

Representation of Social Inequality in the Film 12th Fail (2023)

Received: 03-01-2026

Revised: 12-02-2026

Accepted: 14-04-2026

DOI: 10.29240/jdk.v11i1.15998

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Keywords: Social Inequality,
Film Representation,
Semiotics Roland Barthes,
12th Fail, Educational
Inequality, Social Justice

ABSTRACT

Purpose – Social inequality refers to conditions of inequality of access, opportunity and utilization of resources between community groups. This phenomenon can be seen in differences in income, quality of education, infrastructure development, and legal treatment. That issue is also a structural issue in India, a country that still faces sharp inequalities between social classes, rural and urban areas, and powerful groups and marginalized communities. Film media has a strategic role as a means of representing social reality, because it is able to convey critical messages visually and narratively. The Indian biographical film “12th Fail” by Vidhu Vinod Chopra has become an object of study because it tells the story of the struggle of the character Manoj from a poor family in facing an unequal social system.

Method – Descriptive qualitative research methods are applied through Roland Barthes' semiotics approach, including denotation, connotation and myth analysis. Primary data are sourced from scenes and film dialogue, while secondary data are from relevant scientific literature.

Findings – The results showed four main forms of social inequality, including inequalities in quality and educational facilities, socioeconomic status inequalities, rural and municipal infrastructure inequalities and legal justice inequalities. The representation shows how social systems tend to favour the powerful and limit the social mobility of the poor.

Cite this article:: Putri, C. C., & Sidiq Setyawan. (2026). Representation of Social Inequality in the Film 12th Fail (2023). *Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi*, 11(1), 79–92. <https://doi.org/10.29240/jdk.v11i1.15998>

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INTRODUCTION

The striking differences between societies, including differences in income, power, social status and opportunities, are called social inequalities. Social inequality can be interpreted as inequality or inequality in access to obtain or utilize available resources (Septiani et al., 2022). Social inequality is generally reflected in differences in income between levels of society, unequal access to public facilities, and social discrimination (Watif et al., 2024). The differences are caused by the

economy, education, resources and facilities, which are the causes of social inequality (Fabela & Khairunnisa, 2024).

According to Abad Badruzaman, the form of social reward that exists in society can be a very striking difference, this is also interpreted as a situation where the rich have a higher position and are more powerful than the poor (Aisyah, 2023). Social disparities arise due to polarization between people categorized as poor and both capable and rich (Herdiana, 2022). So from categorization in society, inequality causes real differences that shape social inequality in society.

Social inequality is a global issue in various countries around the world. The World Inequality Report shows the highest extreme social inequality in countries such as South Africa, Brazil, the Middle East, the United States and India, this report includes comparisons with indicators of income, wealth and access to human capital. According to Ghatak (2021) India has an inequality problem, driven by limited upward mobility, which is also driven by uneven opportunities. As a country with the largest population, India also experiences problems with social inequality. According to the World Inequality Report 2026, the gap in India is reaching an alarming stage where with wealth and income being more concentrated in the upper classes, with the richest 10% of the population having 58% of national income, the bottom part of income only has 15% of which the top 1% alone is able to control 40% of all wealth.

In understanding the social dynamics that occur in society, social reality is not only seen in everyday life, but social images can be reflected through mass media. Film as a mass communication medium that is considered effective in conveying various kinds of messages (Prasetya & Rahman, 2020). Apart from being a mass communication medium, films also have their own charm which presents a hidden message in conveying messages from various forms of knowledge and learning from the method of conveying them to society.

The function of the film itself is education, education, entertainment, information, uplifting and displaying culture, as well as increasing economic growth (Tahapary, 2021). Especially biographical films which lifts from the life story of a real character from important events experienced by using his story as a source of learning. One of the biographical drama films in which the topic of social inequality is reflected is the Indian film directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra "12th Fail" (2023).

The film "12th fail" This film is worth researching because it reflects the reality of the education system in India and the struggle for the lower class to fight social injustice, and this film presents a deep social criticism of social inequality, where the film highlights the existence of inequalities in terms of economics, education, and social problems that occur in society. This film is based on the true story of Manoj Kumar Sharma which started from a book by Anurag Pathak which was later adapted into a film by director Vidhu Vinod Chopra with the same title, namely "12th Fail".

This film is about the character Manoj Kumar Sharma (Vikrant Massey) who is known to be a student who initially failed in grade 12 and comes from poor people fighting to become social studies or Indian Police Service. To pursue his dream, Manoj must prepare himself to take part in the UPSC, which is a prestigious national exam for civil servants. Manoj comes from a poor family, to fight for his dreams Manoj has to pursue his dreams with his economic conditions which are far from sufficient. The social conditions visualized through film media highlights various issues, most of which are social inequalities that occur in films, including socio-economic inequalities, education and social problems. Through this research, researchers are interested in gaining a deeper understanding of films that depict forms of social inequality.

So the author found research that was relevant as a reference to support the continuity of the research, where the research was carried out by (Mullrizio et al., 2023) in his journal entitled "Representation of Social Inequality in Parasite" Films The results of this research are a form of

representation of social inequality in South Korea using the Roland Barthes semiotics analysis approach which is described based on vertical-topics of daily life between the rich and the poor including levels of educational inequality, income, living environment, and opportunities. The difference between this research and the research that will be carried out is the object of the research, in this research the object is a parasite film which depicts social inequality in South Korea, different from the research that will be carried out where researchers use the film "12th fail" as a research object in India.

Another research that has been carried out (Sungkarputra & Lobodally, 2021) in his journal entitled "Representation of Social Inequality in the Film "Joker" by Todd Phillips" The results of this research in general in research found that there are social inequalities indicated by k culture The results of this research in general in research found that there are social inequalities as shown by the culture of structural poverty, the environment. As well as social class inequality. In contrast to previous research which highlighted general social inequality in terms of economic and social class aspects, research on the film "12th fail" specifically analyzes how social inequality is not only in terms of the economy and social class but the justice of the system observed between communities which causes social inequality with the reality of conditions in India is also part of what is highlighted by comparing the reality in India. And furthermore, analyzing films will be represented through visual symbols and narratives that emphasize social inequality in the film.

In this research, the author is interested in studying the film "12th fail" because the film highlights various social contents, especially several aspects of social problems due to inequality in society. Focus on this research by looking at how social inequality is conveyed through messages described through visualization and cast narration to examine aspects of social inequality in films. This research was carried out with the aim of identifying, analyzing meanings and symbols through Roland Barthes' semiotics approach, which was then interpreted to open up discussion space from the image of social inequality in the film 12th fail.

METHOD

This research method is qualitatively descriptive, where the research aims to represent or create an in-depth picture of the phenomenon being studied. This research uses Roland Barthes' semiotics theory approach which is used to decompose visuals, audio and narrative signs into deeper layers of meaning to determine the form of social inequality in the film "12th fail". The data sources include primary data and secondary data. Primary Data: The primary data source comes from the "12th Fail" film corpus. Secondary Data: Secondary data sources include journal literature, books, online sources that discuss the film "12th Fail", as well as other documents that support the research objectives. The techniques for collecting data from this study include observation and documentation. Observe by watching the film "12th fail" which then records and analyzes detailed dialogue, body language, visual symbols and other elements that support the analysis of the representation of social inequality in the film. Documentation using screenshots (screenshots) to prove the results identifies symbols and signs in the form of images, narratives or other visuals in the film "12th Fail". Research will be analyzed according to its stages using Roland Barthes' semiotics theory approach, namely denotation, connotation, myth. In the first stage of denotation, identify the message with its true meaning. The meaning of denotation is related to objective factual information that does not cause multiple interpretations (Fauziah et al., 2024). Then, connotations with the second level show implicit or uncertain meanings which can sometimes be related to psychology, feelings and beliefs (Nofia & Bustam, 2022). In this stage, we

will analyze the denotation marks which are new markers with images that are more emotional, cultural and ideological. A myth is a sign that is born after identifying the significance of denotation and connotation. As Roland Barthes argues, myth is a second level semiological system that uses signs that already exists in denotatives to communicate additional meaning that is ideological in nature (Jayaningsih et al., 2025). So with this approach you will better understand how certain messages are communicated and received by the audience to develop a social inequality research study in the 12th file film.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

In analyzing the representation of social inequality in the film “12th fail”, researchers chose a scene that showed there was a scene of social inequality in the film. as previously known, the film “12th fail”, which lasts 2 hours 26 minutes, tells the story of the character Manoj Kumar Sharma, a poor young man from Chambal who struggles with academic failure and poverty to become an IPS officer (*Indian Police Service*). Researchers analyzed Roland Barthes' semiotics approach by dividing it into several categories to find out through signs and narratives in scenes in the film. In this research, it was analyzed which was divided into 4 data findings and 8 scene frames obtained from the researcher's documentation of 12 film scene cutsth files.

1. Gaps In Quality And Educational Facilities

Data 1 scene film 12th fail

	
<p>Figure 1, students write cheat sheets Source: Researcher Documentation</p>	<p>Figure 2, the teacher writes down the answer to the exam Source: Researcher Documentation</p>

Denotation of the scene in figure 1, showing students making cheat sheets for school exams, in scene picture 2, the teacher writes the exam answers on the blackboard during the exam. The background of the classroom with dirty walls and doors depicts a slum place.

Connotation this scene depicts how students cannot compete honestly and fairly so they cheat for the final result, and teachers who write answers on the blackboard mean they are fair and help in breaking the rules. In the scene, Manoj's friend asks “how many cheats do you have?” meanwhile, the teacher told the students “tear all the cheats” and “I will write all the answers on the blackboard” this shows that this behavior describes a form of weak academic integrity in the education system, where behavior such as cheating and teachers helping to carry out these actions is not normal. As well as forms of learning environments that are not conducive in terms of facility

availability hamper optimal quality education.

The myth in this scene is that the normalization of systematic failure has become an old culture that contains fraud due to competitive pressure and unequal access which symbolizes weak integrity in academic ethics. Schools from remote areas often have access to inappropriate education, as well as a lack of quality resources and trained teachers. Factors in educational inequality in remote areas include limited infrastructure and educational facilities, socio-economic conditions of the community, and geographical access barriers (Hasanah, 2025). The inequality in access to education obtained compared to schools with adequate quality and facilities can widen the educational gap.

2. Gaps In Socioeconomic Status

Data 2 scene film 12th fail



Figure 3, Differences in clothing between figures
Source: Researcher Documentation

Denotation in the scene in this picture Pritam Pandey uses a shirt suit with watch accessories visiting Manoj Kumar Sharma wearing a sleeveless t-shirt with dirty clothes and hands after working using a flour production machine.



Connotation, in the scene the clothes worn by Pritam Pandey and Manoj represent differences in social status. Pritam Pandey wearing neat and clean clothes with watch accessories implies an economic ability to buy these accessories. Meanwhile, unlike Manoj, wearing a sleeveless t-shirt with dirty conditions, it shows that he lacks free time to care for his appearance because he has to work to meet his economic finances.

Myths in lifestyle societies where clothing reflects social status. Clothing as a non-verbal language is used to differentiate one group from another. Clothing reflects the identity and status symbols of trusted social values (Tulloh et al., 2025). How clothing is no longer only seen as a practical tool but as a medium for self-expression and a marker of social status in society (Qorib et al., 2023). Economic strength represents a person's social status, where a higher socio-economic status holds greater power than those with a lower socio-economic status (Chelak & Chakole,

2023).

3. Social Gaps in Infrastructure Between Villages and Cities

Data 3 scene film 12th fail

	
<p>Figure 4, village infrastructure Source: Researcher Documentation</p>	<p>Figure 5, municipal infrastructure Source: Researcher Documentation</p>

The denotation in the scene in figure 4 shows Manoj sitting on grass with a background of wooden foundation houses, sandy dirt roads and trees around him in the countryside in the Chambal area. In figure 5, showing Manoj standing looking at the cityscape after his move from the village to pursue education and career, in the picture there is a backdrop of tall buildings, paved streets and crowded vehicles in the city of Delhi.

The connotations in the scenes in the film highlight the differences in development between village areas and cities from significant structural conditions. In figure 4, the condition of Chambal village is shown as the condition of the house with small buildings, wooden foundations and sandy roads represents the simplicity of Chambal village and its infrastructure which is left behind compared to the city. Meanwhile, figure 5 implies the splendor of infrastructure and access and opportunities which further reasons Manoj's move from the village to the city of Delhi. City conditions represent areas that have more advanced infrastructure.

The myth that arises is how village development is often seen as a symbol of backwardness and simplicity, while cities are a symbol of progress, modernity and success. This assumption forms the context that the success of ideal infrastructure comes from modernization such as cities, while the assumption that village infrastructure is considered reasonable to be left behind. This is a trigger for social inequality involving uneven infrastructure. In improving the quality of life and economic opportunities in society adequate infrastructure can reduce socio-economic disparities between regions. Unequal infrastructure development between villages and urban areas will cause social disparities in society (Nisyak et al., 2023).

4. Social Gaps in Legal Justice

Data 4 scene film 12th fail

<p>Figure 6</p>	<p>Figure 7</p>	<p>Figure 8</p>
<p>Manoj and Kamlesh are imprisoned and beaten Source: Researcher Documentation</p>		

The denotation in the scene in figure 6 shows Manoj and his brother Kamlesh being arrested and imprisoned regarding those who did not receive their rickshaw passengers being stolen by someone who turned out to be the mayor's subordinate. In figure 7, a police officer avenges his actions by hitting Kamlesh with a wooden stick. Figure 8 shows the narrative told to the Kamlesh character about uniforms that allow aggressive actions.

The connotation in the scene indicates an abuse of power from authorities who have law enforcement authority. In scenes of arrest along with physical violence received without a warrant represent structural injustices that are more often targeted at marginalized groups. Scene figure 6 implies that the law is no longer a neutral tool but a commodity that can be manipulated, judging by how a subordinate mayor is able to get the police to imprison people who have no power. Figures 7 and 8 show the view that mainly someone who does not have power is more likely to accept negative behavior from parties who commit acts of abuse of power. In a scene from the narrative the character Kamlesh says that the uniform allows you to do whatever you like“shows sharp criticism of the abuse of power.

The myth of this scene strengthens the ideology of the law which protects the social hierarchy, where in scenes which show that the mayor's subordinates cannot receive bad treatment while lower class people can be punished despite self-defense. This gives rise to the context that social injustice is more likely to be found in those from lower classes. In social reality, poor people tend to often be less able to meet case financing, lawyers and others needed in the legal process, which causes difficulties in obtaining fair legal behavior (Firmansyah & Pangestika, 2024). So that social injustice arising from differences in treatment and abuse of power can exacerbate social inequality.

DISCUSSION

Social inequality is an event that occurs due to differences in terms of striking quality in society (Della Sinta & Iqbal, 2023). Social inequality departs from as a result of the unequal distribution received by society. This also happens in countries like India. According *World Inequality Report*

2026, revealed a globally alarming gap in India, the top 10% of the population generated 58% of the national income, while the bottom 50% generated only 15%, where the report highlighted the wide disparities of income, wealth, gender and growth and social justice policies interventions. According to Kumar, In the context of the Indian state, these inequalities arise from inequalities in education, income, and access to justice, this is reinforced by structural hierarchies such as caste, patriarchy and social systems that create conditions of injustice for marginalized communities who are at a disadvantage (D. Kumar, 2025).

According to Stuart Hall (1997) Representation is used in explaining the meaning displayed through symbols. The film is principally the result of a culture containing representations (Prasetya, 2022) The film “12th fail” which was released on netflix in 2024 with producer Vidhu Vinod Chopra adapting the true story of Manoj Kumar Sharma which tells the story of Manoj from a poor family who goes to the city to take the test to become a police officer (IPS Officer), in the midst of his struggle, Manoj faced many problems from the polemical system of economic conditions and the social problems he faced. In this film, aspects of social inequality from education, economics, infrastructure and social problems are found.

The scene in data 1 shows social disparities in the quality and facilities of education. This is illustrated by students making cheat sheets and teachers writing exam answers on the blackboard and dirty classroom backgrounds. Connotationally, what emerges is a symbol of weak ethics and integrity in the academic process and inadequate conditions in educational facilities. The myth presented is a form of normalization of systematic failure of education that contains fraud, as well as low quality of resources and teachers. This will certainly be detrimental to students if they graduate without real knowledge, it will be difficult to compete with social realities which require their abilities and self-competence both at work and socially.

Education is an important foundation in building a nation because through education individuals gain knowledge and moral values, ethics and skills in facing global challenges (Kadrina, 2025). In the Indian context, socio-economic and cultural factors significantly influence educational outcomes. The main factors of inequality in education in India are due to infrastructure, teacher quality, socio-economic status and cultural factors (Kumar et al., 2024). In fact, quality education and adequate facilities play an important role in building the economy and social mobility, if hampered it will prevent social inequality.

Social disparities in education include inequalities in the quality and facilities and access to education that exist among community groups. This happens because there is an educational gap between groups of people who do not have equal access to education so that it is difficult to achieve equal opportunities in life (Kumar et al., 2024). The causes of inequality in education are economic, cultural, environmental, social factors, thought patterns, facilities and minimal education (Incung et al., 2015).

Research (Sobri & Sassi, 2024) states that the Indian government is struggling to improve the world of education so that the quality of the nation also helps encourage the progress of the quality of the nation, but the education system in India also still has challenges from the education gap between regions urban and rural areas, lack of educational facilities in some areas, and problems with the quality of education. This representation reflects the findings (P. Kumar, 2025) inequality between students from rural and urban areas is a threat in achieving inclusive development where unequal access to quality education is a continuous challenge, for this reason it is necessary to

distribute fair resources from improving the quality of teachers and community participation to bridge the education gap.

Therefore, to overcome educational gaps, access and quality factors need to be addressed because these gaps can determine the quality of human resources, if factors such as high unemployment this will also have an impact on national economic growth. It can be concluded in the film 12th file which highlights schools in rural India where there are visible educational gaps formed from inequality in the quality of resources, rights and opportunities, as well as educational facilities in India.

The scene in data 2 shows gaps in socio-economic status. The appearance in the picture shows the differences in the condition of the clothes worn between the characters Manoj Kumar and Pritam Pandey. Connotationally, the clothing symbol represents the economic differences between the figures Manoj and Pritam which determine social status. The connotation of the meaning aspect that arises is based on subjective meaning, where this denotative sign is a marker for deeper interpretation. The myth presented by how to look in shabby clothes is often considered to have a lower socio-economic status than people who dress neatly. Social status is characterized by a reflection of self-representation where appearance is also a symbol of social status (Fitriani et al., 2025). The social status of each society is different depending on the class division of each individual and community group, where economic aspects are often the main indicator in determining social status. Each member of society individually and in groups has a different social status in society (Al Hidayah, 2013).

Socioeconomic status refers to the level of status of an individual, or his family in society, which is determined by the position of work in meeting life needs, material ownership and factors that reflect that position (Taluke et al., 2021). Differences in social position create inequalities that can be the cause of social stratification where owners of higher social status have an advantage compared to owners of lower social status. Individuals belonging to groups with low socioeconomic status often experience systematic limitations not only in building social networks but in limiting social mobility and widening the gap from more socially and economically established groups (Ahmadi & Sutrisno, 2022).

This socio-economic status gap refers to unequal access to resources, opportunities and income between community groups which often worsens social stratification. Economic disparities include income disparities, wealth disparities, and the gap between rich and poor with reference to the distribution of economic measures between individuals in groups, groups in populations, or between countries. (Ahmadi & Sutrisno, 2022). To some extent if measured from India's income disparity the inequality between the upper and lower classes is striking. According *World Inequality Database* (2022) India is dominated by 10% of the income of the upper class population controlling around 57.1% of total national income while the bottom 50% of the population gets 13% of total national income.

It is also influenced in terms of India with the impact of the caste system practices that exist in Indian society. Caste is also related to social status, a person's social status is tied to the caste where they were born (Deshpande, 2010). The social status of this caste system provides privileges, resources, opportunities and social networks. According data *National Sample Survey Office* (NSSO, 2017-2018) lower caste groups have higher rates of poverty, unemployment and underemployment than upper caste, a person from lower caste is often limited to menial jobs with

limited opportunities to meet a stable economy (Sato, 2024).

So if the social status is unevenly hierarchical, the upper class controls resources, while the lower class experiences limited access which creates economic disparities and weakens social mobility. In this case, it is in line with the opinion (Ambari et al., 2025). Economic inequality is a difference in meeting the needs of a community group, inequality in income, education and access to public services if not immediately addressed can cause social and economic instability. In the movie scene “12th this fail” highlights the symbols and real messages that indicate this gap is represented by differences in socio-economic status based on the reality of income inequality, equal opportunities and the inherent culture of the Indian caste system.

The scene in data 3 shows that there is a social gap in infrastructure between villages and cities. The display in figure 4 shows the character Manoj sitting on grass with a background of wooden foundation houses, sandy dirt roads and trees in Chambal village, and in figure 5 the character Manoj stands looking at tall buildings, paved roads and crowded vehicles in the city of Delhi. Connotationally, it shows the differences in structural development conditions which are represented by the condition that Chambal village is lagging behind compared to the city of Delhi which has more advanced infrastructure. The myth formed from the notion that villages are seen as symbols of backwardness and simplicity, while cities are considered symbols of progress and modernity. This reveals the fact that there is uneven development that encourages the progress of cities more than villages.

Unequal distribution between regions widens the incidence of social inequalities, and is a factor in immigration to cities. Disparities between regions can occur as a result of uneven development of infrastructure, the main of which is infrastructure, which triggers migration (Tambusay et al., 2024). In fulfilling the achievement of community welfare, infrastructure development is an important aspect in encouraging economic growth. Infrastructure includes components of needs such as public facilities, transportation facilities, development and other components that are important in supporting socio-economic living needs in society.

In reality in most parts of India there is a gap between villages and cities, where cities emerge as centers of economic activity, innovation, better infrastructure while village communities are faced with poverty, limited educational resources, inadequate infrastructure (Kaur & Dhillon, 2025). This is reinforced by the results of Ghosh's research (2017), the quantity and quality of rural infrastructure in India is much lower than cities, indicators of physical and social infrastructure such as electricity, better roads in rural India can increase rural life expectancy and overcome poverty, improving health and education. Equitable infrastructure in terms of development of access and quality of other resources helps reduce social disparities between regions. This social gap is represented by the imbalance in village and city infrastructure which is seen in terms of symbolic aspects which are shown by the inequality in roads, development which is highlighted in the film “12th fail”.

Scenes in data 4 show social inequality in legal justice which is depicted through the scene in image 6 about the forced arrest of Manoj and Kamlesh from the orders of the mayor's subordinates, image 7 shows acts of insanity from the legal apparatus, and image 8 from the Kamlesh shop narrative about uniforms that allow aggressive actions. Connotations in scenes give rise to representations of abuse of power and social injustice. The myth that is opposed is that legal ideology protects social hierarchies, where law often favors the owner of power. According

to Firmansyah & Pangestika (2024) Those who have power and wealth can often buy justice, while those who cannot afford it and have no connection are trapped in injustice, access to justice in Indonesia depends on socio-economic factors. The gap in legal affairs is characterized by inequality in the justice system, where elite groups who refer to power, wealth with economic and political domination are luckier than small communities.

Meanwhile, in the context of India, the results of research (Dedha, 2025), the Indian constitution promises equality before the law as a basis, but freedom can still be effectively bought and sold, where the rich and elite can avoid lawyers, while the lower classes languish behind bars because of lack of guarantors, which if continued, the legitimacy of the justice system in India will be eroded. Where the tendency of lower class people to receive it often and the difficulty in getting assistance with access to social justice. Difficult factors in accessing justice for people in India are due to inadequate costs and legal aid systems and weak law enforcement for certain groups (Phadkule et al., 2023). So it is important for equal distribution in access to legal assistance so as not to exacerbate social inequality. In the movie scene “12th fail” represents the social gap of legal injustice dominated by power by ensnaring marginalized groups. This gap in obtaining legal justice makes it more difficult for the poor to compete with the ruling groups.

CONCLUSION

Based on research that has been studied using Roland Barthes' semiotics theory approach by analyzing the film “12th fail” can be concluded that there is a representation of social inequality in India which includes economics, education, and social issues such as infrastructure and legal justice. This research explores images through signs and messages aimed at the figure Manoj Kurma Sharma in his struggle to increase social stratification through social reality in India. As the findings in the film highlight the educational aspects experienced by lower class people from rural schools, it illustrates the existence of social disparities in the quality of resources, rights and opportunities as well as inadequate educational facilities. Then, the disparity in the socioeconomic status of the people is seen in terms of identity symbols that arise due to income inequality and the caste cultural system inherent in India. The form of inequality in social problems is the village and city infrastructure gap which is highlighted in the film, the aspect of inequality which is depicted through differences in building infrastructure, roads and quality of life, where quality and access in cities is much better than in rural areas. The gap from other social problems that arises is the gap in social justice forming a perspective of inequality arising from legal injustice, where the lower classes tend to have more difficulty in obtaining justice than the authorities. So it can be concluded that research refers to aspects of social inequality in the quality and facilities of education, inequality in socio-economic status, social inequality in infrastructure between villages and cities, social inequalities in legal justice.

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