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***BHEED: A Story of Lockdown Brunt, Migrants' Crisis and Societal Prejudices***

**Kuldeepsingh Rajput<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

The film 'Bheed' by Anubhav Sinha is an honest attempt to represent the struggle and hardships of migrants and the marginalised due to the devastating lockdown. 'Bheed' powerfully tries to visualise the invisible group of migrants, and being a 'real art' manifests its role, i.e. the protest. The film is not just about the exodus of migrants, but it courageously interrogates the sick society and the decayed power structures of caste, class and religion embedded in society through the heart-wrenching stories of the migrants.

**Keywords:** Hindi Cinema, Voices of Subaltern, Lockdown, Exodus of Migrants, Institutional Failure, Statelessness, Caste and Religious Identities.

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## **Introduction**

There are some Hindi films like *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946), *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), *Jagte Raho* (1956), *Shehar Aur Sapna* (1963), *Do Boond Pani* (1971) and *Gaman* (1978), to name a few, focusing on the grim reality of migrant labourers, their poverty and debt. However, these films do not expressly stress the migrant's life at their destination city, their precarity and their identity crisis. The lives and voices of various marginalised communities have rarely been depicted in mainstream commercial movies (Thakur et al., 2022). On this ground, the recent film *Bheed*, directed by Anubhav Sinha and also written by him along with Soumya Tiwari and Sonali Jain, boldly takes up the issue. It raises several critical concerns and questions on the exodus of migrants, humanitarian crisis and statelessness due to the sudden lockdown and its catastrophic impact, which overshadowed the threat of Covid-19. Director Sinha, in his interviews, said that during the lockdown, we all were coping with different issues. However, a section at the bottom of our society was utterly neglected and invisible, and *Bheed* is trying to make them visible to a society that has forgotten them. The film is bold and essential as it discusses various symbolic, physical and structural violence that culminates from the intersectional axes of caste, class, migratory identity and religion.

The initial teaser trailer of *Bheed* began with a voice-over of PM Narendra Modi announcing the lockdown, juxtaposed with some harrowing and heart-wrenching scenes of stranded migrant workers, families walking barefoot for miles from cities to their hometowns, some being beaten up by the police, doused with disinfectant and seating helplessly on the dusty roadside when the state borders were sealed. *Bheed* was shot in black and white purposefully to draw attention towards the single largest migration, to evoke the images and the horrors of the 1947 India Partition and mass displacement, saying, “*Ek baar phir hua tha batwara, 2020 mein*” (the Partition happened once again, in 2020). However, due to the increasing controversies and polarising discussions, the film's first official teaser trailer was made unavailable soon on YouTube, and the audio-videos were replaced in the film, in which PM Modi's voice-over was also removed.

“Justice is always in the hands of the powerful. If the powerless had the opportunity to serve justice, the outcome would be different,”

the critical dialogue in the film keeps viewers hooked.

## **The Central Theme**

*Bheed* narrates the severe and horrifying hardships that migrant workers faced at the time of the first nationwide lockdown announcement on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Migrants were stranded in

different cities with minimum access to food and shelter, little or no money, and a lack of overall infrastructural support. The film starts with the scene of migrant families walking on railway tracks towards their hometowns, hoping to somehow reach their destinations. They avoid walking by road due to police check-posts and discuss among themselves why they are blamed for the coronavirus spread. They are tired, exhausted, and injured and sleep on the train tracks, thinking that transport has completely ceased, hence, trains will not run on the tracks. Unfortunately, the train came speedily with the headline of the time “16 migrant workers run over by a train”. The initial striking shot in the film of migrants desperately trying to find ways of moving out, climbing up on moving buses, trucks, rickshaws, and cycles, sets the tone for the intense traumatic story that *Bheed* offers.

Most of the film is shot at the check-post near the rural corner of the Tejpur border in North India. The state borders are sealed, and the police officer in-charge, Surya Kumar Singh (Rajkummar Rao), who is an honest cop, refuses to let anyone pass through. He is in love with Renu Sharma (Bhumi Pednekar), a medical student, organising a camp near the check-post to care for symptomatic patients and provide basic medical aid. The area comes under inspector Yadav ji (Ashutosh Rana). There is Ram Singh (Aditya Shrivastava), who is Surya’s subordinate. On the other side of the barricading, there is a high society ‘Madam Ji’ (Dia Mirza), who is travelling in an SUV, to take her daughter home from the hostel, and her driver Kanhaiya (Sushil Pandey) offers to bribe the police to let them cross the border. In the film, there is a security guard, ‘Trivedi Babu’ (Pankaj Kapur), who is leading a bus carrying Hindu migrant workers, and a group of TV news-media led by a journalist Vidhi Tripathi (Kritika Kamra) covering all migrants stories. In the initial scene, Vidhi draws an analogy between the overloaded truck carrying goods perilously held together by ropes with that of society. She says it would take just a minor bump in the road for the ropes to come apart and the bundle to unravel. Society may also get scattered and become a divided crowd (*Bheed*).

### **Caste Identities and Consciousness, Sparking in *Bheed***

Sinha successfully draws critical attention to the contagious ‘Caste virus’ in contemporary Indian society, even during the crisis. The film begins on a harsh note showing a scene of a lower caste man (a relative of Surya) being brutally beaten up by village Pradhan’s brother (upper caste) and tied to the pole for daring to drink water from a temple pump. The film highlights the inhuman but highly prevalent reality of caste identities and conflicts through several scenes, characters and hard-hitting dialogues. Anubhav Sinha was criticised for his early film, *Article 15*, for portraying the ‘urban-upper caste saviour’, a Brahmin IPS officer

who fights to deliver justice to the Dalits of rural Bihar. Though *Article 15* seeks justice for the subaltern, it seems an Indian version of the ‘White-man-saviour trope’, where an ‘upper caste’ replaces the ‘White man’; hence it essentially could have been imagined better by giving space and voice to the victims themselves (Thakur et al., 2022). However, in *Bheed*, he corrects that and brings Surya Singh, a police officer in charge of the check-post belonging to the oppressed community, to the centre. Surya Singh is well aware of the caste hierarchy and the violence wielded from it and recalled the exploitation and atrocities against his forefathers and relatives by upper caste people. His ‘lower-caste identity’ is deeply rooted in his consciousness; hence he struggles with a sense of inferiority and dilemma. He disguises his original caste i.e. ‘Tikas’, and replaces it with the brand and honorific ‘Singh’ because that is what his father (Gautamlal Tikas) did for Surya to get admission to the school. Gautamlal’s act symbolises the determining role of caste identity in gaining access to basic essential services such as education. Adaptation of the upper caste identity suffix as ‘Singh’ by lower caste people reminds one of the ‘Sanskritisation’ processes. However, Surya constantly lives in fear of being ‘outed’. Despite being a police officer, he lacks confidence because of his deep sense of inferiority of belonging to the lower caste community. He loves Renu Sharma but fears marrying her due to the possible repercussions and caste conflicts, as she is a Brahmin girl. In a love-making scene with Renu, Surya fails to ‘perform’ due to the sudden realisation of his backward caste identity and his relationship with Renu, who belongs to an upper caste.

Another character in the film, Pushpesh Singh, brother of an ex-MLA, says, “*Humare Bhaiyya ‘Thakuro’ ke Bade Neta Hai*” (my elder brother is a popular leader of ‘Thakurs’), and asks Surya to let him pass the border of Tejpur. He further says, “*Keh dijiye humare paas ‘Special Pass’ hai*” (Tell others that we have a ‘special pass’), here the ‘Special Pass’, is the ‘Caste-card’ that Pushpesh Singh uses to convince Surya, as he thought that Surya is also ‘Thakur’ as his surname ‘Singh’ indicates so. However, Surya believes in constitutional principles and understands his duty. Surya takes a firm stand and rejects Pushpesh Singh’s offer by saying:

“*Yaha check-post se leke peechhey tak bahot sare ‘Singh’ hai aur bahot sare ‘Shukla’, ‘Trivedi’, aur sabka ‘Kanoon’ same hai, itne saalo baad bhi aapko ye baat samajh nahi aayee*”

Surya’s comment is critical and indicates that the law is equal for all; however, even after seven decades of Independent India, some privileged upper groups still identify themselves in

the supreme and dominant position. Despite being an honest cop and ‘in-charge’ of the check-post, Surya is targeted by everyone and is repeatedly reminded of his ‘*Aukaat*’ by different characters. In one scene, he is completely disappointed and says, “*Hamara nyaay hamari aukaat se bohot bahar hai*”. Surya is most forcefully reminded of his caste identity by symbolic violence perpetrated by a stranded security guard ‘Trivedi Babu’ (a Brahmin man), who shoves Surya in one scene and says “you are a Tikas, and if it were my native place, I would have taken your skin off for your excessive daring.” Trivedi’s harsh comments push Surya into the atrocity-trauma and makes him senseless for a while.

### **Tablighis and ‘Corona Jihad’**

In an earlier scene, Balram Trivedi looks unpleasantly at Muslims stranded at the same check-post. Further, despite hungry companions and children on the bus, Trivedi refuses food from Muslims. He says that ‘You (Muslims) have infected the country with Corona Jihad, spare our kids now’. However, after the film’s release, the word ‘Jihad’ was muted from the original dialogue shown in the trailer. The humiliation and stigmatisation of Muslims are depicted in the film. Trivedi and Pushpesh Singh, along with his fellow passengers, restrict Muslim mobility at the check-post and forcefully push them into their ‘bus’. The ‘Muslim bus’ symbolises the ‘ghettoisation’ of Muslims. These incidents have been portrayed in *Bheed* in the context of the ‘Tablighi Jamaat’, an International Muslim missionary group held responsible and wrongly accused of spreading the coronavirus and aggravating the health emergency in India. Senior functionaries of the BJP party and the government likened the Tablighis to ‘Terrorists’, excoriated them ‘for moving around like a bomb’ and described the meeting as a ‘Talibani crime’ (Indian Express, 2020). Indian TV news anchors and rumours on social media and WhatsApp started debating ‘Corona Jihad’, aggravated the ‘Muslim-Phobia’; consequently, all Muslims soon came under suspicion and experienced widespread hatred. However, the Aurangabad bench of the Bombay High Court criticised the ‘scapegoating’ of Tablighis for the pandemic. The Covid crisis is being used to deepen the divide between two zones in India i.e. Hindu-Muslims, and exacerbated the situation for Muslims (Apoorvanand, 2020). Even the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has warned that the world faces the most challenging crisis since World War II; India’s already rampant communal virus is gleefully piggyback-riding on the novel coronavirus (Anand, 2020). These incidents raise several concerns about the systematic exclusion and mass-scale labelling of Muslims even after many years of Independence.

## **Class and Gender Dynamics**

The film *Bheed* also takes a closer look at the stark class divide existing and increasing in the country. The stock of food in the shiny mall, situated next to the check-post is not available for the needy and hungry people (migrants). Trivedi requests to open the mall and get food for his hungry companions, and when permission is denied, he becomes violent. He finally holds a low-caste police officer (Surya) hostage to get food. Soon he is labelled a 'Naxal'. The character of 'Madam Ji', belongs to a privileged upper-class society that lacks concern for migrants, passes idiotic comments and opines how 'yeh log' (the migrants and the working-class labour) have strong immunity; they used to work hard and never had any issues of lactose, intolerance or migraine. Nasir, a cameraman with Vidhi refers to it as a 'beautiful countryside'. Later in the film, Nasir clicks photos of stranded migrants and mockingly comments that it is an 'Incredible India'. Vidhi argues with Nasir that when placed at a hilltop of 'privileges', all things around seem beautiful and pleasant without little realisation that another India is suppressed below the same hill that is invisible, uncared and unattended.

There is also a young girl carrying her alcoholic father on a bicycle. This character in the film is inspired by the true story of a 15-year-old girl, Jyoti Kumari Paswan, who rode 1,300 km on a bicycle with her father on the pillion from Gurugram (Haryana) to Darbhanga (Bihar). The film critically throws light on the worst situation of internal female migrants in a scene where Renu Sharma says that 'from many days, menstruating girls were using newspapers in the absence of sanitary pads'. However, *Bheed* could have been an excellent opportunity to uncover many gender dimensions of migration and the labour market stemming from the established patriarchal socio-cultural norms and power relations. In the film, it was essential to show female migrants through a gender lens with their specific vulnerabilities and oppression. Unfortunately, the film fails to do justice to female migrants and makes a passing reference to them.

## **Migrants' Crisis and Institutional Failure**

Rural-urban migrants, engaged predominantly in the urban informal sector, are crucial human resources and play a critical role in the city's development and economic growth. Their rural unemployment pushes them towards cities, and their distress migration forms labour-relations in the informal labour market, further pushing them to the margins. At destination cities, these migrants experience multiple layers of discrimination, exclusionary practices and interlocking axes of oppression (Deshingkar et al., 2022). They have been largely neglected



by the government, policymakers and other development stakeholders for years. *Bheed* shows how without considering the enormous magnitude of internal migrants, with the four-hour notice, the government announced a nationwide lockdown, consequently resulting in widespread panic and eventually threatening the lives of millions of migrants and their families. Sinha has effectively portrayed the unpreparedness and high-handedness of the state functionaries. Surya says, “*Aap saher gaye kyo ki yaha koi intezam nahi tha, Saher se wapas aaye kyo ki waha koi intezam nahi tha, Garib aadmi ke liye kabhi intezam hi nahi hua*” (you migrated to the city because there was no work for you here (in the village), you left the city because there was also no more work for you there; there have been no (development) plans and welfare provisions for the migrants and poor). Trivedi and other migrants in the film keep asking for the outcome of a political meeting on the opening of borders and the issue of migrants. In reality, it was just a message that went viral on social media, and there was no such meeting. These scenes indicate unaccountable institutionalised trajectories, irresponsible governance and poor bureaucratic mechanisms, which pushed migrants into extreme vulnerabilities and a mental health crisis.

After realising the plight of stranded migrants, the Government of India announced some measures (such as a relief package, cash assistance, portability of ration cards, and supply of food grains etc.). However, critics argued that there were several hits and misses in the announcement (Rajan et al., 2020); consequently, millions of migrants were excluded from receiving these benefits. Organising ‘Shramik trains’ for migrants was a ‘late response’ from the government side (Deshingkar et al., 2022) as by the time trains were organised, many migrants had left the cities and adopted available informal transport to reach their rural hometowns. In May 2021, the honourable Supreme Court of India directed the Union government to build a national database of unorganised workers, including migrants. Subsequently, to enumerate workers, the ‘e-Shram Portal’ was launched by the Ministry of Labour and Employment of the Government of India. However, the migrants’ crisis during the lockdown ultimately demanded a robust social security network to protect these precious but precarious human resources. One needs massive investments by prioritising social insurance and social assistance schemes and their universalisation. Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing demand for social security for migrants and unorganised workers. The National Commission for Enterprises in Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), in 2007, insisted upon a universal registration system for migrant workers. However, these recommendations were only partially accepted and practised. The draft National Migrant Labour policy and its

future implementation must reflect the serious concern to protect internal migrants from all forms of violence (Rajan & Rajput, 2023).

The film *Bheed* also offers a deep insight into the everyday structural violence, manifested indirectly and embedded in the socio-economic and political structures. The physical and structural violence against migrants closely intersects with their politicisation. During the first lockdown, migrants were humiliated and stigmatised as ‘carriers of the virus’ and ‘a burden on systems’ at the host cities, even at their place of origin. In *Bheed*, the journalist (Kritika Kamra) looks at the exodus of migrants and says (in the deleted trailer) that “the whole scenario feels like another partition of India, one day suddenly these people (migrants) were told that the homes where they used to live, did not belong to them”. In one scene, Trivedi says “The border has become inside our own country.” These dialogues draw attention to the severity of the ‘citizenship crisis’ faced by migrants, resulting in ‘statelessness’, where they suffer from the deprivation of identity. Due to the sudden lockdown, migrants overnight became infiltrators and refugees in their own country.

Migration scholars have repeatedly acknowledged that migrants have been denied the right to the city, and disconnected from decent living and working conditions. They are poorly documented in the government database due to lack of identity proofs and unawareness, and hence remain ‘invisible’. The exodus of migrants made them visible and helped us realise their miseries, although we have learnt nothing from the crisis during lockdowns. It seems the government and other development stakeholders have forgotten the plight and struggles of migrants, as to date, there exists no solid development or inclusion policy for internal migrants to protect them from several vulnerabilities and future disasters. With this background, the film *Bheed* enables viewers to question critically their own fractured social system and emerges as a sincere effort to play the role of a protest and tries to seek justice for the subaltern. Hence, in the words of Adorno, it remains a ‘real art’.

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