

## Caste, Capitalism, and Collaboration: A Dalitgiri Perspective of 'Kalki 2898 AD'

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**Abstract:** Indian mythology has been a source of motivation to work for truth, love, and humanity. On the other hand, mythology fosters a sense of belonging among humans and provides guidance on how they should treat nature. 'Kalki 2898 AD' is a fantastic, iconic movie that brings new insights to think about the caste with intersectionality of gender, class, and capitalism. In this article, I will explore the complexities of the caste system in Indian political sociology.

**Keywords:** Caste, Capital, Movie, Culture, India.

### INTRODUCTION

'Kalki 2898 AD' offers a profound commentary on caste, capitalism, and environmental sustainability. By depicting the friendship between Ashwatthama and Karna, the movie suggests that collaboration across social divisions is essential for a better future. Being a scholar of Dalit issues in India, I am always in search of new narratives and perspectives. Nag Ashwin is the director of the Indian Telugu-language epic science fiction film *Kalki 2898 AD*, produced by C. Aswani Dutt. The ensemble cast includes Deepika Padukone, Prabhas, Amitabh Bachchan, Kamal Haasan, and Disha Patani. The trailer of *Kalki 2898 AD*, which I watched on June 22, 2024, piqued my curiosity.

In the trailer, I noticed characters from the Mahabharata, such as Lord Krishna, Ashwatthama, and Karna. These characters hold significant roles in the epic. This raised questions about how the movie would justify these mythological figures in the contemporary scenario. While I am not an expert in the Mahabharata or Indian mythology, I have seen Ramanand Sagar's television serials *Ramayan* and *Shri Krishna* in the 1990s. Additionally, I have been researching Dalit issues for a decade, particularly the various equations and layers of caste such as – disparities in the distribution of consumption across various castes<sup>1</sup>. (Thakur and Ghosh 2024:6)

My research background constantly drives me to analyze world events from a Dalit perspective. On June 28, 2024, I watched *Kalki* with my friends, motivated by the trailer. Our group included individuals from Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and General Categories,

representing various sections of society. In 2022–23, SC's population is 20 per cent, the OBC's population is 43 per cent, and General Categories' population is 28 percent. (Thakur and Ghosh 2024:6) So our group had been representing almost 91 per cent of the population.

As we entered the mall, the names Lord Krishna, Ashwatthama, and Karna repeatedly came to mind. The movie begins with a scene from the Mahabharata's war. Karna (played by Prabhas) charges in on his chariot, and Lord Krishna (whose face is blurred) criticizes Ashwatthama (played by Amitabh Bachchan) for killing Ghatotkacha through conspiracy. Ghatotkacha, the son of Pandava Bhima and the demoness Hidimbi, is a half-human, half-demon hybrid. In this context, I consider Ghatotkacha a Dalit, based on the theory of pure blood by extremist Hindus. The defenders of caste had been claiming that caste could be an important social institution to maintain to the pure of race and blood for centuries. However, Ambedkar doesn't accept this argument, and they denied to accept it, and he gives the example of Punjab, where Jat Sikh and Chamar had been the same race.

In next scene, Lord Krishna (Played By Tamil Actor **Krishna Kumar**) curses Ashwatthama, predicting that while the Pandavas and all will die, Ashwatthama will suffer eternally, yet in the future, he will have a duty to protect the mother of God (played by Deepika Padukone).

The movie then transitions to a new era, depicting a highly advanced civilization with artificial intelligence, driverless vehicles, and severe environmental degradation. The Ganga River is dry, and the land is barren, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable development.

<sup>1</sup> Thakur, Jyoti and Prabir Kumar Ghosh ( June 18, 2024). The Shadow of Caste: Despite affirmative action programmes, it continues to shape inequalities. *The Indian Express*. P.6.

In the first scene of this transitional era, in a vehicle, which is in flying mode, which represents advanced technology, but the most emotional thing was in the scene that a person is crying for water, and it was seeming that the character would die without water. It is very interesting to correlate the iconography of the movie surrounding us. In the Capital of India, Delhi, Ms. Atishi (Minister in the Delhi Government) began her hunger strike on June 2, 2024, amid a prolonged heatwave in Delhi and has demanded the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled Haryana release water for the national capital. She argued that there are 2.8 million people in the city who are aching for just a drop of water (I am not trying her hunger strike right or wrong). The Indian Express reported on June 18, 2024, 7 people were found dead due to a heat wave in Noida<sup>2</sup>. (Dasgupta 2024: 8) But the iconography of 'Kalki shows that water would be the most precious capital in the future.

## SYMBOLISM REPRESENTATION

## AND

In this movie, the three characters (Lord Krishna, Ashwatthama, and Karna) represent three classes of Indian society. Firstly, Hinduism is represented by Lord Krishna, and the director's understanding of Hinduism has been remarkable and in-depth.

The face of Lord Krishna is blurred by the director, echoing Sashi Tharoor's idea in his book *Why I Am a Hindu* that the question of God's existence can have multiple acceptable answers, reflecting the inclusivity of Hindu religion. However, the most complex feature of Indian society or Hindu religion is the caste system, which creates a hierarchy in society and divides it into thousands of groups.

Ashwatthama, the son of Dronacharya who fought from the side of the Kauravas, represents the Savarna class in the contemporary scenario. Karna represents the SC and OBC as he faced the hidden threat of his birth identity, similar to what millions of SCs have faced for centuries.

Readers might be question that how he also represents the OBC. My answer is that, despite his skill and honesty, he did not receive his rightful place in society. The Pandavas did not accept him as a *Kshatriya*, the traditionally governing or warrior class in Hindu India, which holds the

second-highest ceremonial position among the four varnas.

## CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

The movie critiques hard-core capitalism, represented by the utopian state "Complex". The ruler of this state (played by Kamal Haasan) poses as a saint but exploits women's fertility for profit. In 'Complex,' women are segregated into two sections: positive and negative. What would be the place of a woman in 'Complex'? It would depend on her power of reproduction, meaning if she can be able to conceive or be pregnant, then she would be treated as a human being. But their power of fertility in this 'Complex' has become a cause of their exploitation; all pregnant women were living in a kind of bars (jail) and under high surveillance. Hence, in this capitalist state, human rights and the rights of marginalized people are disregarded, and individual utility determines one's value.

But practically since the dawn of civilization, women's ability to procreate has been a significant problem for society. Another film, initially titled *Hum Do, Hamre Baarah* (we two, our twelve), has generated controversy. Historically, the phrase *Hum Paanch, Humare Pachchees* (We five, our twenty-five) has been used by several political figures to disparage the Muslim population. The discussion around Muslim women's fertility has a direct impact on their decision to become mothers or not. Stories like this occasionally portray Hindu women as being eradicated by radical Hindus who believe that in order to become the majority in India, they must have an increasing number of children. Ladies have suffered for millennia in both situations. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) show that the fertility rates of all religious communities have declined over the two decades<sup>3</sup>. (Nadimpally and Tella, 2024:8)

The movie portrays a multicultural and multiethnic society in the fictional *Sambhla* state, where surnames are irrelevant. Ultimately, Ashwatthama and Karna unite to save the mother (symbolizing Earth) and her unborn child, emphasizing the need for collective effort and the abolition of all forms of discrimination for human survival. However, the iconography of the movie has been inspired by *Mad Max*, *Game of Thrones*, *Star Wars*, *Bahubali*, and *Lord of the Rings*. The movie has become a blockbuster and has been praised by critics. It

<sup>2</sup> Dasgupta, Rajib. (June 25, 2024). Who Dies in a Heatwave. The Indian Express. Chandigarh.p.8.

<sup>3</sup> Nadimpally Sarojini and Keertana K Tella (June 26, 2024). The Fertility Myth. The Indian Express. Chandigarh.p.8.

navigates to the audience about the issues of climate change, complexities about development, and motivation for sustainable development. Last

but not least, in the future, human beings will not survive without advanced artificial intelligence and technology.

**Source of support:** Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

**Cite this article as:**

Kumar, K. "Caste, Capitalism, and Collaboration: A Dalitgiri Perspective of 'Kalki 2898 AD'." *Sarcouncil Journal of Education and Sociology* 3.7 (2024): pp 9-11.