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MERITOCRACY, CASTE, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF ASPIRATION: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SERIOUS MEN (2020)

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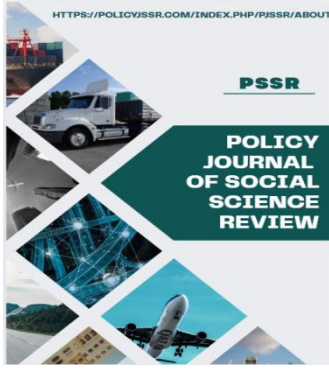
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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a qualitative textual analysis of Sudhir Mishra's Serious Men (2020), adapted from Manu Joseph's 2010 novel, read as a sustained cinematic argument about how inequality is reproduced and legitimated in contemporary urban India. The study is organised around three research questions: how the film critiques meritocracy within a deeply unequal society, how its portrayal of the father-son relationship between Ayyan and Aditya Mani illuminates the psychological burden of intergenerational ambition, and how the director uses the trope of the manufactured prodigy to challenge audience perceptions of the credentialed "Serious Men" who populate the country's scientific, bureaucratic, and educational establishment. Two complementary theoretical lenses guide the interpretation. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social reproduction provides the structural frame through which the film's critique of meritocracy and its dramatisation of compensatory family labour are read, while Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory of the presentation of self provides the interactional frame through which the prodigy performance and the elite audience's credulity are analysed. Purposive sampling of analytically dense scenes, supported by a verbatim transcript, was subjected to a three-pass close reading in which deductive concepts and inductive themes were brought into iterative dialogue. The analysis finds that the film exposes meritocracy as a performative illusion underwritten by inherited capital, reframes the father-son bond as a site of accelerated capital accumulation in a household denied inherited dispositions, and turns the prodigy trope into a critique of institutionalised seriousness itself, showing that the elite audience trained to recognise merit is also the audience most easily fooled by its surface signs.

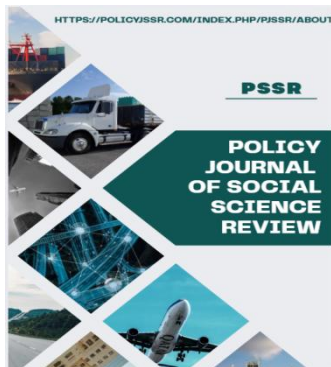
Keywords: meritocracy, caste and class in India, cultural capital, qualitative film analysis.



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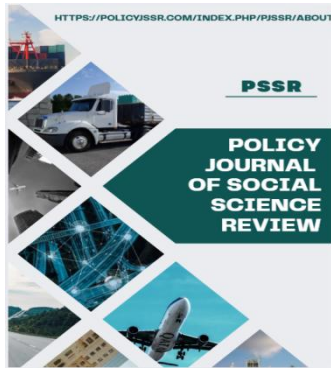
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Introduction

Contemporary India presents itself, both to its own citizens and to a global audience, as a society in which education, talent, and individual effort are the legitimate routes to social advancement. The post-liberalisation rhetoric of opportunity, amplified by the visibility of a technology-driven middle class and a celebrated scientific establishment, has consolidated meritocracy as the dominant explanation for who succeeds and who fails. Yet a substantial body of empirical scholarship has shown that this rhetoric coexists with persistent caste- and class-based exclusion. Audit studies of urban private-sector hiring have demonstrated that identical job applications produce systematically different callback rates when submitted under upper-caste Hindu, Dalit, and Muslim names, with discrimination operating even at the first stage of the application process (Thorat & Attewell, 2007). Macro-level analyses of formal labour markets have shown that caste disparities in earnings,

occupational distribution, and access to elite institutions are not residual relics of an older order but are actively reproduced by ostensibly modern, caste-blind institutions (Deshpande, 2011). Against this empirical backdrop, the question of how cultural texts narrate, contest, or naturalise the gap between meritocratic promise and structural exclusion becomes analytically significant.

Cinema is one of the most consequential sites at which that gap is publicly staged in India, and Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men* (2020), adapted from Manu Joseph's (2010) novel of the same title, is a particularly precise example of the genre. The film follows Ayyan Mani, a Dalit personal assistant to a celebrated astronomer at the National Institute of Fundamental Research in Mumbai, who fabricates his young son Aditya as a child prodigy in order to engineer the social mobility that the institutions around him claim to reward but in fact deny. Through Ayyan's caustic voice-over, the film offers a sustained



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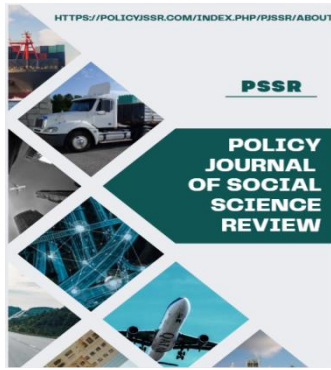
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taxonomy of inherited privilege — most memorably his “four-generation theory” of mobility — while simultaneously dramatising the elite scientific, bureaucratic, and educational class that he serves and parodies. Critics received the film as a sharp satirical intervention in the meritocratic narrative: Desai (2020) described it as a sharp, provocative spin on the Slumdog syndrome. The film's status as a popular Netflix release, watched by an audience much larger than the readership of the empirical scholarship cited above, makes its representational work culturally consequential.

Scholarly attention to *Serious Men* has so far been dominated by review journalism and broad commentary on its caste and class politics, with comparatively little sustained, theoretically grounded textual analysis of how the film actually constructs its critique. The international scholarship on meritocracy as ideology — including Young's (1958) original satirical formulation, Littler's (2017) genealogy

of the term's dramatic U-turn... from socialist slur to a contemporary ideal of how a society should be organised, and Sandel's (2020) account of the cultural and psychological toll of meritocratic credentialism — supplies a rich vocabulary for such an analysis but has rarely been brought into dialogue with Indian cinematic texts. Equally, the sociological theory most directly relevant to the film's representational strategy — Pierre Bourdieu's account of cultural capital and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of the presentation of self — has been widely applied in studies of education, labour, and everyday interaction, but its analytic potential for reading a satirical film about manufactured genius in a stratified society remains underexploited. This study addresses that gap by treating *Serious Men* as a sustained cinematic argument about merit, inheritance, and performance, and by analysing it through a framework that



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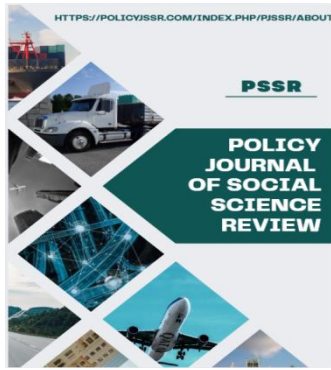
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integrates structural and interactional accounts of social reproduction.

The study is organised around three research questions, each motivated by a distinct dimension of the film's critique and analytically connected to the broader literature. The first asks how the film critiques the concept of meritocracy within a deeply unequal society, situating Ayyan's strategies of fabrication within the structural conditions that make authentic merit-based advancement nearly impossible for the marginalised. The second asks in what ways the portrayal of the father-son relationship between Ayyan and Aditya highlights the psychological burden of intergenerational ambition, attending to the conversion of childhood into compensatory labour in households denied inherited cultural capital. The third asks how the director uses the trope of the prodigy to challenge audience perceptions of the “Serious Men” of the title — the scientists, ministers, journalists, and educators whose performances of authority the film

systematically destabilises. Taken together, the three questions are designed to move the analysis from the structural conditions of inequality, through the intimate psychological economy of the family, to the public theatre of elite legitimacy.

The significance of the study is twofold. Methodologically, it demonstrates how qualitative film analysis, conducted through the dual lens of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Goffman's dramaturgical theory, can yield a structurally and interactionally precise reading of a popular cinematic text without reducing that text to either a sociological case study or an exercise in plot summary. Substantively, it contributes to the wider conversation about the ideological work that meritocracy performs in unequal societies by showing how a single, widely viewed film makes that work visible to a mass audience. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The literature review situates the study within the scholarship on



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meritocracy, caste, social reproduction, and dramaturgical performance, and develops the dual theoretical framework. The method section sets out the qualitative textual-analytic design, the sampling of analytically dense scenes, and the procedures used to ensure rigour. The results section presents the three findings, organised by research question, and a closing discussion draws the analytic threads together.

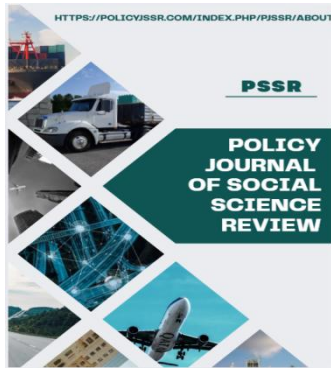
Literature Review

Meritocracy as Ideology: From Young to Sandel and Littler

Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men* (2020), adapted from Manu Joseph's (2010) novel, dramatises the collision between India's official narrative of merit-based mobility and the unofficial machinery of caste, class, and cultural inheritance that organises opportunity. Reading the film analytically requires a theoretical scaffolding capable of explaining both why structural exclusion persists under ostensibly open institutions and how social actors performatively negotiate

that exclusion. The first research question, how *Serious Men* critiques meritocracy in a stratified society, sits within a sociological tradition that treats meritocracy not as a neutral allocative principle but as a legitimating ideology. The term was coined satirically by Young (1958) in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, a dystopian projection in which the formula “IQ + effort = merit” produces a new caste system more rigid than the old. Far from endorsing the concept, Young intended the book as a warning that, by encoding inequality as desert, meritocracy would corrode social solidarity.

Recent research has renewed that critique. Sandel (2020) contended that meritocratic ideology, despite its promise of fair competition, reinforces credential-based hierarchies and fosters resentment by interpreting structural disadvantages as personal failures. Littler (2017) traced the shift in meritocracy's meaning—from a socialist insult to a modern ideal of societal organization—arguing that meritocracy



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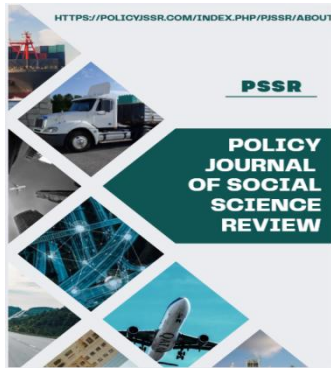
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serves as the main cultural justification for contemporary neoliberalism. While it appears to offer opportunities, it actually fosters new social divisions. Both scholars agree that meritocratic discourse masks the underlying conditions under which talent is recognized and rewarded.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital explains this obscuring effect. In "The Forms of Capital", he distinguishes economic, social, and cultural capital, noting that cultural capital—including embodied dispositions, institutional credentials, and objectified cultural goods—is the most concealed form of hereditary transmission. Since cultural capital is gradually acquired within the family habitus, school exams that claim to assess individual ability actually gauge prior cultural accumulation. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) further expanded this argument, demonstrating how schools systematically transform inherited cultural capital into official academic credentials, while presenting

this process as the recognition of innate talent.

In the Indian context, Deshpande (2011) empirically showed that caste-based disparities in urban, formal-sector labor markets are not just leftover issues but are maintained by institutions that claim to be caste-neutral. These institutions still encode caste hierarchies through concepts like merit, mobility, and modernism. Thorat and Attewell's (2007) audit study on private-sector recruitment in India, where identical résumés bearing upper-caste Hindu, Dalit, and Muslim names received significantly different callback rates, provided evidence that discrimination happens even at the initial stage of the application process. Bourdieu's framework helps explain the film's key spatial and economic metaphor, along with Ayyan's "four-generation theory" of mobility, as a local reinterpretation of social reproduction: it requires accumulated generational capital, not just individual effort, to attain elite status. The contrast between the slum



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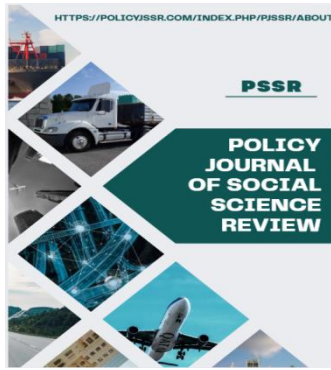
and laboratory as identified in the textual analysis reflects, in Bourdieusian terms, the visible difference between a habitus with abundant cultural capital and one systematically deprived of it. The film's critique of meritocracy is thus not a moral condemnation of dishonesty but a structural argument that the competition is inherently unfairly tilted in favor of elites.

The Father–Son Bond and the Psychological Cost of Intergenerational Ambition

The second research question concerns the father–son relationship and the psychological burden of intergenerational ambition. Bourdieu's focus on the family as the main arena for transmitting (or trying to make up for the lack of) cultural capital remains central to this analysis. He argued that the hidden and highly influential form of educational investment is the transmission of cultural capital, which families without inherited cultural capital must compensate for through intense, often coercive, educational

efforts with their children. The tutoring scenes in *Serious Men*, where Ayyan practices scientific terms with his son Aditya in a dimly lit corner of their single-room home, vividly illustrate this compensatory effort: cultural capital that the household did not inherit needs to be quickly created during childhood.

Sandel (2020) extended the analysis from the structural to the affective register, describing how meritocratic pressure produces a “hubris of success” among winners and corrosive shame among losers, transmitted intergenerationally through parenting practices that conflate the child's worth with academic output. Littler (2017) similarly observed that meritocratic culture intensifies family life around the production of “rising” children, particularly in households for whom upward mobility is felt as both possibility and obligation. In the Indian setting, Jodhka (2015) argues that this intensity is sharpened by caste: the marginalized parent invests in the child as a vehicle for collective redress.



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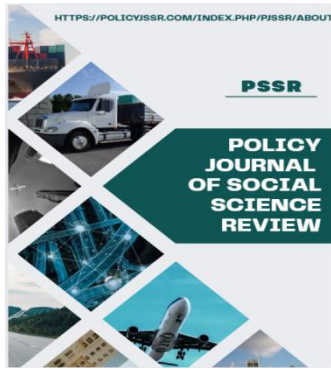
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Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory adds a complementary lens. Goffman conceived of social life as a sequence of performances staged for audiences, in which the actor attempts to guide and control the impressions [others] form of him. The family, in Goffman's analysis, is a key “back region”, the rehearsal space in which the public performance is prepared. *Serious Men* turns this private back region into a sustained training ground: Ayyan scripts, drills, and corrects his son so that the boy can sustain a public performance of genius before scientists and educators. The psychological burden the film makes visible is the cost of being a child whose backstage is also a workshop and whose front-stage performance is the only sanctioned form of love. Joseph's (2010) novel, on which the film is based, foregrounds this dynamic in Ayyan's interior monologue, and reviewers have noted that the film preserves the novel's refusal to sentimentalise the father's project (Desai, 2020).

The literature thus suggests three interpretive claims. First, the father's instrumentalisation of the son is best read structurally, as a compensatory strategy in the absence of inherited cultural capital, not individual pathology. Second, the affective intensity of that strategy reflects the emotional economy of meritocratic societies under inequality. Third, the child's manufactured performance is, in Goffman's (1959) terms, a front-stage role whose backstage rehearsal has colonised the entire space of childhood.

The Prodigy Trope and the “Serious Men” Performance, Authority, and Subversion

The third research question asks how the prodigy trope challenges audience perceptions of “Serious Men”, the scientists, ministers, journalists and educators who populate the film's elite circuits. Goffman's (1959) framework serves as the primary theoretical resource here. According to him, social authority hinges on whether the audience perceives a performance as



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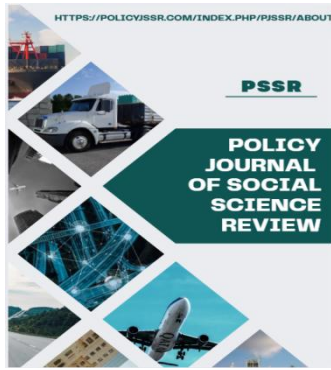
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genuinely representing the role. He distinguished between performances delivered “sincerely” and those performed “cynically,” arguing that institutions perpetuate themselves by ritualizing cues, credentials, vocabularies, and settings that encourage audiences to believe. In this context, the film's fabricated prodigy, Aditya, exemplifies a cynical performance in Goffman's precise sense: a calculated impression management act that still earns sincere belief from credentialed viewers.

What this exposes, in Goffman's terms, is that the “Serious Men” are themselves engaged in performance; their seriousness is a presentation of self sustained by setting, dress, idiom, and institutional affiliation rather than by any privileged access to truth. The film's irony is that the elite audience, trained to recognise the surface signs of intellect, cannot distinguish between rehearsed and authentic competence. Reviewers have read this satirical reversal as central to the film: Sharma (2020)

argued that *Serious Men* exposes “ancient prejudice posing as a post-liberal narrative” in which the elite's gullibility is the joke. Agrawal (2020) confirmed in an interview that the film was intended to interrogate the educational and scientific establishment, not merely the slum protagonist.

Bourdieu (1986) describes institutionalised cultural capital—such as diplomas, positions, and titles—that provide holders with socially and legally recognized value. This explains why the prodigy fraud is easily accepted by the elite. The “Serious Men” believe in Aditya because his achievements align with the institutional signs of merit they uphold; recognizing him as a genius reinforces, rather than challenges, the cultural order that maintains their authority. This trope is twofold: it criticises the elite's focus on superficial signs of intelligence (Goffman, 1959) and exposes the structural way institutionalised capital sustains itself (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).



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Read together, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Goffman's dramaturgical theory furnish a coherent analytic for *Serious Men*. Bourdieu (1986) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) explain why meritocratic competition rewards inherited capital and why the marginalised family must turn the child into an accelerated site of capital accumulation. Goffman (1959) explains how that accumulation takes the form of sustained public performance, and how the elite audience's acceptance of it exposes the performativity of authority itself.

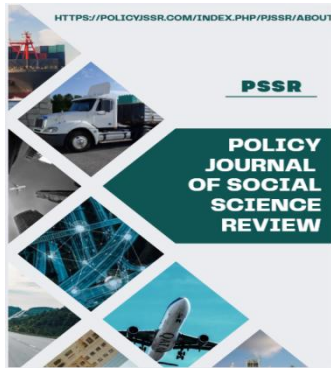
Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual analysis of a single cinematic text, Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men* (2020). Textual analysis is an interpretive method that treats a film as a structured system of signs whose narrative, visual, and dialogic elements jointly produce meaning, and which can be read for the

cultural assumptions, ideological positions, and social relations they encode (McKee, 2003). The choice of a qualitative, single-case design is dictated by the nature of the research questions: each asks how the film *constructs* a critique, of meritocracy, of intergenerational ambition, and of the elite class of "Serious Men", and questions of construction are best answered through close, interpretive reading rather than through frequency counts or comparative coding across many films (Bordwell & Thompson, 2020; Stokes, 2013). A single-film design also permits the depth of attention that a layered satirical text such as *Serious Men* requires, since its meaning is generated as much by tonal shifts, visual contrast, and the unreliable voice-over of its protagonist as by its plot.

The analysis is guided by two theoretical lenses, each selected for its analytic fit with the research questions rather than for theoretical eclecticism. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital and the



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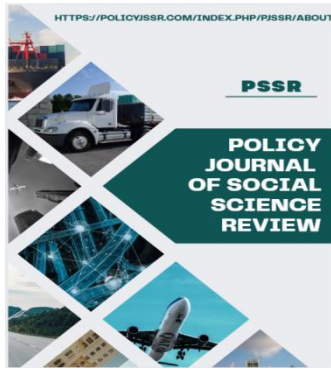
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broader account of social reproduction developed with Passeron (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) provides the structural lens through which questions of meritocracy and intergenerational ambition are examined. Bourdieu's distinction between embodied, objectified, and institutionalised cultural capital, and his argument that schooling converts inherited capital into certified merit, supplies the analytic vocabulary for reading Ayyan Mani's manufactured “genius” son as a compensatory strategy within a stratified social field. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory provides the complementary lens through which questions of performance, authority, and the prodigy trope are examined. His distinction between front-stage and back-stage regions and his account of impression management offers the conceptual apparatus for analysing how characters in the film perform and authenticate seriousness, intellect, and legitimacy before specific audiences. The two frameworks are treated as complementary rather than competing:

Bourdieu explains the structural conditions under which performances of merit become necessary, and Goffman explains the interactional mechanics by which those performances succeed or fail.

Material and Sampling

The primary material consists of the full theatrical text of *Serious Men* (Mishra, 2020), released on Netflix on 2 October 2020 and adapted from Manu Joseph's (2010) novel of the same title. Two corresponding artefacts were used in tandem: the film itself, viewed in its entirety, and the official English-language transcript. The transcript supports verbatim attention to dialogue and voice-over, while the film supplies the visual, spatial, and performative dimensions that the transcript cannot capture, including mise-en-scène, framing, lighting, sound, and the actors' embodied performance. Within the film, purposive sampling was used to identify analytically dense scenes for close reading. Following the logic articulated by Mikos (2014) and Rose (2016),



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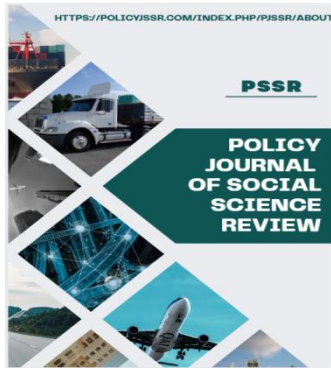
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sampling proceeded from the research questions rather than from a pre-fixed quota: scenes were selected because they instantiated, contested, or complicated the constructs under study, meritocracy, intergenerational ambition, and the figure of the Serious Man, and because they offered observable cues (dialogue, framing, contrast) that could be analysed. The chawl tutoring scenes, the school admissions interview, the laboratory and ministerial exchanges, the four-generation monologue, and the public performances of Aditya as a prodigy were treated as the analytical core; supporting scenes were drawn in where they extended or qualified the pattern emerging from the core.

Analytic Procedure

The analysis followed a recursive, three-pass procedure consistent with established approaches to qualitative film analysis (Mikos, 2014; Stokes, 2013) and with the broader logic of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first pass was an immersive viewing of the film and a

parallel reading of the transcript, undertaken without coding, so as to register the film's overall rhythm, tonal architecture, and narrative arc on its own terms. The second pass was an analytic re-viewing in which the transcript was annotated for moments of dialogue, voice-over, and silence that bore directly on the three research questions, while the film was re-watched scene by scene with attention to the visual and aural devices accompanying those moments, including spatial contrast between slum and institutional spaces, the framing of Ayyan in relation to his employer and his son, the lighting of the "study corner", the placement of the camera during prodigy performances, and the satirical use of incidental sound. The third pass was an integrative coding pass in which annotated transcript passages and corresponding scenes were grouped into provisional themes (for example, "compensatory cultural capital," "front-stage prodigy performance," "elite credulity," and "transactional fatherhood") and re-examined for



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internal coherence, internal contradiction, and fit with the Bourdieusian and Goffmanian frameworks.

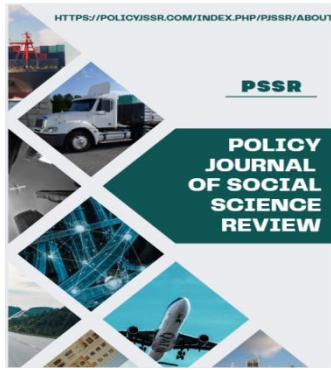
Coding was deductive at the level of the framework, themes were developed in dialogue with concepts drawn from Bourdieu (1986) and Goffman (1959), and inductive at the level of the data, in that emergent patterns not anticipated by the theory, such as the film's recurring use of caste-historical anecdote, were retained and integrated rather than discarded. Where the data and the framework pulled in different directions, the data were privileged, and the framework was treated as a heuristic rather than as a fixed template, in keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2006) account of theoretically informed but reflexive analysis.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Several procedures supported the trustworthiness of the analysis. Verbatim transcript material was retained alongside interpretive commentary so

that readers can independently assess the fit between evidence and claim, a practice consistent with the transparency criteria articulated by Stokes (2013). Interpretations were anchored in observable textual features, specific lines of dialogue, identifiable scenes, particular visual choices, rather than in generalised impressions, in line with Bordwell and Thompson's (2020) insistence that film-analytic claims be grounded in concrete cinematic detail. Reflexive attention was given to the analyst's position in relation to the cultural field the film depicts, and competing readings circulating in the film's critical reception were consulted as a corrective to interpretive narrowing. No claim is made to statistical generalisability; the analytic ambition is the analytical generalisation of the film's critique to the broader sociocultural field of contemporary urban India, on the terms set out by the theoretical framework.

Results



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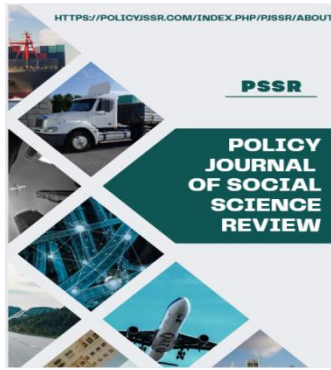
RQ1. How does the film critique the concept of ‘meritocracy’ within a deeply unequal society?

The textual analysis of *Serious Men* reveals that the film treats meritocracy not as a functioning social principle but as a carefully maintained fiction that allows entrenched privilege to reproduce itself while appearing neutral. The narrative voice of Ayyan Mani, the Dalit protagonist who works as a personal assistant to the renowned astronomer Dr. Arvind Acharya, becomes the primary instrument through which the film dismantles the meritocratic myth. From the opening sequences, Ayyan's sardonic monologues establish a counter-narrative to the official story that India's scientific and intellectual establishment talks about itself. When he observes that the same scientists who would not shake a common man's hand for free stand "like beggars" before a minister demanding "funds", the film exposes the transactional, hierarchical, and often

servile machinery that hides behind the language of pure research and merit.

The film constructs a deliberate visual and spatial grammar to expose this rigged system. The chawl where Ayyan, his wife Oja, and their son Aditya live is rendered as cramped, dark, and crowded, while the National Institute of Fundamental Research, the five-star hotel, and the elite school exist in spaces of clean, well-lit abundance. Aditya's "corner" of the home, which Ayyan tells him he must "light up with talent", is literally dark, a metaphor for the conditions under which the marginalized are told to compete with those who already inherit illumination. The film insists, through these contrasts, that the playing field is not level and never was.

Ayyan's famous four-generation theory is the analytical heart of this critique. He explains that his father, the first generation, never went to school; he, the second generation, studied but realized education's true value too late; the third generation will give presentations and accumulate status; and only the fourth



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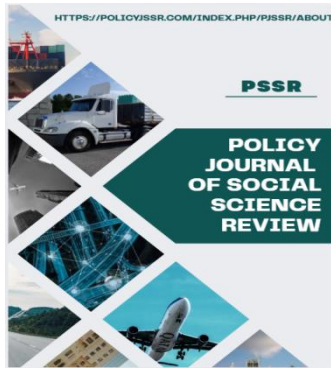
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generation will be able to “sit by a pool and do nothing all day”. The theory reframes meritocracy as an intergenerational accumulation of privilege rather than a contest of individual ability. The “4G” children at the hotel are not more meritorious than Ayyan; they are merely further along an inherited trajectory. By offering this taxonomy through Ayyan's plain, unsentimental voice, the film demonstrates that what the elite call merit is in fact the visible end-stage of a long process of caste and class accumulation.

The film sharpens this critique through caste. Ayyan's account of his grandfather, who died of a heart attack after being mocked for boarding a “Brahmins-only” first-class compartment, and the story of another ancestor whose spine was broken for drinking from a village well, are not nostalgic asides but evidence that the supposed neutrality of the modern Indian institution rests on a violent caste history that has never been resolved. When the admissions officer at the elite

school recoils from Ayyan's frank use of caste terminology, his discomfort exposes the polite consensus by which urban India pretends the structures have dissolved while continuing to benefit from them.

Crucially, the film refuses to romanticize Ayyan's response. His manufacture of his son as a “genius”, feeding him answers through a hidden earpiece, coaching him to recite scientific facts beyond his years, is not endorsed as a clever workaround but presented as the only available currency in a market that has already disqualified him. Merit, in this reading, becomes something the excluded must counterfeit because the authentic version has been claimed in advance. The film's critique is therefore double-edged: meritocracy is a lie, and the lie can only be answered with another lie. By refusing easy resolution, the film leaves the audience with a structural rather than moral diagnosis. The problem is not that Ayyan cheats; the problem is the system that makes



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cheating the only rational strategy for upward mobility.

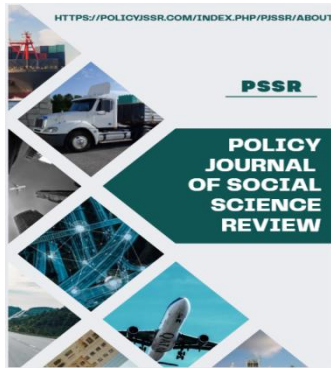
RQ2. In what ways does the portrayal of the father-son relationship highlight the psychological burden of intergenerational ambition?

The analysis of the father-son relationship between Ayyan and Aditya shows that the film converts a conventionally tender bond into a site of psychological labor, demonstrating how ambition inherited downward can hollow out the child it claims to elevate. From the moment Aditya is born, a sequence the film presents with raucous humor as Oja swears at Ayyan in the delivery room, the boy is immediately enlisted into a project that is not his own. Ayyan's paternity-leave application, with its inflated language about a "budding seed" needing nurturing to become a "Homo sapien", already signals that Aditya is not a child to be raised but a specimen to be cultivated. The bureaucratic register of the letter, parodying the institutional voice Ayyan has absorbed from his employers,

reveals how thoroughly his fatherhood has been recoded as a strategic operation.

The textual analysis identifies three mechanisms through which the film stages this burden. First, the dialogue between father and son is overwhelmingly directive rather than reciprocal. Ayyan instructs, rehearses, corrects, and prompts; Aditya repeats, performs, and absorbs. The boy's quietness, initially read by the admissions panel as Einstein-like introversion, is in fact the silence of a child whose interior life has been crowded out by his father's script. When Ayyan tells the school officials that "even Einstein couldn't talk until he was six", he is not defending his son so much as fitting him into a pre-written role.

Second, the film uses spatial framing to make the asymmetry visible. The "study corner" Ayyan assigns Aditya is small and dim, marked off as the site of the boy's labor. The home becomes a workshop in which the child is the product. The father stands; the son sits and studies. The father plans; the son



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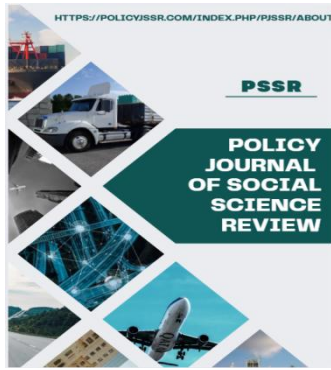
delivers. Even moments that should belong to play are repurposed into rehearsal. The cumulative effect is a portrait of a childhood that has been industrialized in service of escape velocity.

Third, the film tracks the cost in Aditya's affect. His public performances as a prodigy are accompanied by an unease that the camera registers in held close-ups and hesitations, an unease invisible to the adults eager to celebrate him. The boy is praised for answers he does not understand, rewarded for a self he has not chosen. The “genius” label functions as a form of conditioning in which love becomes contingent on output. Ayyan is not cruel, his affection is real, and his hope for Aditya is sincere, but the film shows that affection routed through ambition can be as constricting as neglect.

The film situates this dynamic within a broader pattern of intergenerational pressure in unequal societies. Ayyan carries the unprocessed weight of his own father's silences and his

grandfather's humiliations, and rather than metabolizing that inheritance, he transmits it forward as an even heavier demand. The “2G” man asks the “3G” boy to deliver what four generations are supposed to produce. The compression is unsustainable, and the film's later turns, Aditya's collapsing performance, the exposure of the fraud, the strain on Oja, who repeatedly cautions her husband, confirm that the psychological costs cannot be deferred indefinitely.

What emerges from the textual analysis is a portrait of love distorted by structural injustice. Ayyan's instrumentalization of his son is not a personal pathology but the predictable outcome of a society that offers the marginalized no honest path upward. The father-son relationship in *Serious Men* therefore reads as both a private tragedy and a social diagnosis: the more rigged the ladder, the heavier the weight a parent will place on the next rung, and the smaller the shoulders forced to bear it.



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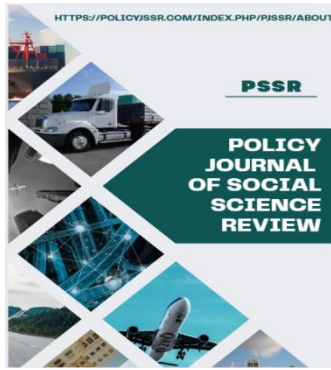
RQ3. How does the director use the trope of the “prodigy” to challenge the audience’s perceptions of ‘Serious Men’ in Indian society?

The textual analysis demonstrates that the prodigy trope is deployed not to celebrate exceptional intellect but to satirize the institutions and elites that authenticate it. The “Serious Men” of the film's title, the scientists, ministers, school administrators, journalists, and political brokers who populate Ayyan's world, are revealed, through the manufactured genius of a chawl-dwelling child, to be considerably less serious than their titles suggest. The trope functions as a mirror placed in front of the elite, and the film's irony is generated by what that mirror shows.

The director sets up the satire by first establishing the self-importance of the scientific establishment. Dr. Acharya's pursuit of stratospheric microbes, Dr. Nambodari's competing “Giant Ear” telescope program, Tawde the bureaucrat's terror that microscopic aliens might “attack us”, these are

presented through Ayyan's voiceover as a parade of vanity, rivalry, and intellectual posturing dressed in the vocabulary of fundamental research. Ayyan's name for them, “Serious Men”, is sarcastic from the outset. They take themselves seriously; the film does not.

Into this environment the director introduces Aditya as a fabricated prodigy. The boy's recitations of scientific facts, fed through an earpiece, are received by educators, scientists, and politicians with escalating awe. The crucial point, and the source of the film's most cutting irony, is that none of these “Serious Men” detect the fraud. They are so primed to recognize genius in the form they expect that they cannot see the performance underneath it. Their expertise, which is supposed to be a safeguard against manipulation, becomes the very mechanism through which they are manipulated. The film thereby suggests that the gatekeepers of merit are themselves the most easily fooled by its surface signs.



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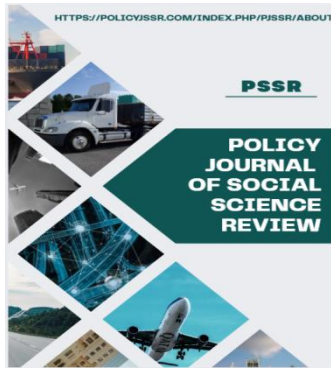
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The director compounds the critique by showing how quickly the prodigy is absorbed into existing power structures. Politicians invite Aditya to the stage; scientists adjust their language to court him; the media amplifies him. The boy from the chawl becomes useful precisely because he confirms the elite's preferred story, that India is a meritocracy in which talent rises regardless of caste or class. Aditya's manufactured genius is therefore not an exposure of the elite but a flattery of it, and that is what makes the satire bite. The "Serious Men" do not embrace him in spite of their biases; they embrace him because he conveniently launders those biases.

The trope is also used to interrogate the figure of the scientist as a moral authority. Acharya, whose intelligence is unquestioned, is shown to be vain, dismissive of subordinates, and willing to humiliate colleagues. His seriousness about science coexists with a thorough unseriousness about the people who make his work possible. By placing Acharya and Ayyan on the same screen

for much of the film, the director invites the audience to ask which man is the more clear-eyed observer of his society. The answer, repeatedly, is the assistant, not the astronomer.

The most consequential effect of the prodigy trope is the redirection of the audience's gaze. Initially, the viewer may read Aditya's act as a story about a fraudulent child; by the film's conclusion, the viewer understands it as a story about a fraudulent class. The "Serious Men" turn out to be the truly performative figures, while Ayyan, whose performance is explicit and self-aware, emerges as the more honest broker of his own dishonesty. The trope therefore inverts the moral hierarchy the audience brings into the film. Seriousness, intellect, and authority are unmasked as costumes. The boy in the earpiece is no more a prodigy than the men in the laboratory are sages, and the difference between them is only that one of them has been allowed to wear the costume for far longer.



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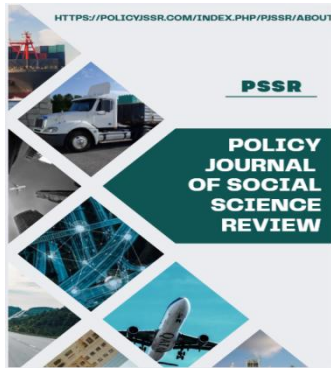
Discussion

The findings of this textual analysis are best read not as three independent observations about *Serious Men* but as a single, layered argument the film makes about how inequality is reproduced and legitimated in contemporary urban India. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital and social reproduction and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of the presentation of self each illuminate a part of that argument, and the interpretive payoff of bringing them together lies in the way they jointly account for both the structural conditions and the interactional mechanics of the film's critique. The discussion that follows links each of the three results to the framework, and then considers what the integration of the two theories adds beyond either lens used in isolation.

The first result, that *Serious Men* treats meritocracy as a performative illusion rather than a neutral playing field, is best understood as a cinematic dramatisation of Bourdieu's argument that schools and

other certifying institutions systematically convert inherited cultural capital into a fiction of individual desert. Bourdieu (1986) insisted that cultural capital is the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, precisely because the institutionalised form in which it eventually appears, credentials, posts, prizes, looks like the recognition of natural talent rather than the ratification of prior accumulation.

Ayyan Mani's four-generation theory is, in effect, a vernacular restatement of this account: the “4G” children he watches by the hotel pool are not more meritorious than his son, only further along an intergenerational trajectory of accumulation. The slum-to-laboratory contrast that the analysis traced visually, and the four-generation monologue that articulates it verbally, together externalise what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) called the misrecognition at the heart of educational systems: the recasting of structural inheritance as personal achievement. Where the empirical



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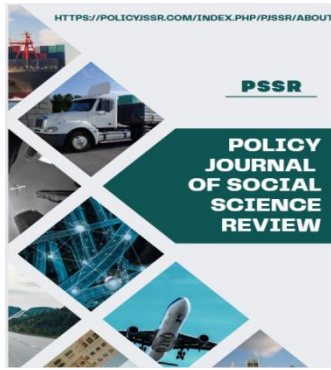
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scholarship on caste discrimination in India (Deshpande, 2011; Thorat & Attewell, 2007) demonstrates the persistence of these reproductive mechanisms, *Serious Men* renders them dramatically visible in a single domestic and institutional landscape. The film's critique is consequently not a moral attack on cheating but a structural diagnosis of the field in which cheating becomes the only rational route to mobility for those denied inherited capital, a reading consistent with Sandel's (2020) account of meritocratic ideology as a legitimization device and with Littler's (2017) analysis of meritocracy as the cultural form of contemporary inequality.

The second result, that the father-son relationship is reframed from emotional bond to functional transaction, with Aditya converted into a vehicle for Ayyan's unfulfilled aspirations, extends the Bourdieusian frame from the institutional field into the family. Bourdieu (1986) was explicit that the family is the primary site at which

cultural capital is transmitted, and that households deprived of inherited capital must compensate through intense, often coercive, educational labour. The chawl tutoring scenes in *Serious Men* dramatise precisely this compensatory labour. The dim "study corner" that Ayyan assigns his son is iconographically the opposite of the cultivated household environment in which dominant-class children acquire embodied cultural capital almost without effort. What Bourdieu described as the slow, ambient transmission of dispositions is replaced in Ayyan's home by an accelerated, scripted, scarcity-driven project. Goffman's (1959) distinction between front and back regions sharpens this reading: the family's domestic space, which dramaturgical theory treats as the privileged back region in which the self can momentarily relax from performance, has been colonised by the requirements of the public front-stage role the boy is being prepared to play. The psychological burden the film



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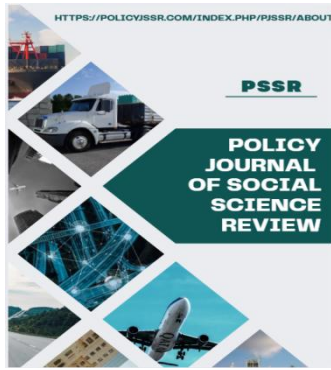
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makes visible is thus not the burden of having an ambitious parent in the abstract but the very specific burden of a childhood in which there is no backstage. Love and labour, affection and instruction, kinship and rehearsal have been fused. The analysis of *Serious Men* therefore supports and specifies the more general claims made by Sandel (2020) and Littler (2017) about the affective costs of meritocratic culture, by showing how those costs are concretely organised at the level of household space and parental conduct in a Dalit family attempting to manufacture mobility within a single generation.

The third result, that the prodigy trope is used to expose the "Serious Men" rather than to celebrate the prodigy, is where Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework does its sharpest interpretive work. Goffman argued that institutional authority depends on the audience's willingness to accept a performance as a sincere expression of role, and that the cues by which audiences are prompted to extend belief settings, idioms,

credentials, and deportment are themselves social products rather than transparent signals of competence. Aditya's manufactured genius is, in Goffman's strict sense, a cynical performance: the cues are deployed deliberately to elicit belief that the performer does not himself possess. What the film exposes is that the elite audience for that performance, the scientists, ministers, school administrators, journalists, cannot distinguish cynical from sincere performance because their criteria for recognition operate at the level of cues rather than substance. The seriousness of the "Serious Men" turns out to be itself a presentation of self, sustained by setting and credential rather than by privileged access to truth, and the film's irony is generated by the recognition that the audience trained to validate genuine merit is the same audience most easily fooled by its surface signs. Bourdieu (1986) anticipates this point at the institutional level: institutionalised cultural capital, in the form of titles,



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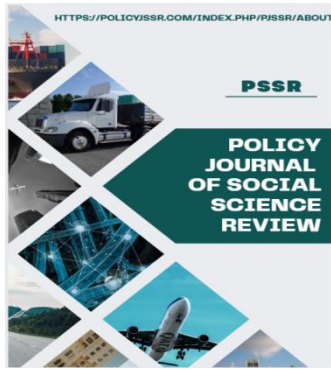
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posts, and credentials, confers conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value on its holders, and the easy absorption of the fraudulent prodigy into elite circuits reaffirms rather than disturbs that order. The trope therefore performs a double critique, interactional on the surface, structural underneath, that requires both theoretical lenses to be fully read.

Taken together, the results suggest that Bourdieu and Goffman are not interchangeable lenses on the same object but complementary accounts of a single process. Bourdieu (1986) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) explain why the marginalised family must turn the child into an accelerated site of capital accumulation, and why elite institutions are structurally disposed to ratify the resulting performance. Goffman (1959) explains the interactional mechanics by which that performance is staged, the spatial reorganisation of the family it requires, and the conditions under which the elite audience extends belief. Where

Bourdieu, without Goffman, risks reading *Serious Men* as a static social diagram, and Goffman, without Bourdieu, risks reading it as a story about individual impression management, the integration of the two yields a reading attentive to both structure and interaction. The film, on this reading, is not only a satire of a particular set of credentialed elites but a sustained cinematic argument that, in a society organised around the misrecognition of inherited capital as individual merit, fraud is the predictable strategy of the excluded and credulity is the predictable disposition of the included.

The implications of this reading extend beyond the specific text. For studies of contemporary Indian cinema, it suggests the analytic value of combining a structural sociology of inequality with a dramaturgical sociology of performance when reading films that thematise mobility and authority. For broader debates about meritocracy as ideology (Littler, 2017; Sandel, 2020; Young,



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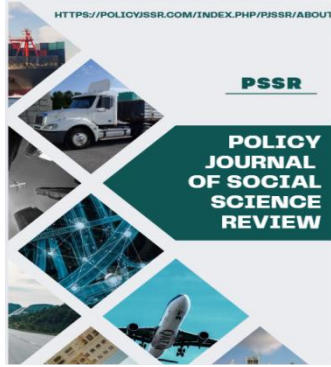
1958), it offers a concrete cinematic instance of how the misrecognition described by Bourdieu becomes interactionally observable in everyday social encounters between the marginalised and the credentialed. Several limitations should be acknowledged: the analysis is anchored in a single film and does not claim generalisation to Indian cinema as a whole, the Bourdieusian and Goffmanian categories applied here are heuristic rather than exhaustive, and reception data from actual audiences fall outside the textual-analytic scope adopted in this study. Future research could productively extend the analysis comparatively, both across other films in the contemporary Indian satirical tradition and across reception studies that examine how different audience segments engage with the film's dual critique of merit and seriousness.

Conclusion

This paper set out to read Sudhir Mishra's *Serious Men* (2020), adapted from Manu Joseph's (2010) novel, as a

sustained cinematic argument about how inequality is reproduced and legitimated in contemporary urban India. Through a qualitative textual analysis organised around three research questions, and interpreted through the dual lens of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of the presentation of self, the study traced how the film makes the misrecognition at the heart of meritocratic ideology dramatically visible. The critique of meritocracy that the film offers is not the moralised observation that some people cheat and others do not, but the structural claim that, in a society organised around the conversion of inherited cultural capital into certified merit, fraud is a predictable strategy of the excluded and credulity a predictable disposition of the credentialed.

The three findings, read together, support that overarching claim and specify it at three different scales. At the scale of the social field, the film exposes meritocracy as a performative illusion



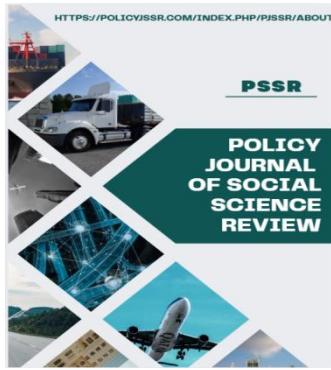
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underwritten by caste and class inheritance, with Ayyan Mani's four-generation theory serving as a vernacular restatement of social reproduction. At the scale of the household, the film converts the father-son relationship into a site of compensatory cultural-capital accumulation, in which a child denied inherited dispositions must manufacture them at speed and at psychological cost, and in which the domestic space ordinarily reserved for backstage relaxation is colonised by the demands of public performance. At the scale of public life, the film turns the prodigy trope against the elite audience that the trope ordinarily flatters, exposing the "Serious Men" of the title as themselves engaged in a presentation of self whose authority rests on institutionalised cues rather than on substantive distinction. None of the three readings is fully available through either Bourdieu or Goffman alone; their integration is the interpretive contribution of the paper.

Beyond the specific text, the study suggests that the combination of a structural sociology of inequality with a dramaturgical sociology of performance is a productive analytic for cinematic representations of mobility, authority, and inheritance in stratified societies. It also offers a concrete cinematic instance of the diagnoses developed in the wider scholarship on meritocracy as ideology, showing how the misrecognition described in that literature becomes interactionally observable in encounters between the marginalised and the credentialed. The limitations of a single-text qualitative design are acknowledged, and the reading developed here makes no claim to generalisation across Indian cinema as a whole; rather, it claims that *Serious Men* repays close, theoretically anchored attention because of the precision with which it stages a critique that the empirical literature has independently established but that mass audiences are rarely invited to see all at once.



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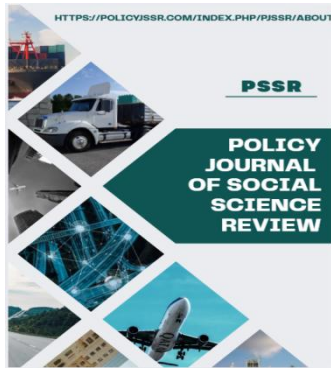
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The film closes without redeeming either its protagonist or the institutions that surround him. Ayyan's fraud is exposed, his son's manufactured genius collapses, and the elite continue, only mildly chastened, to occupy their posts. That ending is the proper one for a film whose critique is structural rather than moral: in a field where the rules of merit have been written in advance, the exposure of an individual fraud does not disturb the order that produced it. The conclusion this paper draws from *Serious Men* is therefore the conclusion the film itself draws, that the question worth asking is not whether Ayyan was right to lie, but why a society organised around the rhetoric of opportunity made his lie the most rational thing he could do.

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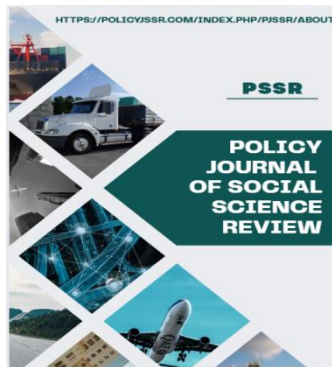


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