

# EDU FILM

FILMS FOR EDUCATION



# Sadgati

(The Deliverance)

Based on Munshi Premchand's  
Short Story - Sadgati

**Directed by:** Satyajit Ray

**Produced by:** Doordarshan

**Length:** 52 mins

**Time Stamps for Classroom Viewing:** 22:53 - 25:16

**Language:** Hindi

**Format & Access:** Available as DVD and on YouTube on  
the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4vBUd5gQKg>

**Preferred age group:** 14+ years

**Keywords:** Caste, Untouchability, Discrimination, Poverty

**Rating:** 3/5

Author: Priyanka Aiyer | Divya Murali

Editor: Divya Murali | Sveta Dave Chakravarty

Layout : Milanth Gautham

### Overview

Sadgati, directed by Satyajit Ray is based on a short story of same name written by Munshi Premchand. The plot of the film revolves around a poor untouchable tanner Dukhi and his struggles to get his daughter married in the wake of caste exploitation and discrimination by the Brahmin priest. The film brings together the perceptive storytelling of Premchand and the cinematic genius of Satyajit Ray to expose the contradictions that govern the principle of untouchability and the highly exploitative and dehumanizing nature of caste society.

### The Film's appeal for a contemporary young audience in terms of aesthetics and format

The film is an aesthetically pleasing experience and can be easily counted as one of the most accessible cinematic narratives centered on caste, especially for a young audience. Overall the treatment of the film is extremely simple and hence it is suitable for all age groups.

### Background Knowledge: Issues of history, culture or specific mores which need to be explained to a young audience explained

The caste system is probably the most enduring and integral feature of Indian society. Students should be given some background information about the nature of the caste system, including the functioning of jatis before viewing the film so that they can fully comprehend and critically reflect on the film. The Hindu religion divides its followers into four major varnas namely the Brahmins, the keepers of knowledge, who occupy the highest position; the Kshatriyas (warriors) come second, followed by the Vaishya's (merchants and traders), and finally the Shudras (workers). Dalits (low menial occupations) are the fifth caste, but technically lie outside the caste system and are considered Untouchables. These varnas have many sub-castes and jatis within them and are the operational units of social organization at the village level. The caste system is

driven by the philosophy of 'purity and pollution' and the 'opposition of the pure and the impure'. This guides caste rules of food, gaze and mobility and ultimately of the practice of untouchability. The caste system also has several identifiable features such as the association between caste and occupation from birth, hierarchy of castes, rules of purity and pollution etc. The untouchables are a severely discriminated and exploited set of people under the caste system and have been denied access to basic human rights. The constitution has legally abolished untouchability but the practice still survives in several parts of India.

### Suggested Reading:

A good resource for an Overview of the Caste System in India can be found in Gupta, Dipankar ed. 1991. *Social Stratification in India*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

### Detailed Description

The film is based on a short story written by Munshi Premchand with the same name. The plot of the film revolves around a poor untouchable tanner Dukhi, and tries to capture a single day in his life. His identity and social standing is dictated by his caste and his caste mandated profession. Dukhi wishes to get his daughter married, but the ceremony cannot take place until the village Mahatma or priest, a Brahmin by caste, sets an auspicious date for the wedding. Hence Dukhi tries to persuade the priest to accompany him home. The priest does not agree and instead orders Dukhi to undertake many chores for the Brahmin household. The last chore that comes his way is to split a log open and splice it into small pieces. Dukhi tries to finish this task with all his might but his starved ailing body crumbles under the force of harsh labour causing him to die in front of the priest's house. A fellow tanner serves as a witness to this event and urges the other tanners of the village to leave the body as it is, till the police arrive. The priest finds himself in a dilemma, as caste rules dictate that touching the untouchable Dukhi would lead to extreme pollution. Ultimately he drags Dukhi's body to the animal graveyard and leaves it there. The final

sequence of the film shows the priest cleansing the place of Dukhi's demise with holy water and chants.

### Themes for Classroom Discussion

This film is suitable for a nuanced discussion about the caste system with young adults. The narrative is able to pack in many questions within a very short time frame.

1. The foreground question is of the persistence of the caste system and its varying manifestations in contemporary India. The initial story was written much before independence in 1931, while Satyajit Ray adapted it in 1981. This is a crucial point of reference. The film was released much after the official abolition of untouchability but the film still remains relevant. The students should reflect on whether untouchability continues to be a reality today? If so what are the various forms it takes and the consequences of such a practice for social equality and justice? Caste-based discriminations and atrocities remain common occurrences in our country. The question that arises, then, is whether a law can actually remove a social evil such as caste hierarchy that has been embedded in our social system.
2. While caste continues to have a stronghold in rural India, it is not irrelevant in urban India. Many urban households still keep separate utensils for the domestic help while sweepers are not allowed inside the house. Can this not be considered practising untouchability? In fact, this remains only one dimension of the way in which urban middle class households treat their domestic help. Even beyond
3. Caste, the general treatment of domestic help, then and today can be discussed by the students. The crucial question then, is of the role that society needs to play towards not

just effectively abolishing the social evil of untouchability but in reforming everyday discriminatory attitudes and behaviours.

4. Other issues that the film touches upon are the educational divide: does it have to do with gender or caste or both? The daughter of the tanner is supposed to be married off at a very young age while the son of the priest has the privilege of getting educated. The question of positive discrimination also needs to be addressed here. In most parts of rural India people are still considered untouchable and hence their children are either barred from attending school along with the other children or discriminated against when they are able to attend. On the other hand, reservation, which seeks to address historical discrimination, is itself a divisive issue, with equal numbers of people in favour of and in opposition to this system.

### **Additional Pre-Viewing Information (social, ethical, cultural) and Resources**

It would be important for the teacher to be well-informed about the social practice of untouchability. Dalit literature is available in several languages including English, Hindi, Marathi and Tamil, and can help to understand the lived experience of Dalits.

In addition the teacher may also look at laws against the practice of untouchability, how the Constitution of India defines it and the ways in which the laws have been followed and implemented. It would also be useful to look into the social as well as legal understanding of the reservation system and its implementation. Newspaper reports, annual education and employment related statistics can be helpful in this case. The other side of the issue can be covered by looking at news reports regarding caste based atrocities in different parts of the nation.

### Suggested Reading:

- Ambedkar, B.R., Roy, Arundhati (Introduction). 2014. *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. Navayana. New Delhi
- Rege, Sharmila *Writing Caste / Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies*. Zubaan. New Delhi
- Omvedt, Gail. 2012. *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*. Orient BlackSwan. New Delhi

### Suggestions for Deepening Understanding: Materials for use post the viewing

The audience can be encouraged to read the story Sadgati by Premchand to get a better idea of the setting and how Satyajit Ray adapts it to a contemporary context. Documentaries like *Jai Bhim Comrade*<sup>1</sup> by Anand Patwardhan and *India Untouched*<sup>2</sup> by Satlin K. can be used as post-viewing material to give the audience a glimpse into the current nature and spread of the caste system. The chapter on Sadgati from Asaduddin and Ghosh's *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand and Ray*<sup>3</sup>, sheds some light on how Ray handles the question of untouchability in particular and the significance of the narrative in the post-independence era.

### Key Learnings and Follow up Activities

Sadgati informs students about the exploitative and debilitating nature of caste hierarchy and the practice of untouchability. They could be urged to think about the caste divide that colours interactions on a daily basis, in multiple insidious ways and how the economic structure often becomes subordinate to the caste system. Hence the film will compel students to think more deeply about how the relationships of caste and economic status are manifested in social life.

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Another interesting theme for class discussion could emerge from students' own definitions of discrimination and how it affects their lives as well as the lives of others around them. A discussion on reservation and inquiry into the question of whether the country still needs reservation norms might also provoke intense discussion. And most importantly, can students define for themselves their own stance and social responsibility with respect to caste in India?