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## PORTRAYAL OF CASTE IN TAMIL FILMS: A SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

The representation, of the underdogs in the caste hierarchy system in the Hindu culture, in Tamil movies has never been from the subaltern perspective in all these years. Majority of the movies of the 80s and 90s, in Tamil that depicted caste system in movies, tried to uphold the caste hierarchy and status quo. Movies that questioned the caste suppression were necessarily not movies that entirely devoted the entire plot to caste issues. This paper is a descriptive study of movies like *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Asuran* (2019) that have created a trend in the Tamil movie industry for the marketization of movies that represent the struggles of the oppressed communities.

**Keywords:** Hierarchy System, Hindu Culture, Caste System.

### Introduction

Just as Gramsci claimed the history of the subaltern classes were never part of the official history. The fragmented and episodic depiction of the subaltern history is the norm across cultures. This paper particularly analyses the representation of the Dalit Community in Tamil Cinema. The sect of people who are considered to be belonging to the lowest strata of the caste hierarchical structure, according to the Manusmriti, followed by the people belonging to the Hindu religion are called as Dalits. These people are considered untouchable by the upper caste people. This deep rooted thought has made the Dalits vulnerable to all kinds of unpleasant treatment and oppression, both, social and psychological. Historically, Dalits have been inflicted with pain and agony by the people belonging to the upper castes.

This painful history has been recorded in various speeches by revolutionaries like Periyar. The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu, started by used cinema as a medium to educate the masses about the evils of the caste system. Cinema was a major tool of propaganda. Movies like *Parasakthi* (1952), made by the Dravidian movement, are game changers, as these movies questioned the norms of the existing hierarchical class divisions and social oppressions during a period when the narratives were dominated by the lives of upper caste people. The cult movies made by the Dravidian movement were a break through during that time. These movies had been a great source for revolutionary thoughts and radical ideas spread across the Tamil Society.

Given the links between cinema and politics in a state like Tamil Nadu, representation of the oppressed communities do matter to a great extent. In a 1956 movie, *Madurai Veeran*, the veteran actor M.G.Ramachandiran, (who served as Chief Minister for 10 years, between 1977 and 1987) plays an underdog. In this movie MGR saves the princess from a forced marriage and the princess slaps him for touching her. His characterization in the movie brought an image of him being one among the oppressed and largely contributed for his political career.

### Caste in Tamil Cinema: A retrospective

Movies like *Penn*, *Thaikku Pin Thaaram*, *Thayilla Pillai* from the 1950s and 60s, spoke about caste identities and suppression. But not many movies addressed the issue in detail. They were small episodes of a larger narrative. Few movies of the 80s also touched upon social inequality. But none had dedicated stories on caste structures. No one movie had dalit themed narratives. Acting icon, Mr.Sivaji Ganesan's earlier movies had semiotic references to caste and were critical of it. His movie, *Mudhal Mariyadhai* is a movie in which Sivaji marries of a relative to a lower caste girl.

As we move into the 90s, a convoluted representation of caste structure in a good light was prevalent, especially beginning with the movie by the master craftsman Kamal Hassan with the *Parasakthi* and the icon of film acting in Tamil Cinema, Mr. Sivaji Ganesan on board. This movie celebrated the pride and valor of one of the intermediate castes.

*Devarmaghan* (1992), marshaled in a phase marked by films, glorifying intermediate castes. This movie then was a trendsetter and was a launch pad for many such movies praising the greatness of the intermediate caste heroes. Some of the famous



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movies that were on this category are Chinna gownder, Ejamaan, nattamai, etc. These movies show as if the lower caste people are willingly admitting their lower status and treating the upper caste people with high regard, which is an utter misrepresentation and hideous representation of reality. Whereas, movies like Bharathy Kannamma, a 1997 movie by the director Cheran highlighted caste discrimination. But movies talking about the adversities of caste are a rarity. This movie was critically acclaimed and did fairly well in the box office. Movies of similar kind that were released in the 2000s are Singam, Sandakozhi, Devarattam, Draupathy, etc.

## Methodology

This is a descriptive study of the trend in Tamil movies that used Dalits as heroes in the last two years, 2018 - 2019. The significance of these movies in the marketization of Dalit themed movies is also looked upon.

## Pariyerum Perumal (2018)

Foucault pointed out that one can make the unseen visible by addressing the layer of material that was considered unimportant in history or address the detail that had not been distinguished as having moral, aesthetic or historical value. Pariyerum Perumal is a movie that exactly addressed the hitherto invisible layer of caste oppression in Tamil cinema, by getting into the finer details of it. Not many movies have been made in Tamil cinema with such layered meanings on caste. The protagonist of this movies is a lower caste person who aspires to become like Dr.Ambedkar, joins the Law College. But becomes a victim of caste based suppression and violence.

The environment of barren lands, visual representation of the setting, the glaring differences in the appearances of the dominant caste and oppressed castes, etc. have been carefully worked on. This is a cinema representing marginalized sections of the society. This movie intelligently interlaced the history of oppression in scenes relating to the contemporary story in an intelligent way. The dialogues that carried the narrative forward were so intense and the narrative depicted the identity constructs in a justifiable manner. The debutant director Mari Selvaraj played with the dialogues and intense visual representations, like the closing scene/shot of the movie in which the protagonist belonging to the lower caste, places his glass near the tea glass of the upper caste person and walks away only for an up close shot of the two glasses. The way the two glasses are kept and the level and color of the drink in the glasses conveyed way beyond what could be expected from a shot like that. It represented the two tumbler system that was prevalent in this part of the country among caste and out-caste people and the still prevalent inequality in the caste system. This practice was an offshoot of the untouchability which was/is prevalent all over the country. This film is filled with symbolism. Many of the visual elements, from composition to lighting has a deeper meaning with links to historical oppression and main events of the movements that fought against it. The hero of the movie is very clear about his goal to study and come up in life, following the footsteps of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar.

The whole movie was themed on caste inequality and presented it from the perspective of the oppressed. The director ended the movie with an appeal to the upper caste to bring about a solution for the issue. The movie made the audience leave the cinema hall in a sober mood instead of taking a violent route. This movie was a runaway success. But, one irony that is noticeable during the release was that a movie with big star casts usually runs four shows, but this movie only had two shows a day. It was noticed that the same was the case for some other movies with subaltern stories and no star casts.

## Asuran (2019)

Asuran is a Dalit themed movie directed by Vetrimaran. This movie is based on a novel called Vekkai. This movie has a star performer Dhanush on board. This movie takes an assertive route in addressing caste issue. This again is a representation of the violent demeanor of the upper caste and also drops hints on the history of oppression. The movie was critically acclaimed and was applauded for the interesting plot, strong performances and the emotional connect that the narrative established with the audience.

## Pa. Ranjith

When talking about recent successes of these Dalit themed movies, one fact that needs to be mentioned here is the contribution of Director and Producer Pa. Ranjith. He directed his first movie Attakkatthi in the year 2012. This movie was based on the life of a lower middle class young man. The movie was a light hearted love story. This movie was applauded for the realism in representing the lower middle class life in the northern part of Chennai. This picture of north madras life broke the stereotypical image of north Madras in the Tamil Cinema industry. His movie Madras (2014) again was noted and appreciated for its representation of the subaltern livelihood and the politics behind it. This movie earned him the directorial venture with the Tamil Superstar Rajinikanth in the movie Kabali in 2016 and Kaala in 2018. The protagonist of these movies were dalits and both the movies revolve around the fight for better livelihood of the subaltern with anecdotes of historical protests of Dalits for equality. Pa.Ranjith produced movies like



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Pariyerum Perumal and irandaam ulagaporin kadaisi gundu which have the oppressed community characters as protagonists. All his movies were well received by the audience and were critically acclaimed.

## Conclusion

Given the history of close links between cinema, caste and politics in Tamil Nadu. It is important to analyze feature films for representations of the social infirmities. Many movies of the 80s and 90s have represented cast dominance, to reinforce caste-based identities and a social common sense which equates intermediate castes with dominance, valor, heroism and violence. There has always been an attempt to naturalize the dominance of intermediate castes which in turn plays out in the cultural sphere, which is not paid attention to.

A trend for ideologically assertive and financially successful anti-caste movies indicates a shift in the conceptual pattern in the Tamil film industry and in the society. Film makers like Pa.Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj, Gopi Nainar, Balaji sakhthivel, Vetrimaran and the like visualized the brutal aspects of caste reality that has started sinking in among the urban audience, who have hitherto denied a considerate look at the caste realities/brutalities around them. The cinema being a powerful medium it cannot be used only as a commercial medium. As an art form, it cannot show just the affluent sections of the society. It is a responsibility to turn the arc lights on the hitherto untouched marginalized sections of the society, which include the Dalits, LGBT communities, etc. One such sensitive portrayal of transgender is in the movie Super Deluxe, released in the year 2019. Pariyerum Perumal in this respect, has been successful in sensitively portraying the lives of the socially under privileged. It is an honest attempt at looking at the caste equations in a rural setting.

Kabali and Asuran are movies that had purgative effect on the audience. These are movies that present an ethnographic look on caste with no usual stock characters of a commercial flick. Marketisation of caste oppression as a subject in cinema has become possible with the release of these recent films. Tamil Cinema, though, always had discussed caste inequalities, the momentum created by Pa.Ranjith as a director and producer, has created a significant effect on political movies discussing the subaltern lives. The fact that Pa.Ranjith himself belongs to the oppressed community reminds us of Spivak's concluding remark of "the subaltern cannot speak" in her famous article "Can the Subaltern speak?"

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