



The Caste of Cinema and the Cinema of Caste: Shooting the Dalit 24 Frames Per Second

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Abstract

Even though Bombay has been hailed as the capital of Indian Cinema, film enthusiasts and connoisseurs would agree that it is South Indian Cinema that deserves the honour. It was 1936 when the 'social' films tainted with politics infiltrated the sphere of Tamil Cinema and since then, it has become extremely pervasive in all spheres of life, particularly political life. During the first phase of Tamil Cinema, that is in the pre-1950s, films such as *Sevasadanam* (1938), and *Sabapathy* (1941) were an instrument to represent the upper caste communities with upper caste protagonists revelling in their privileges. The recent phase not only addresses the caste issues explicitly but lets the Dalit occupy the centre stage. This was initiated by director Pa Ranjith in his films *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), *Kaala* (2018), *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021) and as a producer for *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018). The film industry of Tamil Nadu is as heterogenous as the Indian society and has metamorphosed into an instrument incumbent for understanding the battleground of the caste system of India. My paper attempts to analyse the ways in which caste-based films are affecting the politics of Tamil Nadu and vice versa. My paper intends to reflect on how the caste-based cinematic themes have created class consciousness on one hand, but have given rise to caste-based narcissism among the people of the same caste on the other. Among this chaos and dichotomy, the enormous popularity, as well as the commercial success of films like *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Asuran* (2019), and *Karnan* (2021), deserves a detailed study that would enable us critically assess the cinematic representation of Dalits and their perils in the quest for social identity and acknowledgment.

Keywords: Dalit, Politics, Tamil Cinema, Identity, Caste

I search for God, whom should I hear?
I made stone temples, carved God out of stone
But priests are like stone,
They imprison God.
Whom shall I hear?
We were born Untouchables
Because of our deeds.
-Dalit devotional song (Franco et al., 2000, as cited in Ghosh, 2003)

In a vast and varied country like India, there is a group of people whose existence, even in the contemporary world of envious technology and exposure, is defined as 'untouchables'. Restricted to being only a "shit bearer" for almost three millennia, the Dalits or the

'untouchables' have survived on the leftover of the upper caste, till date. The identity of being a 'pariah' has been corroborated and justified by religious texts like *Manusmriti* where the Dalits are explained as people who are unclean since birth, or someone as polluted as a widow, a menstruating woman, or someone drowned in bereavement. However, there is a subtle distinction between a Dalit and a widow, a menstruating woman, or someone who has recently been bereaved. The Dalit has no freedom from being 'filthy'; he is perpetually so, till he dies. Whereas, a menstruating woman is unclean only till she is menstruating or the one who has been bereaved recently is an outcast for a period only.

According to the Census of India 1991, the Dalits, also called the 'scheduled caste' and 'scheduled tribes', forms about 20 percent of India's population. Backward caste as a community which includes the tribes, the Dalits, and the Other Backward Castes (OBC), forms about 52 percent of India's population. The contemporary version of "Dalit" or "crushed underfoot" is the modern version of what was known as the "Untouchables". The sources of the term 'Dalit' can be traced back to the writings of the nineteenth-century author Jotirao Govindrao Phule as well as the writings of the Black Panthers, a political group that was formed in Maharashtra, in 1972. It was the British who clubbed them together in a group and assigned the term "Untouchables" to them. Even though Mahatma Gandhi protested against the practice of untouchability and called the "harijan" or addressed them as "children of God", they were still perceived as a community who are doomed to remain in perpetual bondage, no matter what.

Cinema is an indispensable tool when it comes to shaping the attitude, opinions, and perceptions of the mass toward anything of significance. The 'Dalits', due to the contemporary media and their own empowerment owing to education, have been fighting for a just representation of their perils and predicament throughout history. However, the popular and affluent wings of Indian cinema like Bollywood have hardly created this opportunity for the Dalits and have, till now, indulged in the perpetuation of Brahmanical patriarchy, objectification of women, and a romanticization of the West. It was South Indian Cinema that provided the light at the end of the tunnel for the Dalits and proved to be the flag-bearer of truth about the Indian caste system. Even though Bombay has been hailed as the capital of Indian Cinema, film enthusiasts and connoisseurs would agree that it is South Indian Cinema that deserves the honour. It was 1936 when the 'social' films tainted with politics infiltrated the sphere of Tamil Cinema and since then, film has become extremely pervasive in all spheres of life, exclusively political life.

During the first phase of Tamil Cinema, that is in the pre-1950s, almost all films such as *Sevasadanam* (1938), *Sabapathy* (1941), etc were an instrument to represent the upper caste communities with upper caste protagonists revelling in their privileges. The recent wave of not only addressing the caste issues explicitly but letting the Dalits occupy the centre stage was initiated by director Pa Ranjith in his films *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), *Kaala* (2018), *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021) and as a producer for *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018). Till now, many films have made efforts to represent the caste issue. However, the protagonist would always be an upper caste Hindu, basked in God complex exercising his generosity and excess wealth by aiding his Dalit subordinate to regain his dignity. Only in recent times, with the advent of some Dalits in the film industry, are a few films being made that represent the Dalit perspective. The film industry of Tamil Nadu is as heterogenous as the Indian society and has metamorphosed into an instrument incumbent for understanding the battleground of the caste system in India.

Tamil Cinema consisted of three phases that ranged from 1931 to 1985. The films from the Puranic, folklore, and mythological period (1931-1950) were far removed from reality. They resembled the street theatre performed by folk artists. Then came the period of melodrama (1951-75) revolving around escapism and exaggeration. Finally, it moved towards social

realism (1976-85) when Tamil Cinema embraced stories that were anti-sentimental and partly realistic. The Dravidian Movement led by E.V Ramasami was a significant period in the history of Tamil Nadu and Tamil Cinema. The Dravidian ideals which got popular during the 1930s and 1940s rejected any discrimination in the name of caste, class, or creed.

Pariyerum Perumal by Mari Selvaraj is an intense portrayal of the caste-ridden society where the film starts with a scene of an upper caste man urinating in the pond that is used by the “lower caste” people. This scene is followed by the death of Kuruppi, the protagonist Pariyan’s dog, by upper-caste men, which again reminds us that caste-based violence does not spare even a dog. The scene before the interval is heart-wrenching where an upper-caste man urinates on Pariyan’s face because he befriended the man’s sister, an upper-caste girl. The humiliation and the torture faced by Pariyan in his college by his classmates and teachers is a harrowing echo of the reality of institutional casteism. From ridiculing his desire to become like Dr. Ambedkar to his innocent and helpless plea to use Tamil instead of English as a medium of teaching to the teacher, to falling in love with an upper-caste girl, the irony is that all of this happens inside the campus of a LAW college. The film is steeped in songs, dialogues, and symbols of caste inequality, yet it does not use a dark and grim tone to convey its message; it stays hopeful without taking a resort to a dark theme.

When Pariyan goes to his lover’s father to express his love for Jyothika, the father’s reaction is that of sadness and fear rather than rage. He says, “If you continue, my people will kill not just you, but also my daughter.” (Selvaraj, 2018). Needless to explain, it is more of her father’s desperate plea than a threat to Pariyan. Pariyan’s story is inter-cut by scenes of an aging serial killer who hunts down lower-caste men and kills them if they have fallen in love with an upper-caste girl. The effect of the film intensifies when we realise that it is a figment of the reality that we are living in. It is something that has either happened, is happening, or will continue to happen in our country. There is distress, angst, and misery throughout the film. However, Mari Selvaraj doesn’t take the overrated way of revenge, as it is continuous and cyclical. The film concludes with Pariyan saying as Mari Selvaraj’s mouthpiece – “Forget everything. No matter who you are, and how different you are, we are equal. We are humans.” (Selvaraj, 2018).

Another masterpiece that revolves around the caste issue is the film *Asuran*, which was released in 2019, and directed by Vetrimaaran. It revolves around two issues primarily. One is the trials and tribulations of a Dalit family in order to save a small piece of land. Two is the loss that a hamlet undergoes as a consequence of a land reclamation struggle. The movie is based on a novel called *Vekkai*, written by Poomani, a Sahitya Academy winner, and talks about the never-ending strife between the Dalits of Thirunelveli district and the Hindu landlords. The history of Madras Presidency/ Tamil Nadu is crowded with instances of counter-narratives against caste, majoritarianism, and Hindutva forces. *Asuran*, the title of the movie echoes this legacy. Even though *Asuran* means demon in Hindu Mythology, the movie presents Asuran as someone who fights for the rights of the oppressed people. However, in reality, it is not possible for Asuran to act from the confrontational mode always, as he is devoid of class, caste, and cultural capital. Hence, they are often brushed aside as someone dispensable and lesser, and negotiate and settle for less than what they deserve in society. Vetrimaaran does a fabulous job of portraying this reality of the Dalits on screen. There is a scene where the protagonist Sivasamy, a father of three children, surrenders his self-respect in front of the whole village to save his son. The Panchayat orders him to fall at the feet of Hindu families in the village, where some members are even children. What follows next is a heart-breaking scene of an elderly person falling at the feet of children. After this, his wife asks him “Why did you humiliate yourself? Don’t you have some self-respect?” He replies, “What will we do with pride, if our son dies?” (Vetrimaaran, 2019).

The British Colonial Government allotted approximately twelve lakh acres of land to the Dalits in the Madras Presidency for their social and economic upliftment. This land is called the 'pancami' land or the 'Depressed Class Conditional Land'. The struggle to protect this land of the Dalits is the core subject of the movie. The first portion of the movie deals with how Sivasamy and other Dalits try to stop the casteist Hindu landlords from selling the 'pancami' land to industrialists for building the factory. The second portion of the movie portrays the struggle of the hamlet which fights to reclaim their land from the Hindu landlords. *Asuran* is not a tale about one single man, rather it tells the story of each one of them who is a Dalit and is fighting for their right and dignity. *Asuran* thus becomes a tale of the resistance of the Dalits against the upper-caste Hindu oppression. For a long time, Indian tradition has characterised the Asuras as evil and wicked. Dr Ambedkar in his book *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India* writes:

It is believed that the Asuras were not a human species at all. They are held to have been ghosts and goblins who plagued the Aryans with their nocturnal visitations. The description of Asura given, in the Mahabharat and Ramayana make out as though they belonged to nonhuman world. An Asura is described to eat ten carts-load of food. They are monsters in size. They sleep for six months. They have ten mouths. Who is a Rakshas? He too is described as a non-human creature. (Ambedkar, 2017)

Labelling these beliefs as "unfounded", Dr Ambedkar writes:

The word Asura is generic name given to various tribes known by their tribal names of Daityas, Danavas, Dasyus, Kalananjas, Kaleyayas, Kalins, Nagas, Nivata-Kavachas, Paulomas, Pishachas and Rakshasas. Fortunately with the help of the Buddhist Literature, Ancient Indian History can be dug out of the debris which the Brahmin writers have heaped upon in a fit of madness. The Buddhist literature shows that the Devas were the community of Human beings...and the Asuras again are not monsters. They too are Jan-Vishes Human beings. (Ambedkar, 2017)

However, like *Periyerum Perumal*, *Asuran* does not propagate revenge. In the final scene, Sivasamy comments, "If we own farmland, they (caste Hindus) will seize it; If we carry money, they will snatch it; But if we have education, they can never take it from us." He even says, "you should study well and come to power. When you come to power, you don't do the same to them." (Vetrimaaran, 2019).

After the success of *Periyerum Perumal* (2018), Mari Selvaraj added *Karnan* (2021) as a catalyst to the politics of social justice and dignity by portraying the Dalit grievances in a compelling manner. *Karnan* revolves around the conflict between Devendra Kula Vellalars (former untouchables) and the Thevars (proximate backward class). The movie is replete with metaphors. The opening scene portrays Dhanush's character Karnan sitting on an elephant, the elephant being a symbol of power and prosperity. This metaphor is then followed by symbols like a donkey with its front legs tied, a bus stop not being constructed for the village, Karnan's sister dying in the middle of a busy road- all these representing the limitations imposed on the Dalit community from attaining the socioeconomic mobility. In this film, Mari Selvaraj does not use a village head or a caste leader as the antagonist, rather his antagonist is a servant of the state, Kannibiran, a senior police officer belonging to the proximate backward caste. Kannibiran's inhuman torture of the villagers, and his violence, make the audience shiver with rage and sadness. One day, he beats the village elders for not removing the chieftain's headscarf or 'talaippakai'. When Karnan sees this, he ransacks the police station to rescue the villagers as a response. Karnan then tells the villagers: "They beat us for just asserting ourselves. Now that the assertion started, we won't back down". (Selvaraj, 2021). The movie also uses symbols

that represent the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam such as an emblem of a rising sun on the wall of a mud hut that is being ransacked by the police.

Dhanush as Karnan is a bold young man who stands firmly against oppression, eventually killing the antagonist to stop him from wreaking havoc in his village. His supporting character is Yeama Raja, played by Lal Paul, whose primary focus is access to opportunities and privileges and hence avoids confrontation. Parallely, the celebrated icon of the Devendra Kula Vellalars, Immanuel Sekaran is shown throughout the movie as a faceless painting. *Karnan*'s concluding scenes are of wall paintings comprising the face of Yeama against Karnan. The movie does not valorise the protagonist despite the fact that he killed the antagonist. He is rather shown as portraying emotions of tragedy and futility towards his act. It makes clear that the movie is not about the oppressor caste's conquest over the oppressed caste, but of holding on to a hope of being socioeconomically mobile and achieving dignity. *Karnan*, like *Periyerum Perumal* and *Asuran* is an effort to mainstream the voices of the marginalised and an experiment to overturn the perpetuation of explicit and implicit dominance of the caste.

The Tamil Film Industry has been the most significant and influential one when it comes to promoting the state's ethos through astute politicians like CN Annadurai, M Karunanidhi, and MG Ramachandran. The movies with the themes of devotion and the freedom struggle had an upper-caste audience. Since the 1950s, Tamil Cinema has been used as an instrument to problematise the narratives and grievances of the marginalised and has been used alongside public rallies and speeches. Unlike other film industries, Tamil Cinema has no division for the genres of the films, that is, there are no separate "art" films and "mainstream" films. Rather, all the films are a part of the mainstream. From the middle of the 2000s, the film world that was steeped with movies tainted in caste pride saw a re-emergence of films that dealt with the subaltern, working class, and anti-caste narratives. It was directors like Pa Ranjith, Vetrimaaran, Ram, Mari Selvaraj Ameer Gopi Nainar, and others who made a conscious effort to bring forth and discuss the social realities of the Dalits in an unapologetic way through films like *Madras*, *Kabali*, *Kala* and *Asuran*.

Mainstream Indian Cinema such as Bollywood has time and again, spent resources on unrealistic and glamorous depictions. Professor Suraj Yengde says, "(mainstream Indian Cinematic sphere) has been responsible for sustaining dominant caste hegemony" (Yengde, 2018). He is also of the opinion that Bollywood has contributed to the stereotypical representation of the Dalits as broken, poor, problematic, and unstable. This was also the case when Tamil Cinema started making films with Dalit characters and tried to include their narrative. Throughout the history of Tamil Cinema, there were a great number of films that represented "the social concerns of the Dalits, and yet most of them were very subtle and passive" (Susairaj, 2020). The main reason behind this was that the directors, producers, editors, etc who were directly involved in the making of this kind of films usually belonged to the upper caste whereas the low-skilled workers who hardly had a say in these films belonged to the lower caste. Only in recent times, directors from the Dalit community have managed to raise questions about the stereotypical and critical representation of the people of the minority caste that have been prevalent for so many years. In most Tamil movies, the Dalits were delineated stereotypically as "victims with empathy" (Susairaj, 2020). This can be vividly located in new-wave Tamil films like *Kabali* (2016), *Kala* (2018) produced by Dalit director Pa Ranjith with Rajinikanth, a superstar of Tamil Cinema as the protagonist. Sreeram comments that Rajinikanth's role as someone from the oppressed class in both the films *Kabali* and *Kala* is no less than a milestone in the Tamil film industry.

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Bio-note

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