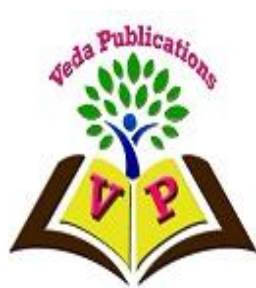


**CONTEMPORARY TAMIL CINEMA & DISCUSSIONS ON CASTE IDENTITY**

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*(Ph.D Scholar, Department of Applied Linguistics & Translation Studies, University of Hyderabad, Telangana)*DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2022.9108>**ABSTRACT**

Cinema is a popular medium of art. In earlier days, cinema in India did deal with social problems in a peripheral way. It often failed to address the social realities, especially caste disparities. Caste issues were always portrayed as economic backwardness. But recent times have witnessed that popular and commercial cinema has begun to open up towards the discussions of gender and caste. In the case of caste discussion, it is the Tamil Cinema industry that creates more movies on it. Tamil cinema is comparatively rich with Dalit representations in the arena of filmmaking. Some directors, writers, and actors initiated the discussions of caste hierarchy in popular cinema. The political situations of Tamil Nadu have been a deep influence in molding these directors and their courageous ventures of popular cinema with Dalit subjects. Dravidian Ideology, Mandal politics, and the recent revival of Ambedkarite politics have been fuel for this. Still, fitting Dalit issues into the frames of the popular and commercial film have both pros as well as cons. Hence, this article analyses the relevance of the socio-political situations of Tamil Nadu in initiating mainstream Dalit cinemas. It also looks into the pros and cons of the popular narrative of Dalit subjects.

**Keywords:** *Tamil Cinema, Dalit, Popular Cinema, Social Movement, Tamil Nadu, Caste identity.*



## INTRODUCTION

Cinema is a popular medium of art. In India, it possesses a wider range of viewership among the people. Therefore, considering this kind of wide viewership, the films are made in such a way that everybody could watch them and enjoy them. Like every art form, cinema is also an expression of the realities of life. How the social problems of India are represented in cinema? To be more specific, how did issues such as cast disparities reflect in the movies?

The mainstream Indian cinema has not addressed the cast disparities earlier. It is never acclaimed that there is such an issue in society at all. It was the upper caste view that initiated the portrayal of caste as a non-existing problem. Instead, they portrayed the caste disparities only as economic backwardness. It was normalized and thus everybody including people from the lower and backward castes internalized this kind of portrayal. Tamil cinema was not an exception.

But the recent time has witnessed a change in this trend in the Tamil film industry. Recently, a number of films were able to address the problems faced by the lower caste people in their true sense. In other words, the Tamil cinema industry recognized the caste disparity as a visible problem. They found that the disparity is not a bipolar thing, but it is graded into many layers. These films were able to discuss this graded inequality as well.

## BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Earlier the mainstream Indian cinema did not discuss caste but even then, directors like Rithick Khatak, Sathyajith Ray, Syam Bengal, and John Abraham did include some hints on this issue in their

movies. But, significantly, none of them took this issue as a prime subject of their movies.

In the earlier period, the stories of Tamil cinema were set in a non-existing land. Thus, they could exclude real-life issues such as caste. The conflicts in the plot of the movies were placed as economic conflicts so that they could cover up the issues of caste easily with this.

Unlike this, in 1980, a few directors like Bharatiraja placed their stories in real villages. As a result, characters engaged in caste-based occupations began to show up in their movies. Kizhakke Pokum Rail(1978), Vedam pudithu(1987), and such films are examples.

From here the social and educational mobility into a better state with the aid of many elements such as Mandal Politics helped the Dalit community to reach the forefront of Tamil cinema industry. Today, they are able to present their politics substantively through their own films. Films like Paruthiveeran(2007), Subramaniapuram(2008), Aattakadhai(2012), and Rummy(2014) initiated this kind of change in Tamil cinema.

After that, the recent revival of Ambedkarite politics and Dalit Identity politics enhanced this fledge. More powerful films and directors discussing Dalit politics and their conflicts between the Backward Caste emerged within these ten years. Films such as Visaranai(2015), Kabali(2016), Uriyadi(2016), Kaala(2018), Pariyerum Perumal(2018), Asuran(2019), Karnan(2021), and all are such powerful rendering of the Dalit politics.



### SOCIO-POLITICAL FACTORS

We cannot talk about an art form by excluding the socio-political scenario which influences all the aspects of society. Therefore when it comes to the caste discussions in Tamil cinema, deeply influencing factors of Tamil Nadu such as social movements and political ideologies should be observed.

The self-respect movement, Dravidian Movement and Independence struggle were the major social reformation movements that had taken place during the 1930s. Some glimpses of these movements and their ideology were reflected in a number of movies as well. Issues like casteism, Untouchability, Brahminical Hierarchy, and widow remarriage were discussed in many films like 'Balayogini(1937)' 'Thyagabhoomi(1939)' and 'Chandrakanta'. The self-respect movement and Dravidian Movement stood against the same issues which were prevalent in society at that point of time. Brahminical hierarchy and the sufferings of widows were the two issues that were constantly opposed by the self-respect movement. The film 'Balayogini' talked about the same problems. A widow named Janaki was expelled from her house and she was given shelter by a low caste servant named Munuswami. This triggers may conflicts within the caste prevalent society that they live in. 'Tyagabhoomi' of 1939 was a film on Dalit problems and their struggles. This film was banned by the British Government after its release. The film discussed a very sensitive topic of that particular time. It was regarding the right of the Dalit people to enter the temple. Hence, the Dravidian Movement, Independence struggle, and such social reformation movements at Tamil Nadu did cause some kind of

space for caste discussions in the movies of that period.

E.V. Ramaswami Naikkar, popularly known as Periyar was the most influential leader of the self-respect movement. He always tried to uphold the Dravidian racial identity and used it as a tool to fight against Brahminism. He had a number of revolutionary visions regarding the caste struggles and other malpractices. His views were extremist but highly influential at the same point. This had a great impact on Tamil Nadu. He spoke for property rights for women. He stated that there is no difference between men and women. He went to the extent to say that women should not give birth because it is the prime reason for their subjugation. Many of his ideas were insane for the community during his lifetime. But we can see the impact of his vision in the cinemas of his lifetime and the later ones. The above-mentioned films are examples. A film that talks about a widow's problems and Dalit issues would have been a mirage if Periyar was not there.

Self-respect movement later evolved into Dravidian Movement. Based on the ideology of this movement a political party emerged in Tamil Nadu. Dravida Kazhagam was a social party that was born from the Dravidian Movement. It was founded by Periyar in 1944. It aimed at eradicating the evils of the caste system, including untouchability, and to obtain a 'Dravida Nadu' from the then Madras Presidency.

Later, C.N. Annadurai a follower of Periyar founded another party. It was named Dravida Munnetta Kazhagam(DMK) in 1949 as a break away from Dravida Kazhagam. Along with the ideologies of Dravida Kazhagam, which already existed, DMK



stressed its feet against the Hindi imposition as well. After the unexpected death of Annadurai in 1969, M. Karunanidhi was elected as his successor and the head of DMK. His era continued until he died in 2018. But in the 1970s M.G.Ramachandran called for a boycott of the party's General Council and created 'All India Anna Dravida Munnetta Kazhagam' on 17th October 1972. Dravida Munnetta Kazhagam had deep roots in the art and culture of Tamil Nadu. C.N. Anadurai, the founding leader of DMK was a successful screenplay writer. His follower M. Karunanidhi was also a scriptwriter for many commercially successful films. Both of them were strong believers and proponents of Dravidian Ideology. The role of M.G.R is significant not as an ideologue such as Annadurai and Karunanidhi, but as the face of their ideology. M.G.R being an actor portrayed the characters created by these scriptwriters on the screen. Hence, common people received these ideas through the characters played by M.G.R on screen.

Dravidian Movement including DMK or AIADMK did not address the Dalits as such. It was Iyothee Thass who organized some tribal communities like Todas of Nilgiri Hills in the 1870s. He made a revolutionary declaration that scheduled caste people were not Hindus. Following this declaration, he established 'Dravida Mahajana Sabha'. He is the first known Dalit leader of Tamil Nadu. But we cannot see a continuation of his legacy in history.

Later, the decision of implementing the Mandal Commission Report by V. P. Singh government in 1990 changed the entire political scenario of India. The country faced many protests against the implementation of this report. To defend this, many

movements from the OBC/SC/ST communities arouse all over the country. Many political parties were evolved. These movements gave a new enthusiasm to the OBC/SC/ST communities in India. Leaders like Mayavathi, Krishnaswami, Mulayam Singh, Ramvilas Paswan, and Nitish Kumar can be seen as the products of the post-Mandal political Scenario of India. This political change had its reflection in every aspect of the society. Cultural arenas like cinema and literature were not exceptions. Many Dalit writers came up with their own stories and the narratives of the Dalit struggles. *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, *The Prison We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar, and *Akkarmashi* by Sarankumar Limbale are a very few examples. Hence, hereafter the scheduled castes possessed a space to narrate themselves. The emergence of Dalit directors can be seen as the continuation of the legacy cited by the post- Mandal socio-political arena of the country.

The post- Mandal period witnessed a revival of Ambedkarite ideology and his politics as well. The Ambedkarite ideology had a new relevance in post-Mandal India. This resulted in the boom of Dalit identity politics as well. It is in this circumstance, the production of films that discuss caste identity politics began largely. Directors from various caste backgrounds began to narrate films based on their own perspectives. These include directors from the scheduled communities also. Directors like Vetri Maran, Mari Selvaraj, Pa Ranjit, and Gopi Nainar are examples.



### AESTHETICAL CHANGES OF POPULAR CINEMA

The aesthetic language of popular cinema began to change when the people from Dalit backgrounds initiated the narration. Things that had never been a part of popular cinema or had been a part of negative connotations came to the forefront of the narrative. Earlier people from the Dalit background were shown either with immoral conduct or as incapable fellows. We often saw them as Gundas, thieves, servants, drunkards, or beggars. They had no subjectivity. All these characters had to do is to obey or assist either the villain or the hero. The popular notion did not accept the Dalit character as capable to perform the antagonist. The casteist perception never thought of a Dalit being as equal to a "savarna" hero. But things have changed when the active participation of Dalit writers and directors grew in recent times. They narrated the problems of casteism within the structure of popular cinema itself. This has made Dalit heroes and backward caste anti-heroes. For example, in "Pariyerum Perumal" and "Asuran" we see the Dalit as the hero and an upper caste (OBC) man as the antagonist. In "Kaala" the distinction is clearer where the protagonist Karikalan fights against a powerful upper-caste antagonist.

When we talk about the aesthetic language of cinema such as metaphors, symbols, music, etc we realize that it has also changed considerably. Let us take two examples. Two of them are commercially successful movies. One is "Padayappa" released in 1999 written and directed by K.S. Ravikumar. The story is about an upper-caste wealthy engineer who rises up from a suddenly occurred economic downfall. His father was almost like a land-lord who dies of a shock when their wealth is incorrectly

owned by his foster brother. The protagonist is a hero who succeeds from an economic backdrop and who fights for his family and pride. Throughout the movie, we see Lord Subramannia's Vel(Speare), his Idol, Snake, Turmeric, etc as symbols. All of them are used by the Savarna- Hindu communities.

After 20 years, in 2021 we saw another commercial hit, "Karnan" written and directed by Mari Selvaraj. The plot revolves around a village named 'Podiyankulam' which is inhabited by people belonging to the Scheduled Caste. Karnan, a young man reacts against the inhuman treatment that they get and he revolts against the caste-driven notion of authority. Here we see a Dalit Superhero who fights for his community and the rights of his people. And he succeeds. The film is made by using very original and rustic symbols. The film used animals like donkeys and horses to portray the two different states of the same problem. Similarly, the wonderful use of a mask of the rustic goddess has enhanced the entire feel of the movie. In a keen observation, we can see that the director has used the "Headless statue" very carefully. The black dog used in "Pariyerum Perumal" is yet another example. The use of folk music not as a commercial element, but as the background of the narration is an example of the use of music. This kind of change is particularly due to the participation of directors like Mari Selvaraj, Vetrimaran, Pa Ranjit, etc. in filmmaking.

Making these films commercially recognizable has some advantages as well as disadvantages. By using the structure of popular cinema, these directors could bring the problems of Dalit communities to the forefront of mainstream society. More viewership and discussions happened regarding the subjects of



these films. This ultimately effected the recognition of the issues that the scheduled caste communities faced. For example, after the release of “Karnan” people began to enquire about Kodiyankulam and the real-life incident behind it. Many YouTube channels, online journals, and television shows made inquiries about that incident. This is an advantage of popular cinema. The more the viewership is, the more the recognition will be. Similar is the case of “Pariyerum Perumal”. Another advantage of the commercial language of these films is that they showed the Dalit people as people who are able to fight. This has made a notion that people of scheduled caste communities are capable of fighting against their problems. The popular structure of these films could reveal the graded inequality to the public notion. These are the major advantages of making films in a popular structure.

On the other hand, this kind of popular portrayal has some disadvantages in the long run. Commercial films have a typical pattern. It will have a hero or a superhero who is capable of fighting against any evil. That hero will never fail, never die, or never lacks the support of the people around. The ultimate victory will always be with the hero. Precisely, the mainstream cinema is a one-man show of the protagonist. All other factors are less important. But the reality is different. There will be no superheroes in real life. Human beings can be defeated or not. They can be courageous or feeble, supportive or non-supportive. When it comes to the issues of Dalits, even though they fight, there are many factors that may not be present for their sake. It can be finance, support of the authority, support of the people around, media attention, etc. Because of these

reasons, fighting itself is a task for Dalits. So, succeeding in it will be an extremely effortful task.

Another misconception created by popular cinema is regarding the tool for the struggle. Considering films like “Asuran” “Karnan” or “Kaala” we see that violence is the tool that heroes use for their fight. But violence had never been a solution. It will create an opposite effect in society. We have never seen violence win in history. On contrary, it will create a public notion that will never nurture the community. This kind of portrayal will give an impression to the Dalits that violence is the ultimate solution. And the public will get a notion that the Dalits are inherently violent in nature, which will ultimately worsen the conflict. Also, in the end, these popular films mark that problems are solved and the hero is won. But in the reality, the Dalits did not yet achieve status to win whatever they fight for. They are still not able to influence the whole society. When laymen watch these films they might think that the Dalits do not have a sorry state anymore and they are able to manifest things as they want, which is a bad notion.

There are initiatives that part their ways from the popular cinema. One of such initiatives is “Madathy” directed by Leena Manimekhalai. “Madathy” is a film which talks about a Dalit girl’s life. It is not a film that fits into a commercial structure. This film talks about the problems but does not recommend a solution. In that way, the film is more objective and realistic. It is also significant that Leena Manimekhalai has expressed her objections regarding mainstream Dalit movies.



## CONCLUSION

Popular cinema in its structure is very undemocratic, hegemonic, and pro-establishment. But staying within these structural defaults, directors such as Pa Ranjit, Vetri Maran and the like could create some advantages as well. They could expose the issues of Dalits to the entire society, which was earlier considered as just the problem of a community. The evolution and existence of these directors in the arena of popular or commercial cinema can be seen as the upliftment and social mobility that the scheduled caste people had achieved. These directors and their successors will be able to bring similar issues to the forefront of society, which had never been recognized or revealed earlier. And that is the relevance that these directors and their movies have in present India.

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