

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Blessy S. Samjose, Ph.D.

CONFLICT / Samar (1999)

Shyam Benegal

OVERVIEW

Auteur Shyam Benegal is an award-winning South Asian film director. He is notable for creating films addressing social realism themes. Benegal focuses on the common man's struggle to make ends meet amidst the sweeping changes led by postcolonial independence, industrialization, urbanization, and associated sociocultural and political changes. Examples of award-winning films exploring these themes include *The Role*, *Night's End*, *The Essence*, and *The Churning*. Photography and film-making run in Benegal's family. He developed an interest through his father, Sridhar Benegal, a famous photographer.

Film *Conflict* is a Bollywood feature film originally released in 1999. It was directed by Shyam Benegal and written by Ashok Mishra. As the title suggests, the film, *Conflict* addresses the unavoidable presence of casteist attitudes in Indian society and the resulting conflict between upper and lower castes. The National Film Development Corporation of India, a government agency, produced *The Conflict*. The film employs a story-within-story format that recurs in many Shyam Benegal films. It won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in 1999 for its innovative approach to addressing a persisting social evil in Indian society. This is the first time Shyam Benegal has won this award for his films. It also won the National Film Award for Best Screenplay in 1999.

Background The film's plot is based on Harsh Mander's memoir, *Unheard Voices: Stories of Forgotten Lives*. Mander was a civil service officer in the Indian government and wrote this memoir based on his eyewitness account of casteist discrimination and oppression in Central India. Though the film's plot is set in Madhya Pradesh, India, the film was shot on set at Ramoji Film City in Hyderabad. The conflict-inducing scene in the film when Chakan Singh peed on Nathu as a casteist assault is based on a real-life incident. A Dalit farmer from a Central Indian village had suffered the same assault from his village's headman for entering the village's temple. The use of a story-within-story format in *The Conflict* is advantageous to Benegal's aim to raise social awareness and encourage critical thinking in his audience. While rehashing the real-life incident for screen brings the harsh reality of casteism to the forefront, the second layer of the story showing Murali and Kishore's argument over the scene shows the implicit presence of casteist discrimination in contemporary Indian society.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Kishore	The actor who plays Nathu in the film, and a Dalit
Uma	The actress who plays Dulari, Nathu's wife in the film
Murali	The actor who plays Chakan Singh in the film.
Director Karthik	The director of the film addressing caste conflict
Hiralal	The superintendent of police who belongs to a lower caste
Nathu	A Dalit who fought against caste oppression in his village
Dulari	Nathu's wife
Chakan Singh	The upper-caste village headman in Nathu's village
Ramesh Singh	Chakan Singh's son

SYNOPSIS

In 1991, a caste conflict with significant repercussions happened in the village of Kull in Madhya Pradesh, India. Chakan Singh, a village headman from an upper caste, enforces the caste system hierarchy by terrorizing the Dalits (the lowest caste in the caste hierarchy) in his village. However, the Dalits are able to get a reprieve through government laws outlawing caste oppression and casteist exploitation in Indian

society. A modern-day film crew led by Director Karthik arrives at the village to retrace the events and capture them in a social justice film. While shooting different scenes and experiencing the caste trauma buried in the original events, film crew members are forced to grapple with their own caste prejudices and casteist attitudes. Members of the film crew splinter and take different sides in the original conflict. While some side with Nathu, the Dalit man, others side with Chakan Singh, the village headman who oppressed Nathu and other Dalits. As the crew wraps up the film shooting, the newly arrived deputy superintendent of police brings closure to the nature of caste conflict. He belongs to the lower caste and facilitates an insightful conversation on the harms of the caste system through his own experiences and other incidents he had witnessed on the job as a policeman.

PLOT

A malady At the village well, two women of unequal social statuses meet. The upper-caste woman, the village headman's wife, nags at Dulari, a Dalit (lower caste) and Nathu's wife. The nagging escalates to physical assault when the upper-caste woman notices Dulari's skin infection and misdiagnoses it as leprosy. When Nathu's husband learns about the unjust attack, he visits the headman's house to find justice. However, the headman dismisses Nathu and throws him out unceremoniously.



The Handpump A government surveyor arrives and discusses the village's water situation with the Dalits. Dalits' access to the village well is restricted because of caste segregation. Each side of the well belongs to a caste group. Although Dalits have their own side, they are not allowed to draw water until all the other caste groups have drawn water for the day. Addressing the disparity, the government surveyor promises them a handpump in the Dalit neighborhood.



Punishment

Despite the village headman Chakan Singh's intervention and attempt to move the handpump location to the upper-caste neighborhood, the government order is issued to build the handpump in the Dalit neighborhood. Chakan Singh expresses anger and attempts to halt the construction using his authority as the village headman. The workers cite the government order and pay him no attention. However, Chakan Singh redirects his anger to the Dalits and accuses them of rebelling against their social superiors, the upper castes.

**Story within a story**

The assault scene freezes, and the camera zooms out. We learn that the previous scenes are part of a film. Director Karthik appreciates Kishore's portrayal of Nathu. As the film crew wraps up the set, we learn that the film aspires to address caste inequity by revisiting a real-life caste conflict that took place in the village some years ago.

**Deep conversations**

Actress Uma plays Dulari, and Krishna plays Nathu in the film. During the course of the film shoot, they develop a strong friendship built on sharing knowledge and lending support. Uma belongs to an upper caste but is a progressive thinker committed to the film's aim of building caste equity in society. Krishna is a Dalit playing a Dalit in the film. He shares his experiences growing up with caste discrimination and complains about casteist attitudes and mindsets among film crew members of upper castes. Uma extends empathy and understanding to Krishna's struggles as a Dalit.



A request

The Dalits find it hard to make ends meet with their upper-caste employers' low wages. Therefore, they request a raise, matching the government-established standard for labor wages. However, the village headman Chakan Singh and other upper-caste employers express irritation at the request and show no inclination to consider the Dalits' circumstances. Instead, they decide to oppress the Dalits to remind them of their powerlessness and dissuade them from asking for more wages.

**Mistress' advice**

Chakan Singh visits his mistress to relax after the confrontation with the Dalits. She advises him to relent and display his magnanimous nature to the village and surrounding areas. However, Chakan Singh suspects that his mistress' loyalties are divided because she belongs to a lower caste. As a result, he refuses to take her advice. Instead, he orders all the other caste communities to boycott the Dalits, to neither serve them at their establishments nor accept their waged labor and services.

**A casteist shopkeeper**

When Director Karthik approaches the village's shopkeeper, a member of the Agarwal caste (upper caste), he notices the shopkeeper's differential attitude toward Dalit and non-Dalit customers. While he hands the purchased goods to non-Dalit customers, he throws purchased goods to Dalit customers because he considers the latter's touch polluting. Nonetheless, the upper caste shopkeeper has no such qualms when receiving Dalits' money. He explains that money cannot be polluted because of its association with the Goddess Lakshmi. However, he does not treat Kishore (a Dalit) like a Dalit. The shopkeeper reasons that since Kishore is a city-born upper-class actor, he cannot possibly be a Dalit.



The Boycott Chakan Singh punishes the Dalits for acting insubordinate. Furthermore, he orders all the other caste communities to boycott the Dalits, leaving them without access to shared resources and work opportunities. Forced by the boycott, Nathu travels to the neighboring city to work at a match-making factory and earn money to care for his family.



Anti-caste laws While working in the city, Nathu learns about governmental provisions to protect and uplift Dalits. When Nathu returns to his village, he shares his knowledge with family and community members. The awareness empowers the Dalits because they know they can stand up to the village.



The right diagnosis An urban doctor visits the village to conduct regular health checks on the villagers. During the visit, he examines Dulari's hand and pronounces the correct diagnosis of eczema. After a week, Dulari's eczema clears up, and she is relieved.



Caste in the temple Nathu notices his wife's healed skin and is overjoyed by the healing. He returns to the village temple to fulfill a promise he made earlier. He had promised to plant a flag in the god's honor upon his wife's recovery. However, Chakan Singh catches Nathu in the temple and physically assaults him for bringing caste pollution into the village temple.



Caste in the film set When the actors and the film crew finish the assault scene, Director Karthik comments that Krishna needs to work on his "Dalit Body Language," asking him to bring more fear and timidity into his performance. Although he finds the director's suggestion offensive, he does not say anything. However, when Murali, in Chakan Singh's outfit and demeanor, repeats Director Karthik's comments, Krishna takes offense at Murali's targeted insult. As a result, a scuffle breaks out between the two.



A party Chakan Singh's son, Ramesh Singh, organizes a party inviting only the upper caste among the film crew members. Amidst drinking and dancing, the attendees bond over their caste-privileged identities and mutual hatred of Dalits. Murali complains that Kishore gets special treatment on set because he is a Dalit. He also complains about Kishore's irreverence toward Murali and other upper-caste film crew members.



Depression and suicide Uma spends the night at Nathu and Dulari's hut in the village. They express surprise at an upper-caste woman willing to spend time at a Dalit family's hut. However, Uma puts them at ease by sharing her life experiences and asking for theirs. One of her questions concerns the family's stress during Dulari's Leprosy misdiagnosis. Nathu painfully recalls Dulari's depression and her efforts to kill herself. Dulari adds that her husband reassured her each time and empowered her to continue living.



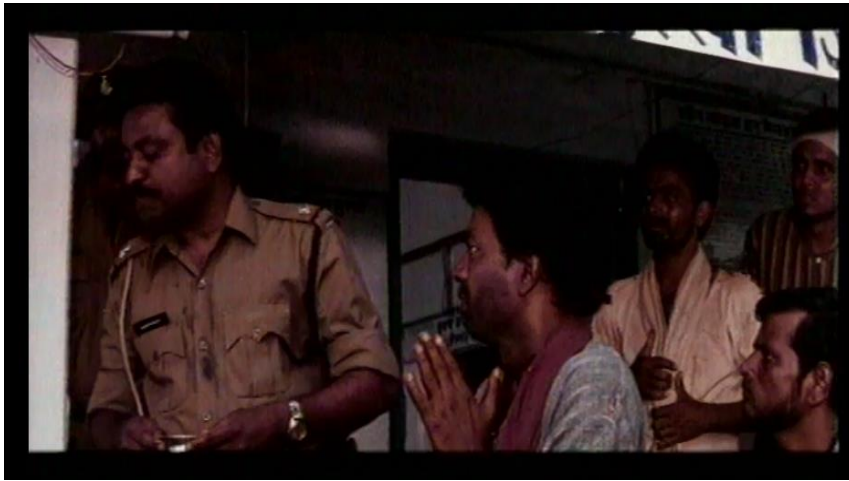
A caste conflict Murali's masked casteist attitudes and actions grow more explicit in targeting Krishna. So, Krishna refuses to perform with Murali and accuses Murali of using his character as Chakan Singh, the upper-caste headman, to abuse and assault Krishna playing Nathu in the film. Director Karthik intervenes and orders Murali to apologize. Even so, Krishna refuses to perform the scene when Chakan Singh peed on Nathu to shame and dehumanize him after the temple entry.



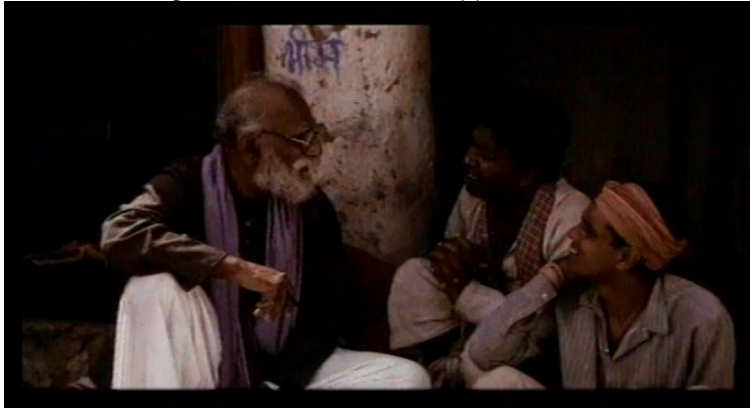
Rising above shame The film crew skips to the scene after the humiliation scene. While Kishore interprets the scene as Nathu's moment of mental breakdown and realization of helplessness, Nathu digresses and relates the real events from his life. He explains that instead of suffering a mental breakdown, the episode incensed him to rebel against upper-caste tyranny once and for all.



Closed doors When the Dalits take a complaint to the local police station, the police inspector chases them out and threatens to beat them up if they bring such complaints against their upper-caste masters again. Furthermore, the police inspector also meets with the village headman and reports the Dalit's actions.



A helper After the inspector fails to help the Dalits, they reach out to Raidas Swami, a renowned legal scholar and civil rights activist. Through his help, they write a petition articulating their struggles under the village headman and other upper-caste communities' casteist regime.



A public hearing The police inspector responds to the Dalits' complaint by organizing a town hall and investigating the charges against the village headman and the other upper castes. Although Chakan Singh goes into hiding during the town hall, he does not escape punishment for his actions.



One little boy's question The district's deputy commissioner appreciates Director Karthik's efforts to address the caste system through a social awareness film. Moreover, he invites members of the film crew to lunch and conversation. A lively discussion ensues around the table. The conversation is paused when the deputy Commissioner's son arrives in tears because his friends had teased him for belonging to a lower caste. The Deputy Commissioner takes the opportunity to explain to his son and also add to the ongoing conversation at the table. He tells his son not to worry about others' low opinion of his caste. Instead, he advises his son to only care about what he will make of himself. He points to himself as an example. He elaborates, "So what if my father had been a cobbler? Look who I am today. And that's what matters – what you make of yourself." Everyone at the table is silenced and humbled by the scene.



A farewell As the film crew prepares to depart from the village, the Dalits arrive with flower garlands to bid goodbye. Unfortunately, Murali is left without a flower garland because of a miscalculation in numbers. Kishore offers his flower garland to Murali as an olive branch to dissolve the bitterness between them. However, Murali refuses the offer and prefers to go without gifts from the Dalits.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Kishore Kishore is a Dalit actor playing the role of Nathu in the film exploring caste conflict in the central Indian village of Kull. He is frustrated by the casteist undercurrents in Indian society. He wonders if Dalits will ever escape the prejudice and stereotypes ascribed to them as the lower caste members of the Indian social hierarchy.

Aware Kishore is cautious in his interactions with other film crew members because of the prevalence of casteist microaggressions that go unchecked on the film set. While everyone else considers derogatory remarks directed at Dalits harmless and humorous, Kishore is aware of the comments' historical roots in caste oppression. Although the awareness brings a profound sense of unease, Kishore uses the awareness to understand the implicit presence of casteist attitudes among upper-caste Indians. In a conversation with Uma, his co-star in the film, he explains his misgivings at

being cast as Nathu in the film. Kishore believes that he got the role because the director wanted a Dalit to play the role of a Dalit in the film.

Determined As a Dalit, Kishore has experienced discrimination and microaggressions all his life. Therefore, he defies casteist norms and demands respect as a fellow human being while on the film set. Murali, the actor who plays the upper-caste oppressor Chakan Singh in the film, spouts casteist remarks to indirectly target and make fun of Kishore. However, Kishore is determined to call Murali out on his harmful comments. When the other film crew members try to placate Kishore, advising him to step back, Kishore determinedly persists in his demand for equity and respect.

Angry Others around Kishore interpret his strong opposition to casteist attitudes as a display of anger. During a bus trip, Murali entertains the group with a song that makes fun of the Dalits. Although everyone else joins the song and claps along, Kishore gets angry and moves to the back of the bus in protest. During the filming, Director Karthik frequently criticizes Kishore for not displaying “Dalit body language.” Since Kishore is aware that Director Karthik’s definition of Dalit body language is a stereotype of Dalit behavior and mannerism exemplifying docility and fearfulness, Kishore finds it highly offensive. He expresses anger at Director Karthik’s unthinking perpetuation of casteist tropes regarding Dalits in his film.

Uma In the film, Uma is Kishore’s co-star and plays the character of Dulari, Nathu’s wife. The film shows the contrast between urban and rural womanhood through Uma’s interactions with different village women. Uma displays curiosity and respect towards everyone different from her. Moreover, she applies empathy to bridge the differences between herself and others.

Curious As an urban woman and an actress with fame and financial success, Uma occupies a position of privilege among other women characters in the film. However, she is always curious about others’ lived experiences and struggles. Therefore, she converses with different individuals to get to know them better. Her conversations with Kishore open her to the realities of caste oppression. She also chats with local women, such as Ramesh Singh’s wife and Dulari, Nathu’s wife. Her curiosity helps her understand the impact of casteism and patriarchy on women’s lives. She brings her knowledge and understanding to her portrayal of Dulari in the film.

Friendly Uma experiences friendliness when she interacts with women from the village. When she meets Ramesh Singh’s wife, they discuss Uma’s lifestyle choices, prioritizing her career over marriage and family. Although the questions are intrusive, Uma does not take offense or act condescending toward Ramesh Singh’s wife. Instead, she patiently explains her devotion to establishing a successful and impactful film career. Uma’s conversations with Dulari carry a similar sense of ease and friendliness. When Uma senses Dulari’s sense of inferiority in her presence, she reassures Dulari and insists on interacting as two women.

Helpful Uma proves to be a good helper and an ally to Kishore on the film set. When film crew members espouse casteist attitudes and upset Kishore, Uma is the only one who can communicate with him and smooth over conflicts. When the film crew arrives at the hotel they are staying at, Kishore realizes that only Director Karthik, Murali, and Uma have been allotted rooms with air-conditioning. The arrangement upsets Kishore because he senses that he has been denied an air-conditioned room because of his Dalit identity. However, Uma explains that air-conditioned rooms were allotted on a first-come-first-serve basis, solving Kishore’s misunderstanding.

Murali Murali is one of the main actors in the film, playing the role of Chakan Singh. Like Chakan Singh, Murali also belongs to an upper caste. He openly declares that he is a Rajput (a dominant upper-caste group) and eagerly makes friends with upper-caste film crew members and village folks.

Insensitive Throughout the film, Murali acts insensitive and disrespectful toward Dalits, especially Kishore, a fellow Dalit actor. Although he deliberately makes casteist jokes and comments, he claims it is said in humor. One of the scenes in the film includes Chakan Singh (Murali’s character) peeing on Nathu (Kishore’s character) to dehumanize and humiliate Dalits. Kishore rejects performing the scene, arguing

that the scene reinforces casteist attitudes instead of challenging them. However, Murali insists on doing the scene, arguing that it is crucial to Chakan Singh's character development.

Dissatisfied Murali expresses dissatisfaction with societal changes and legal provisions prohibiting casteist discrimination and protecting Dalit rights. In conversations, he often says Dalits should know their place and not attempt to rise to the top. He targets Kishore and vents his dissatisfaction by mistreating Kishore. When in character as Chakan Singh, Murali takes pleasure in hurting and humiliating Kishore, a Dalit actor who plays the character of Nathu.

Nathuram Nathu is a member of the Dalit community in the village of Kull. Kishore portrays Nathu in the film. Like many Dalits, Nathu is a landless agricultural laborer who works the village headman's lands. Although he initially opts to tolerate and accept the casteist abuse and humiliation, he resists in the face of the headman's increasing cruelty.

Optimist In many crucial instances, Nathu chooses to look at the bright side instead of the harsh reality. In his optimism, Nathu differs sharply from Kishore, who plays Nathu in the film. When the headman's boycott measures take a toll on the Dalits, the Dalits lose hope and turn despondent. Conversely, Nathu mobilizes them to seek protection through the legal system's provisions for Dalits. When Chakan Singh peed on Nathu to humiliate him publicly, he refused to be ashamed. Moreover, he uses the incident to empower himself to challenge Chakan Singh openly.

Responsible Nathu is a responsible man. Despite being a Dalit, limited by caste rules and oppressions, Nathu strives to meet his family's needs as the breadwinner. When the headman's wife insults and wounds his wife, Dulari, Nathu tries to get an apology for Dulari. Similarly, when he could not get a job in the village, he moved to the city to earn money and meet household expenses. Although Nathu is illiterate, he knows the value of education. So, he considers it his responsibility to ensure his children receive an education. Therefore, he often reminds them to go to school and be smart.

Dulari Dulari is Nathu's wife. Uma plays Dulari in the film. Dulari is a quiet woman, devoted to her husband and children. She supports Nathu's activism by taking care of the household and children. When Nathu loses hope, Dulari comforts him and encourages him to keep going forward.

Anxious Dulari suffers anxiety because of her skin infection after the village headman's wife misdiagnoses Dulari's skin infection as leprosy. As a Dalit woman, Dulari already experiences double discrimination from her caste and gender identity. The anxiety of being ostracized from society as a carrier of an incurable skin blight inflames her anxiety, pushing her to suicidal thoughts.

Loyal Dulari is always loyal to her husband, who treats her kindly and respectfully. Nathu stood by her during her suicidal attempts and encouraged her to continue living. Therefore, she sticks by him when the village headman singles him out for physical assault and public humiliation. After the village headman pees on Nathu to shame him, Dulari holds him close to comfort and affirm his implicit worth.

Chakan Singh Chakan Singh is the village headman of Kull in Central India. Murali plays Chakan Singh in the film. As an upper-caste man who has benefited immensely from the exploitative nature of the caste system, Chakan Singh firmly believes in the caste system and its prescribed social hierarchy. Since Chakan Singh has already passed away by the time of the film's shooting, his son Ramesh Singh supplies vital information about Chakan Singh's character and fundamental beliefs.

Suspicious Chakan Singh is suspicious of the Dalits in his village and their activities. He fears being usurped from his position in power as an upper-caste man and the headman of his village. Chakan Singh becomes suspicious when a government representative arrives at the village and talks to the Dalits about setting up a handpump in the Dalit neighborhood. He thinks having a handpump would cause the Dalits to aspire to rise above their social superiors, the upper castes.

Unfriendly Chakan Singh is unfriendly towards the Dalits in the village. When the Dalits request a raise in their wages, he gets upset and punishes them by cutting off their access to all village resources

and services. Furthermore, he dismisses them from work to starve them. When the Dalits attempt to pass through his land to get to fields on the other side, he threatens to shoot them with a gun should they step on his land. These episodes demonstrate Chakan Singh's use of his position of power to exacerbate his unfriendliness towards the Dalits.

Director Karthik Director Karthik is the film's director. He is interested in addressing the social injustice of the caste system but approaches it from an intellectual perspective. So, he draws on the historical origins of the caste system as a social order based on occupation and its roots in scriptural texts. As such, he displays curiosity but is not very sensitive to the harms perpetuated by the caste system.

Curious Like Uma, Director Karthik expresses curiosity in wanting to know more about the caste system and its everyday implications in Dalits' lives. At the village, he displays his interest in conversing at length with people from different castes to understand each person's position and role within the caste system. When the director talks to the local shopkeeper, who belongs to the Agarwal caste, he observes the shopkeeper's differential treatment toward Dalit customers. While he accepts their money in hand, he refuses to hand them their purchased goods and instead throws it at them. Out of curiosity, the director asks the shopkeeper about it and learns about the local belief that handling money cannot transfer caste pollution from Dalits to upper castes. However, handling most other articles can transmit caste pollution.

Responsible As the film's director, Director Karthik is the most powerful person on the film set. He uses his power to settle conflicts and uphold justice. For example, when Murali favors casteist ideas and uses them to mistreat Kishore, Director Karthik intervenes to disrupt discrimination. Furthermore, he also orders Murali to apologize to Kishore. Similarly, when Kishore refuses to enact a scene because of the heavy caste violence involved, the director understands and brainstorms other alternative options. In all his decision-making and actions, Director Karthik proves that he takes responsibility for the safety and well-being of every film crew member.

Deputy Commissioner Hiralal Hiralal uses his experiences growing up as a member of the lower caste community to advocate for caste equity in society. He represents the real-life author Harsh Mander, whose memoir informs *The Conflict's* plot. Mander had observed many incidents of caste violence during his tenure as a civil service officer in Central India.

Optimist Hiralal is an optimist in his quest for caste equity. Although he has personally experienced caste discrimination, he displays patience and empathy when discussing the sensitive topic. In this regard, he differs from Kishore, who openly expresses his impatience and anger at the persistence of caste norms. When Hiralal's son arrives home in tears because his classmates had made fun of him using casteist remarks, Hiralal comforts him. He teaches him that others' insults and societal labels cannot reduce one's personal achievements and success.

Tolerant Hiralal organizes a lunch event for the film crew members and facilitates a crucial conversation on the workings of the caste system in society. Despite being a victim of the caste system, he tolerantly listens to comments disparaging Dalits and the unfairness of affirmative policies before speaking up and correcting their incorrect assumptions.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Caste The Indian caste system is the central theme throughout *The Conflict*. In particular, the film examines the imposition of caste norms and caste hierarchy in urban and rural India and its implications on inter-caste group dynamics. *The Conflict* uses a story-within-story format to explore caste in two storylines. The inner layer consists of events that took place in 1991 in a village named Kull in Central India. The village headman oppresses and assaults the lower caste members, Dalits, to maintain the caste hierarchy and exploit their labor for farming and crop cultivation. When the Dalits request a raise, he punishes them for daring to ask more than what is given. However, the Dalits fight back by seeking

protection under governmental laws. In the end, they succeed and find justice through legal provisions. The second story takes place in the present day. Director Karthik and his film crew arrive at the village to capture the story on screen. As the film crew members enact the historical incident and interact with people from the historical caste conflict, they reckon with their own ingrained casteist attitudes. While some, like Uma and Director Karthik, embrace the chance to learn and overcome caste misconceptions and bias, others, like Murali, insist on reviving the caste system and its exploitative social hierarchy.

Exploring caste across two storylines, *The Conflict* deconstructs popular misconceptions regarding the Indian caste system. Firstly, it disapproves that caste is a rural phenomenon. Although the film crew members are urban Indians, they betray an implicit casteist bias that becomes evident at crucial moments. For example, Murali quickly becomes friends with Ramesh Singh, an upper-caste villager who openly vocalizes casteist notions. Murali also mistreats Dalit actor Kishore. Similarly, although Uma and Director Karthik believe in social justice and express curiosity in wanting to learn more about the caste system, their engagement is sometimes superficial. For example, Director Karthik orders Kishore to draw on the "Dalit Body Language" when playing Nathu. Although Kishore and Nathu are Dalits, they are entirely different because of their cultural backgrounds. And yet, Director Karthik maintains that it is easy and natural for Kishore to play Nathu because of their shared Dalit identity. Although Kishore's awareness of the casting role decision makes him uneasy, he uses it to understand a vital contradiction in contemporary Indian society. While there are rules prohibiting practices of caste oppression, these rules cannot stop people's casteist attitudes and acts of microaggression. Thus, he realizes that India needs more than laws to tackle the systemic harms of the caste system. Similarly, Uma displays obliviousness in her conversations with Kishore. When Kishore gets angry at Murali's acts of microaggression, Uma placates him, saying that he is overreacting to simple coincidences. A second misconception is that caste discrimination is a thing of the past. Although the events in the first story occur in the past, the caste conflicts among the film crew members disprove the second point. Thus, *The Conflict* concludes that although there are laws against caste discrimination, the bigger task of changing people's mindsets remains unfinished.

POLITICS

Power Power is a recurring theme in *The Conflict*. Caste hierarchy defines social lives and cross-community interactions in the village of Kull. As such, the upper caste groups claim most of the cultivable lands and water resources. The Dalits are left to beg for scraps. The upper-caste village headman uses his power to terrorize the Dalits. He denies them basic rights, such as the minimum wage instituted by the government of India. When the village headman Chakan Singh creates the rule to boycott Dalits, the other caste groups fall in line and obey the unjust order. Thus, Dalits are unwelcome at barbershops, flour mills, and shops. Since the Dalits are landless and work on other caste groups' lands, the boycott robs them of opportunities to earn money. Furthermore, the headman targets the Dalit's income from making and selling beedis (local cigarettes) by ordering the local buyer to skip purchasing beedis from the Dalits. Despite knowing about the Indian government's laws prohibiting casteist discrimination, he continues to enforce caste norms in his village through his powers as the village headman. The headman is power drunk and refuses to acknowledge any authority above him. After conversing with Ramesh Singh, Chakan Singh's son, Murali (who plays Chakan Singh), concludes that Chakan Singh would not adapt to the new social order that curtails his caste power and privilege. Hiralal, the deputy commissioner, offers a fascinating contrast to Chakan Singh. Although a powerful government official, he never uses his position for selfish reasons. When people are openly casteist towards him and his family, he takes the higher road and teaches his son to do the same.

JUSTICE

Violence Violence has always been an important weapon in the upper-castes' arsenal against Dalits. *The Conflict* shows this in both stories. In the village of Kull, the village headman single-handedly beats up the Dalits in many scenes. They are helpless and unable to fight back because of generations of casteist oppression. A notable example occurs at the time of the handpump installation. When Chakan Singh realizes that the government's handpump will be set up in the Dalit neighborhood, he unleashes his anger on the Dalits. He accuses them of stealing the handpump from the other caste groups in the village and beats them up. When the caste conflicts intensify, and the headman learns about Nathu's trip to the

city, he sets fire to Nathu's hut to turn him homeless and jeopardize his efforts to mobilize Dalits for social justice. Historically and today, Dalits have faced violence and bodily harm when they attempted to enter temples and access public resources such as land and water. *The Conflict* shows this when the village headman beats up Nathu for stepping into the village temple. Accusing Nathu of spreading his polluting touch in the temple, Chakan Singh violently assaults and pees on him to shame and violate him.

Justice *The Conflict* contributes to social awareness among the audience by detailing the legal provisions and special schemes to protect Dalits and empower them among other caste groups. Unable to tolerate the village headman's targeted assaults any longer, the Dalits seek a social activist lawyer to educate themselves and stand up for their rights. Through the lawyer, they learn about laws dictating minimum wage, prohibiting worker exploitation, and criminalizing caste discrimination. As a result, they use their knowledge to file a formal complaint against the village headman at the collector's office. In response, the police commissioner conducts a formal hearing to convict the criminals and safeguard Dalit rights in the village.