

# The Paradigm shifts in the Portrayal of Caste in Tamil Cinema and its impact on the Tamil Society

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## Abstract

The film industries of India, among the largest in the world, can be broadly classified into two: one is the Bollywood Industry, the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, and the other is a number of regional film industries, which produce films in different languages of India. This article analyses the portrayal of caste in Tamil cinema, one of the regional film industries based in Tamil Nadu, South India. Discrimination based on caste is one of the fundamental and most profound problems in India since it determines one's status, lifestyle, profession, and one's entire life. Moreover, it is also the source of conflict and discrimination among people of different castes. Tamil cinema has produced many films which deal with the caste system in Tamil Nadu. There have been many paradigm shifts in the portrayal of caste in the history of Tamil cinema in terms of higher castes, lower castes, inter-castes, and subaltern classes. This paper examines the paradigm shifts in portrayal of caste in different Tamil films in different periods of the history of Tamil cinema and its impact on the Tamil society.

## Introduction

The film industries of India, among the largest in the world, could be broadly classified into two. One is the Bollywood Industry, the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai; the word 'Bollywood' is the amalgamation of the city Bombay (now Mumbai) and Hollywood. The second one is often referred to as regional cinema, which produces films in different regional languages of India such as Urdu, Marathi, Gujarathi, Assamese, Bengali, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, and so on. This article analyses the rationale behind the portrayal of caste in Tamil cinema, one of the regional film industries based in Tamil Nadu, South India. The Tamil film industry is known as Kollywood, an amalgam of the words Kodambakkam, the name of the Tamil Nadu's cinema city, and Hollywood. Located in the Chennai district of Kodambakkam, Tamil Nadu's cinema city. According to a survey, it produces 150–200 feature films annually.<sup>1</sup> Tamil cinema has a long history comparable to other Indian cinemas and has grown to become the most domineering influence in the Tamil Society.

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<sup>1</sup> Selvaraj Velayutham, "Introduction," in *Tamil Cinema: The cultural politics of India's other film industry*, ed. Selvaraj Velayutham (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 2.

Tamil cinema has a number of unique, distinct characteristics. Foremost, language is a critical marker of distinction. Though Tamil is recognized as one of India's national languages, it is not the lingua franca of India. It is a classical living language and belongs to the Dravidian language group.<sup>2</sup> For Tamilians, Tamil language is the essence of their culture, the bearer of their traditions, and the vehicle of their thoughts from time immemorial. Movie dialogues and songs often glorify and celebrate the Tamil Language, people, culture, and identity. According to Selvaraj, Tamil identity locates both the film and the audience within a particular national imaginary and ethno-linguistic space which is Tamil and Tamil only. For instance, the frequent mention of Tamil Nadu (Tamil country), meaning the land of Tamil language, culture and people is a powerful signifier and it evokes the imagery of internal psychic/emotional unity of all Tamils against the 'external others'. Tamil cinema always portrays the Tamils while Hindi cinema more often than not represents an 'Indian' without an ethno-specific identity. According to Selvaraj, the characters of Bollywood cinema are supposedly pan-Indian. The tendencies of separatism and linguistic nationalism asserted by the Tamils in South India are also a salient feature of the Tamil film industry.<sup>3</sup> Tamil cinema pervades every aspect of Tamil society and everyday life. As a form of popular culture, it provides not only entertainment to the masses but also affects their values, beliefs and life as a whole. In this sense, the subjects addressed by Tamil cinema say as much about Tamil society, its people and culture as they do about Tamil films.

In this article, though the detailed history of Tamil cinema is not dealt, yet there is a mention of the important phases of Tamil cinema. Sreenivasan argues that there are three phases of Tamil cinema between 1931—when the first “talkie” was released—and 1985. These are the puranic, mythological and folklore period (1931–50) when films resembled the street theatre of earlier folk artists and had nothing to do with real life; the melodrama period (1951–75) which featured in exaggeration, excessive dialogue and escapism; and finally, the move towards social realism (1976–85) when Tamil cinema came to terms with “partly realistic and anti-sentimental stories”.<sup>4</sup> This type of classification helps us to analyse the different stages of Tamil cinema. The notable period in the history of Tamil Nadu and Tamil cinema is the period of Dravidian Movement<sup>5</sup> which was led by E. V. Ramasami. Dravidian ideals were popularized during the 1930s to the 1950s by a series of small movements and organizations in Tamil Nadu. It rejected the discrimination in the name of caste, creed, class in the society. Its ideology was infused and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringer, “Madurai Formula Films: Caste Pride and Politics in Tamil Cinema,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* (22 June 2017): 4, accessed December 10, 2019, <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4359>.

<sup>5</sup> 'Dravidian' is defined as a family of South Indian languages that shares many common characteristics but which differs from the North Indian language complex. However, the term Dravidian came to be used to designate a somewhat artificially unified South Indian culture, and also a community, comprised of all Dravidian-speaking people. Dravidian movement began in late 19th and early 20th century in South India to eradicate discrimination in the name of caste and establish equality in the society.

influenced by Dravidian politics. The reverberation and promulgation of Dravidian identity and Tamil nationalism are profound in Tamil cinema. According to Karthikeyan, during the 1950s Tamil film was largely used as a platform to articulate Dravidian identity and Tamil nationalism. These films departed from the earlier focus on religious and nationalist sentiments and articulated a rationalist critique of social ills particularly with discrimination in the name of caste. Subaltern identity celebrated in the Dravidian films pitted the poor against the rich or the casteless non-Brahmin against the wily and treacherous Brahmin rather than tackling caste inequalities or identities head on.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Dravidian movement motivated people to overthrow a hegemonic Brahmanical world view of caste discrimination, and replace it with a progressive anti-caste agenda.

However, since the 1990s, with the liberalisation of the Indian economy, the rise of an Indian middle class, and the commercialisation of Tamil cinema, Tamil cinema has shifted its orientation towards tapping into the sensibilities and taste cultures of this new film audience. According to Selvaraj, during this period, films have been centred mainly on themes such as romance, institutional and bureaucratic inadequacies.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, films are a lot more sensual, intense, and explosive in their visual form and this is coupled with a high turnover of new and young actors within the film industry. The Tamil films changed its direction from socially focused issues to the sensual needs of the market. The film artists were responding to the need of crowd and market. In this context, it is very difficult to portray the social issues and subaltern issues in the movies. There were also movies produced glorifying the intermediate caste, expressing the caste honour and pride of landowning intermediate castes, and belittling or implicitly neglecting lower castes. Selvaraj states that the repeated portrayals relating to particular castes (mainly *Thevars* and *Gounders*) reinforce dominant social narratives and legitimize social institutions like caste *panchayats*.<sup>8</sup> There were only a few films which dealt with subaltern issues during this time. However, in recent times, the Dalit movie makers are making movies based on the subaltern issues and discrimination in the name of caste.

Within Tamil cinema there is one element which is very common in most of the movies is that the emphasis and glorification of Tamil culture and its identity. However, the thematic overview of the Tamil cinema during the course of history transitions from one theme to the other influenced by the ideology of the time in the Tamil society. The themes of the Tamil movies have been mythological, socially oriented, Indian patriotic, Dravidian Political, melodramatic, rural villages centred, romance and caste based. This article focuses on the rationale behind the portrayal of caste in different times of the history of Tamil cinema.

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<sup>6</sup> Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringe, "Madurai Formula Films: Caste Pride and Politics in Tamil Cinema," p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Selvaraj Velayutham, "Introduction," in *Tamil Cinema: The cultural politics of India's other film industry*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringe, "Madurai Formula Films: Caste Pride and Politics in Tamil Cinema," p. 6. (Caste panchayat is a jury system in the villages formed by elders from higher castes).

## 1. Portrayal of caste hegemony in Tamil Cinema

Tamil cinema has reflected and responded to the images created in the popular mind of Tamil society in different times of the history of Tamil Nadu. One of the reasons of the portrayal of the glorification of intermediate castes in Tamil cinema is due to the dominance of a group of castes in the history of the Tamils. According to Karthikeyan, during the British colonial times of India, the intermediate castes like the *Kallars* and *Thevars* have served as soldiers or armed retainers to local kings. They were given authority as *kavalkarar* (meaning the protector or watchman) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to protect the peasantry. Though having lost their authority due to the exploitation of the peasants with unreasonable fees, yet, they had a peculiar kind of sovereignty through their claim to protect the peasants and their property.<sup>9</sup> Available reports since the 1850s indicate that intermediate castes also carry a history of violence against and dominating over lower castes. The other reason for the dominance of the intermediate caste is that Muthuramalinga Thevar (1908–1963), a scion of longstanding political rulers in Ramnad, a town and a municipality in Ramanathapuram district in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, fostered the cross-regional consolidation and identity formation of the caste cluster in his alliance with the Indian Nationalist leader Chandra Bose (1897–1945) during the days of the Indian freedom struggle.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Muthuramalinga Thevar has a special respect and reverence particularly by the people belonging to the *Thevar* caste. His statue is erected in the public places of Tamil Nadu, particularly in the places where, the people of the *Thevar* caste assert their hegemony.

The presence of caste discrimination in the Tamil society has been unavoidable since colonial India. Though non-Brahmin castes mobilized politically through the Dravidian Movement in Tamil Nadu during pre-colonial rule (1915–47), yet there was significant caste consciousness that could not bring people of all the castes together, particularly intermediate castes like the *Thevars* and *Kallars*. Stalin Rajangam of American College, Madurai, says that by the 1990s, communities and caste groups that had been classified as ‘backward’ came to assert themselves politically and claim their identities. This, he says, was because of certain political developments like the Mandal Commission which had been set up in 1979 to set up reservation quota on the basis of caste.<sup>11</sup> This assertion of identity also led to an acceptance of caste pride among certain sections of the people of high castes. The other reason for the dominance of the intermediate castes is due to the caste-conflicts in Tamil Nadu. In the years 1995–98, the southern districts witnessed widespread clashes between the *Thevars* and Dalits.<sup>12</sup> It strengthened the caste consciousness among the people of different castes which led to

<sup>9</sup> Rajan Krishnan, “Imaginary geographies: The making of the “south” in contemporary Tamil cinema” in *Tamil Cinema*, p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringer, “Madurai Formula Films: Caste Pride and Politics in Tamil Cinema,” p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> The meaning of the word ‘Dalit’ is “broken/scattered” in Sanskrit and Hindi. It is a term mostly used for the oppressed ethnic groups in India.

offensive violence. It is also one of the reasons to assert the dominance of one's own caste in the society and in cinema.<sup>13</sup> Though many humanist narratives of cinema were made in the history of Tamil cinema, yet they have not helped to eradicate the forms of untouchability and discrimination against the people of lower castes. Rather, Tamil cinema has reflected the popular mind showing the dominance of the castes on the screen.

This article analyzes the Tamil Film '*Thevar Magan* (son of the *Thevar*)' which is considered to be one of the most influential movies, setting trend in portraying the dominance and glorification of intermediate castes on the screen. The analysis helps us to understand the influence of the historical situation in Tamil Nadu on cinema and vice versa. Most of the Tamil films have celebrated and praised the dominant castes through its plot, the protagonist or the hero of the film who always belongs to dominant caste groups and guides the others. Before the Tamil Movie *Thevar Magan*, Tamil films did not openly or strongly portray the names of the dominant castes though they would praise and glorify subtly the people of high castes. The movie *Thevar Magan*, with the license given by authenticity, helped Tamil cinema to shed its inhibitions about caste identities but with mixed results. However, after the release of caste-titled movie, '*Thevar Magan*' (1992), a film labelling *Thevar* caste as part of the title of the movie, there was a trend of titling many Tamil movies in the name of the castes during 90's and later. One of the reasons why the Tamil Movie '*Thevar Magan*' became a trend setter is that the prominent versatile Tamil actors like Sivaji Ganesan (1928–2001) and Kamal Haasan (1954~) played the role of *Thevars* in the movie. Sivaji Ganesan himself belongs to the *Thevar* caste whereas Kamal Haasan does not. Karthikeyan lists caste-based movies that followed *Thevar Magan*: *Thevar Veetu Ponnu* (The Girl of *Thevar*'s House, Rama Narayanan, 1992); *Maravan* (Warrior/ Member of the *Maravar* Caste, Manoj Kumar, 1993); *Kizhakku Cheemayile* (In the Eastern Province, Bharathiraja, 1993); *Periya Marudhu* (The Elder Maruthu Brother - a *Thevar* hero, N. K. Viswanathan, 1994); *Pasumpon* (the village where Muthuramalinga *Thevar* was born, Bharathiraja, 1995); *Ponmana Chelvan* (Man with a Golden Heart, P. Vasu, 1996); *Taj Mahal* (Bharathiraja, 1999); *Maayi* (a name associated with the *Thevars*, Surya Prakash, 2000); *Diwan* (Landlord, Suryaprakash, 2003); *Kaalai* (Bull, Tharun Gopi, 2008); *Kaadhal* (Love, Balaji Sakthivel, 2004); *Ghilli* (Risk Taker, Dharani, 2004); *Sanda Kozhi* (Battle Rooster, Lingusamy, 2005); *Thimiru* (Effrontery, Tharun Gopi, 2006); *Paruthi Veeran* (name of a folk hero, Ameer, 2007); *Subramaniapuram* (name of a locality in Madurai city, Sasikumar, 2008); *Goripalayam* (name of a place in Madurai, Rasu Madhuravan, 2010); *Saami* (God, Hari, 2003); *Maayandi Kudumbathar* (Maayandi is a common family name among *Thevars*' Family, Rasu Madhuravan, 2009); *Thittakudi* (place name, Sundaran, 2010); *Milaga* (Chilli, Ravi Mariya, 2010); *Aadukalam* (Playground, Vetrimaran, 2011); and *Sundarapandian* (a name associated with Pandya kings, S. R. Prabhakaran, 2012).<sup>14</sup> Though these movies are associated with the *Thevar* caste, they do not follow a similar plot line. However, they contain the characteristic

<sup>13</sup> Rajan Krishnan, "Imaginary geographies: The making of the "south" in contemporary Tamil cinema" in *Tamil Cinema*, ed. Selvaraj Velayutham, pp. 149–150.

<sup>14</sup> Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringer, "Madurai Formula Films: Caste Pride and Politics in Tamil Cinema," p. 10.

features of the *Thevar* caste such as the use of sickles, dominance, and violence. After the release of many movies based on *Thevar* caste, the people of the Tamil film industry tried to make movies based on other intermediate castes such as the *Gounders* and others. These films glorify caste and its pride: *Chinna Gounder* (Junior Gounder, 1992, R. V. Udayakumar), *Nattamai* (Village Chief, 1994, K. S. Ravikumar), *Periya Gounder Ponnu* (Daughter of a big landlord, 1992, Manivasagam), *Mappillai Gounder* (Gounder, the groom, 1997, Manivasagam), and *Kunguma Pottu Gounder* (2001, Suraj)<sup>15</sup> are films that glorifies the caste and its pride. The films based on caste dominance have become vehicles for, and expressions of, the assertiveness and pride of intermediate castes. The movies based on *Thevars* have created and reinforced a common stereotype that the people belonging to the *Thevar* caste are violent and socially dominant. Tamil cinema based on different castes acts like a motivating factor to hasten the casteism in Tamil society. Srinivas and Kaali (1998) say that genealogical praising of the *Thevar* caste in the song lyrics of the Tamil Movie *Thevar Magan* helped make the film a huge box office success by the support of the people of the *Thevar* caste.<sup>16</sup> The soundtrack of the movies praising *Thevars* such as *Potri Paadadi Pennae/Thevar-kaladi manne* (Praise the land touched by *Thevar's* feet) and *Ayya Nam Thevar Ayya* (Master, our *Thevar* Master) are routinely played by *Thevar* households during family rituals and ceremonies and village festivals, especially during the birth anniversaries of heroes of the same caste. Though the film *Thevar Magan* ends with good message to fellow *Thevars* to take education rather than to sickles, the film appears to have led to the reification of the martial qualities and the caste pride of the *Thevars*.

The movies titled after the name of different castes such as *Thevar Magan* not only motivated people towards casteism in the mind of the people but also instigated conflicts among different castes in Tamil society. There were several clashes among the students of different castes in the student hostels. The movie, *Thevar Magan*, was deliberately used to mobilize *Thevars* during the riots between *Pallar-Thevar* castes that flared up repeatedly between 1995 and 1998. *Thevars* in riot torn villages screened the film *Thevar Magan*, and its songs were used to instigate inter-caste violence. Karthikeyan cites an incident happened during a local Hindu Festival at Kovilpatti that there was a row between the Dalits and the *Nayakkars*<sup>17</sup> which became a caste clash. The riot, which began as a Dalit against *Nayakkar* feud, soon assumed a different hue when *Thevars* were brought in from nearby villages to attack the Dalits. They were given shelter in *Nayakkar*-owned marriage halls where the movie *Thevar Magan* was screened to instigate the people towards violence. This happened everywhere and, in the late 1990s from schools to colleges, *Thevar* youth would sing the songs of the film when they encountered young Dalits.<sup>18</sup> The caste-based cinematic themes have not only created caste consciousness and caste pride among the people of the same castes, but also it was a cause of chaos and hatredness among the people of different castes in Tamil society.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> *Nayakkar* is a name of an intermediate caste.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

Amidst the chaos and confusion due to caste-based movies, the immense popularity and commercial success of such movies motivated the legitimization of the portrayal of *Thevars* as powerful and fearless. Even non-*Thevar* directors like Gangai Amaran<sup>19</sup> were not immune to produce movies based on the *Thevar* caste. Though his film *Enga Ooru Paatukaran* (Our Village Bard, 1987), thus, shares none of the celebration of violence present in the other films, but the opening song still starts with an homage to Muthuramalinga Thevar and metonymically links the hero to this leader, thus asserting his prowess and legitimacy.<sup>20</sup> Though there were movies aimed at reforming the people of *Thevar* and other intermediate castes, remnant casteism can be found. The director Cheran's debut film *Bharathi Kannamma*, for instance, has actor Vijaykumar, who plays a *Thevar* zamindar, and delivers a speech on what it means to be a "true" *Thevar*. He says anyone who carries a sickle or sports a moustache cannot be considered a *Thevar* and that a real one would be able to protect the "honour" of a woman against hundreds of enemies. He also speaks about the "magnanimity" that a "true" *Thevar* exhibits towards other castes.<sup>21</sup> The movies based on the *Thevar* caste are celebrated very much among the people of the same caste though the reformative messages were taken for granted.

Due to the image of dominance of the intermediate castes over lower castes in the history of Tamil society and the Tamil mind, there were many movies produced reflecting the caste consciousness in the society. The movies which are based on the themes of caste hegemony of intermediate castes instigated casteism and caste conflict in the society. It is a vicious circle of the images of casteism reflected in the movie, and the movies creating a new space for casteism to live. This casteism further leads to the formation of fan clubs and political parties based on members of the same caste, as is the case in Tamil Nadu. Most of these fan clubs have turned out to be a political party promoting the people and issues of the same caste. Unfortunately, these types of fan clubs sometimes are the cause of inter-caste violence and riots in different parts of Tamil Nadu.

The dominance of the intermediate caste in the history of Tamil Nadu has been reflected in the caste-based Tamil films. These films have become of the medium of asserting of one's caste pride, glorification, and dominance. On the one hand, caste-based movies have been a motivating factor of people of the same caste to come together and support each other in good and bad situations. On the other hand, it has become a source of casteism in the mind of the people causing caste-conflicts and violence between different castes. There are many incidents in which caste-based films have been the motivating element to dominate and discriminate the people of lower castes. There are many caste-based fan clubs for an actor of the same caste that have turned into political parties which try to promote the values and ideals of their own caste while neglecting the total welfare of the Tamil society. Most of the time they have

<sup>19</sup> Gangai Amaran, born in 1947, is a music director, singer, lyricist, script writer, film director and actor in Tamil films.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Devaki Mirthula, "Representation of Caste in Tamil Cinema: Pride and Prejudice," *On the Contours of Marginalization-Voices of Voiceless* (March 2019): 212, accessed February 3, 2020, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332246742\\_Representation\\_of\\_Caste\\_in\\_Tamil\\_Cinema\\_Pride\\_and\\_Prejudice/citation/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332246742_Representation_of_Caste_in_Tamil_Cinema_Pride_and_Prejudice/citation/download).

become the cause of chaos and hatred among the people of different castes in Tamil society. It is a vicious circle of the images of casteism reflected in the movies, and the movies creating a new space for casteism to live in society.

## 2. Portrayal of the people of lower castes in Tamil Cinema

Cinema, often a medium for propagating certain ideologies among the masses, play a major role in how society views various sectors, communities or even an individual amongst the masses. In the battleground of caste system in India, Tamil cinema has portrayed the people of different castes in different ways reflecting the social reality in Tamil Nadu. In most of the Tamil movies, the Dalits were presented as subservient, submissive, and dirty; the movies have been a tool for the denigration of Dalits. In Sweetman's analysis the representation of people in cinema is a portrayal of the existence of a "being" defined by Derrida as the "being" grounded in a perception of self, which is partially constructed by the social norm. This characterisation in Tamil cinema is what Maritian refers to as the "principal of identity". The concept states that "identity is not derived from the structure of the mind but from the structure of reality."<sup>22</sup> Hence, Tamil movies represented and sometimes distorted the reality of Dalits who have been oppressed and suppressed in the caste-minded society. This is visible in the underrepresentation of Dalits on media platforms especially in the Tamil cinema Industry. Hence, though there are a few Tamil movies which emphasized the importance of the social equality of Dalits in a sympathetic manner, yet there are many Tamil movies which made use of Dalits as a matter of laughingstock. The moviemakers take the collective consciousness of considering Dalits as low in the society as a social fact. It is very difficult to challenge and change the social facts as they are coercive and uniform in their effects. The social facts of discrimination, inequality, prejudice and hostility faced by Dalit communities by dominant groups, are shown in the movies as a normative function of their social reality.

According to Benson, Tamil films have portrayed the marginalized and subaltern characters built around grim story lines, expository dialogues, and dark themes. The movies have been made with a stereotypical screen image of Dalit people having dirty clothes, a sweaty visage, dark skin, and being untidy.<sup>23</sup> Indian dress codes were highly diversified according to caste, class, religion, occupation, education, region, and politics. Clothing is important in the formation of a community's image in people's minds. The representation of lower castes in films, especially in the way that they are dressed and the clothing that they wear is significant with regard to their identification in the social order. Dressing well or wearing white coloured clothes has always been associated with the dominant caste. Indeed, until relatively recently, Dalits were prevented from wearing ironed shirts and sporting styled moustaches and none of

<sup>22</sup> Benson Rajan and Shreya Venkatraman, "Fabric-Rendered Identity: A Study of Dalit Representation in Pa. Ranjith's *Attakathi*, *Madras* and *Kabaali*," *Artha-Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2017) 18–19, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.12724/ajss.42.2>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.



the characters portraying Dalits on screen are shown with twirled moustaches. In the majority of the movie scripts, they are seen as subservient and Dalit men are denied a masculine identity in Tamil movies and which served to marginalize Dalits. The films have created an image that people from the slums are belonged to lower castes and are shown in a negative light such as thieves, murderers, and the subject of most jokes. Sreeram Gopalkrishnan states that sewage workers, washermen, and cobblers chosen to act out the comedic scenes and they are portrayed as people from lower castes even though the caste is not mentioned openly. Most of comedy scenes performed by the legendary Tamil comedian Goundamani,<sup>24</sup> who was active in the film industry for almost 42 years, often involve a person from a subaltern community in the role of graveyard worker to a barber to a washerman. His character, a barber, in the movie called *Rakkayi Koyil* (Rakkayi Temple, 1993), says when served tea in a coconut shell at an upper caste chieftain's house says, "You are drinking tea in a silver tumbler." At least, you could have served us in a plastic cup. For how long shall we drink out of a coconut shell?"<sup>25</sup> In the rural villages of Tamil Nadu, there had been a discriminatory custom to serve Dalits tea in a coconut shell though this custom has disappeared in most of the places now.

Dalits have not only humiliating portrayals, but also have limited options in film making. Hugo Gorringe states that when the name of director A. L. Vijay's film starring the actor Vikram (from a lower caste) was announced as *Deiva Thirumagan* (God's Chosen Son, 2011), there was an outcry from Thevar groups (a dominant caste group) who have trademarked that phrase for Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar and were particularly infuriated by the fact that the main actor in question was a Dalit who is celebrated by *Pallar* (lower caste) youth as one of their own. Eventually the name of the film was modified to *Deiva Thirumagal* (God's Chosen Daughter).<sup>26</sup> This fact highlights the dominance of intermediate castes over the people belong to Dalit community even in the film industry. Another filmmaker SP Jananthan, who made actor Jayam Ravi's *Peranmai* (Valour, 2009), a movie based on a tribal guard, had difficulties in getting the film made, including going through 16 cuts because he showed the pitiable situation of the people of lower castes in the society especially among the students, office staff, and even in the police department. The film has Jayam Ravi playing the role of a lower caste forest guard, whom his students look down upon by his lower status. Jananthan states in an interview that the reason CBFC (Central Board of Film Certification) reportedly gave him for the censorship of several scenes on caste discrimination since caste discrimination no longer existed as a social fact, there was no need to show it on screen. Babu Ramasamy, former regional director of the CBFC, explains that the guideline they follow is that it is all right to "praise and glorify" but not denigrate any caste. This means, he says, even the word "Dalit"

<sup>24</sup> His real name is Subramaniyan Karuppaiya, born in 1939, active in the film industry as a comedian from 1964 to 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Sreeram Gopalkrishnan, "Marginalised in the New Wave Tamil Film: Subaltern Aspirations in three films by Bala, Kumararaja and Mysskin," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 11, no. 2 (October 2019): 5, accessed November 2019, <http://rupkatha.com/V11/n3/v11n303.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringe, "Madurai Formula Films: Caste Pride and Politics in Tamil Cinema," p. 19.

cannot be used in the movies.<sup>27</sup> While dominant caste groups are celebrated and glorified on screen, Dalit caste groups are not even mentioned as Dalits on the screen. They are simply termed as the marginalised or subjugated. It is very difficult to make a realistic film about caste oppression without offending the sentiments of dominant castes since certain words and situations of dominant castes' oppression of lower castes have to be shown if the film is to have verisimilitude. It is easy for dominant castes such as *Thevar* or *Gounder* to find social acceptance but not for a Dalit, a film about *Thevars* or *Gounders* will find social acceptance but not one about Dalits. In Tamil movies, not only are the names of low castes silenced but also the Dalit personages such as Dr Ambedkar, a Dalit leader who was the major architect of the Indian Constitution. In a Tamil documentary on caste in Tamil cinema, there is a discussion on one of the scenes from the movie *Azhagi* (Beautiful Lady, 2002) in which, landlord's dominant caste son would pluck the book a Dalit boy was reading away and the Dalit boy would ask, "shouldn't we read at all?" When the Dalit boy who was interested in studies is taken to a school, there was a shot showing a picture of Dr Ambedkar in the classroom representing the great works of the Dalit leader. CBFC asked the director of the movie to remove that shot (showing Ambedkar) because they said that it would make people feel uncomfortable as well as saying that there is no caste discrimination in the society these days.<sup>28</sup> Dr Ambedkar should be celebrated by all Indians without any regard to caste and creed, but his contributions are ignored and moreover he is labelled as a leader of only the Dalits and a symbol of shame. This incident reflects not only about the biased idea of the CBFC but also the mindset of the current Tamil populace.

### 3. Portrayal of inter-caste issues in Tamil Cinema

In the history of Tamil cinema, there have been many movies which have dealt with the social concerns of Dalits. The movies made between 1930s and 1950s by committed Gandhians such as *Thyaga Bhoomi* (Land of Sacrifice, 1939, K. Subramanyam) and *Harijana Pen Lakshmi* (Dalit Lady Lakshmi, 1937, C. V. Raam) have represented the social issues of Dalits. From the 1970s onward, cinema has been seen as propagating a language of ethics and moral values. Benson states that this phase in Tamil cinema was termed in Tamil as "Cinema *Kalam*" (Age of Cinema) which showed a utopian future for the rural population. This was capitalised upon by the stardom of M G Ramachandran (MGR) (1917~1987), an actor and politician of Tamil Nadu.<sup>29</sup> MGR was shown as the catalyst for the uplifting of the downtrodden by playing the

<sup>27</sup> 100 thoughts on "The Invisible Other: Caste in Tamil Cinema." The Invisible Other is a Tamil documentary film that explores the presence of caste in films and film production in Tamil cinema, especially since the 1990s. (All the interviews were shot between September and November 2011), accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOoI4zNEOmI>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Benson Rajan and Shreya Venkatraman, "Fabric-Rendered Identity: A Study of Dalit Representation in Pa. Ranjith's *Attakathi*, *Madras* and *Kabaali*," p. 23.

subaltern roles, which are closer to the reality of Dalits though the films wouldn't speak directly about caste. Among the 1980s' movies, there were only two films that dealt explicitly with caste, *Muthal Mariyathai* (Honor of the First Order, 1985, Bharathiraja), and *Vedham Pudhithu* (A New Veda, 1987, Bharathiraja) which were directed by Bharathiraja. *Muthal Mariyathai* won India's National Award for Best Film in 1986. The movie depicts the growing affection between a middle-aged high caste man and a young scheduled or lower caste woman. Their relationship never becomes a physical union, but their mutual fondness is presented much more favorably than the relationship between the man and his uncaring wife.<sup>30</sup> This film does not approach the issue in terms of a relationship between people of two different caste groups, but rather through the melodramatic portrayal of love between two individuals. Moreover, the film does not imply that inter-caste love relationships will work out in the real world, since both of those it depicts end tragically. This movie makes an appeal to the Tamil society that inter-caste love and marriage should be accepted in reality. Sara Dickey states that in the movie called *Vedham Pudhithu*, the director Bharathiraja, criticizes the stereotypes based on caste discriminations between two families of different castes of *Thevars* and *Brahmans*.<sup>31</sup> There were also many Tamil movies in the 1980s such as *Sivappu Malli* (Red Jasmine, Rama Narayanan, 1981) and *Alai Oosai* (Sound of the Wave, 1985, Sirimughai Ravi) which were based on love stories between the high caste landlord's daughters and sons of lower castes. There were always several Tamil movies produced depicting inter-caste love stories. The film *Kaadhal* (Love, 2004, Balaji Sakthivel) is based on the love story between a heroine from higher caste (*Thevar* caste) and with a Dalit boy (lower caste). The boy is beaten up very badly and he becomes mentally deranged and the girl is commanded to discontinue the relationship for otherwise the boy would be killed. Eventually to save the life of the boy, the heroine discontinues the relationship and gets married with another boy who was arranged by the family.<sup>32</sup> In *Kaadhal*, we see a classic expression of the trope that Tamil cinema has been constructing for the Tamil psyche, which is torn between the threatening pre-modern assertion of caste and an allegedly egalitarian free market space of modern individuals or citizens. According to Sreeram Gopalkrishnan, in 2000, there were also many movies produced based on Dalit issues. The issues such as the marginalised in Chennai (*Pudhupettai*, 2006), caste evilness in the rural village (*Paruthiveeran*, 2007), bone-chilling honour killings (*Kaadhal*, 2004), followed by *Katrathu Tamizh* (What I Learnt was Tamil, 2007), *Veyil* (Sunshine, 2006), Chennai 600028 (Chennai is a city in south India, 2007), *Polladhavan* (A Vile Man, 2007), *Anjathey* (Don't Fear, 2008), Subramaniapuram (name of a place, 2008), *Poo* (Flower, 2008), *Vennila Kabbadi Kuzhu* (The White Moon Kabbadi Team, 2009), and *Naan Kadavul* (I am God, 2009). Later films like *Naduvula Koncham Pakkatha Kanom* (Some Pages are missing in between, 2012), *Pizza* (2012), *Soodhu Kavvum* (Vice Engulfs, 2013), *Visaranai* (Investigation, 2016), and *Kaakaa Muttai* (A

<sup>30</sup> Sara Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 105.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringer, "Madurai Formula Films: Caste Pride and Politics in Tamil Cinema," pp. 12-13.

Crow's Egg, 2014)<sup>33</sup> cemented the reputation of a new wave of Tamil films. This type of movies reflected various social issues related to inter-caste issues such as inter-caste love, inter-caste marriage, caste discrimination, honour killing and so on and so forth. Moreover, this type of movies also in turn inspired people to speak out various inhuman elements boldly in Tamil society.

#### 4. Portrayal of subaltern issues in Tamil Films

In the history of Tamil cinema, though there were many movies produced representing the social concerns of Dalits, yet most of them were very subtle and passive. One of the reasons is that most of the high skilled personnel in Tamil film industry such as producers, directors, camera men and editors were from high castes, and low-skilled workers with no say in the films hailed from the lower. During the recent past years, filmmakers from the Dalit community like Pa Ranjith, Mariselvaraj, and P. Jananathan, represent the concerns of the Dalit community in a more authentic way. They have managed to raise critical questions on the stereotypical representations of the oppressed and the people of minority castes on the screen for many years. Udhav Nai states that the Dalit filmmakers encouraged many able assistant directors, technicians, and lyricists from similar backgrounds enabling them to produce very authentic Dalit-related movies on the screen.<sup>34</sup> This helped anti-caste films would win both critical acclaim and commercial success. It has paved the way to produce movies which give voice to the voiceless subaltern people. It has brought a paradigm change and created a new wave in the Tamil film industry and society. In the new wave film, there is a major shift in portraying passive Dalit characters to assertive Dalit heroes. It is very vivid in the change of dress code of Dalit characters in the new wave films. In the history of Indian society and cinema, there was a deprivation of Dalit communities from wearing clean clothes and being well-dressed, important status symbols, especially when dressing well or wearing white coloured clothes has always been associated with the upper castes. The Tamil movies also represented the Dalit communities with very dirty clothes and with an unrepresentable looks for many years. However, the new wave Tamil films made a paradigm shift by representing Dalits clean and well-dressed. In one of the new wave films, *Kabaali*, directed by Pa Ranjith and starring Rajinikanth as the Dalit hero was shown in Ambedkar's (the Dalit leader) three-piece suit and its connotative meaning for the Dalit communities. *Kabaali*'s three-piece suit symbolises liberation and prosperity that has transformed the Dalits from being identified as dirty and filthy according to caste rules of clothing. Both Benson Rajan and Shreya Venkatraman have

<sup>33</sup> Sreeram Gopalkrishnan, "Marginalised in the New Wave Tamil Film: Subaltern Aspirations in three films by Bala, Kumararaja and Mysskin," p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Udhav Nai, "Home Indian cinema fared this decade (2010-2019): From 'Attakathi' and 'Kabaali' to 'Pariyerum Perumal': How this decade changed caste representation in Kollywood," *The Hindu*, 31 December 2019, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/from-attakathi-and-kabali-to-pariyerum-perumal-how-this-decade-changed-caste-representation-in-kollywood/article30432918.ece>.

analysed the reason behind the dress code of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar. Though Mahatma Gandhi (1869~1948) and Dr Ambedkar (1891~1956) were contemporaries and part of the Indian freedom struggle, we could see the difference in their dress codes which had a significant meaning in it. One point from Gandhi's politics of non-cooperation against the British, rejecting western clothing, was a cause of his wearing lion's cloth, as a symbol of sacrificing his position and his upper caste background. In contrast, the Dalit community saw the loin cloth as a symbol of Brahmanical oppression and an imposed occupational attire for menial tasks. Therefore, Gandhian attire did not provide any upward mobility for the Dalits. However, Ambedkar's blue suit and red tie shown as a mark of education, respectability and upward mobility in the socio-economic conditions of the Dalit population.<sup>35</sup> Hence, clothes are said to express the very essence of the person who wears them and are perceived to have transformative and moral powers. These transformative powers are visible through Ambedkar's dressing in a three-piece suit, which is often viewed by Dalits as a means to escape from caste hierarchies. His attire was a political statement against the clothing hierarchy as he sought to break caste barriers that even imposed restrictions on clothing for Dalits. As the film *Kabaali*'s narration goes on, it shows the uplifting of *Kabaali* and represents the same through clothing which signifies Ambedkar's drive for self-representation beyond the caste consensus.

The new wave films, such as *Attakathi* (Cardboard Knife), *Madras* (the old name of the city Chennai) and *Kabaali*, have at least one frame dedicated to showing the colour blue as the sign of Dalit consciousness. Benson Rajan states that blue colour is seen as an important paradigm in the explicit representation of Dalit empowerment in films. Blue signifies liberty and it is constantly compared to the blue sky. Therefore, as it is popularly stated "under the blue sky everyone is believed to be equal", we find a non-discriminatory association with blue.<sup>36</sup> It was also the colour of Ambedkar's party, signifying egalitarian enlightenment in order to uplift the masses whose past has restrained their progress in a democratic society. For a Dalit, the blue colour is a symbol of a freedom struggle and a way of asserting one's power in the caste-dominated society.

In the most of Tamil movies, the Dalits were portrayed stereotypically as victims with empathy. The new wave Tamil films have created an alternative image of Dalits as assertive heroes determined to change the oppressive situation of Dalit community. It is very vivid in new wave Tamil films such as *Kabaali* (2016) and *Kaala* (Black, 2018) which are produced by Dalit director Pa Ranjith and starring by Rajinikanth, a superstar of Tamil cinema. Sreeram states that Rajinikanth's role as a low caste person in both the films *Kabaali* and *Kaala* is a milestone in the Tamil film industry. In the movie *Kaala*, Rajini questions the white-clad antagonist saying "you think because we are black we are dirty".<sup>37</sup> The subaltern role of Rajinikanth has had a great effect on the Tamil film industry to make many more movies based

<sup>35</sup> Benson Rajan and Shreya Venkatraman, "Fabric-Rendered Identity: A Study of Dalit Representation in Pa. Ranjith's *Attakathi*, *Madras* and *Kabaali*," p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Sreeram Gopalkrishnan, "Marginalised in the New Wave Tamil Film: Subaltern Aspirations in three films by Bala, Kumararaja and Mysskin," p. 6.

on assertive Dalit heroes giving voice to the suppressed Dalits on the screen. In the Tamil movie *Kabaali*, director Pa Ranjith changed the conventional pattern of presenting the hero from the dominant high caste as always praising his caste and pride. In the new wave films, Dalits have begun to adopt a language of caste pride and valour that echoes the films without naming or mentioning any caste. In the film *Kabaali* (2016), Rajinikanth reads Dalit books, speaks of Ambedkar, portraying a strong Dalit hero expressing the anger and a cry of anguish of the underprivileged and the downtrodden, though nowhere in the films the director mentions the term Dalit or low caste in the movie but the discourses ultimately pokes it. According to Devaki, in the Movie *Kaala* (2018) directed by Pa Ranjith and starring Rajinikanth, the director coloured the movie with blue and black, a symbolic representation of Ambedkar's and Periyar's philosophy which inspires the people of the Dalit community to fight for one's own freedom and equality from the caste-dominated society.<sup>38</sup> The director Ranjith used many signs and symbols, and metaphors which expressed Ambedkar's philosophy and voice against subjugation. In *Kaala*, Ranjith sets up Rajinikanth's home as a Dalit family by demonstrating Nana Patekar declining to drink water<sup>39</sup> there and showing a beef shop<sup>40</sup> near the house. This sort of specificity crushes the typical nourishment images and issues related with Dalit food habits and the notion that they are always meat-eaters. Ranjith's depiction of the housing situation of Dalits in *Kaala* features the misery and poverty in the lives of Dalits. The new wave films have dared to show the real situation of misery of the Dalits on the screen and have given voice towards the liberty and equality of the Dalits.

The movie *Pariyerum Perumal* (*God who Mounts a Horse*, 2018), directed by Mari Selvaraj, is an anti-caste drama depicting the humiliation and shame faced by the Dalit community, made in the southern region of Tamil Nadu. *Pariyerum Perumal* is the name of the local deity of the people of a lower caste in southern Tamil Nadu; the hero Pariyan of the film is named after the deity. This film is a masterpiece and an important milestone in Tamil cinema. In the history of Tamil cinema, the lives of subaltern groups have become invisible or misrepresented, or showcased in a way that justifies their place in the social order. However, the entry of Dalit directors Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj heralded a new cultural revolution within Tamil cinema, which systematically addressed this cultural invisibility and devaluation of subaltern groups. The director of *Pariyerum Perumal*, Mari Selvaraj, has taken a step ahead and has broken the established stereotypical cultural representation of Dalits in the movie. *Pariyerum Perumal* is a very strong film which invites the society to look into the prejudices in the name of castes and asks to rethink about the extreme forms of discrimination. The plot of the movie *Pariyerum Perumal* has plenty of metaphors and semiotics which spotlight the atrocities of dominant castes against the Dalit community in the society.

<sup>38</sup> V. Devaki, "Caste and Tamil Cinema: Now and Then," *Indian Ruminations* (February 2019): 1, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://www.indianruminations.com/contents/articles/caste-and-tamil-cinema-now-and-then-dr-v-devaki-chennai/>.

<sup>39</sup> It is the custom that people from higher castes do not drink water in the houses of the people of lower castes.

<sup>40</sup> Eating beef is considered to be the food habit of people from lower castes as people from higher castes do not consume beef in India.

The director shows the discrimination of Dalits in the classrooms of educational institutions. Like in most cases for the Dalits, classrooms as a space are not a space of equality but of varied forms of discrimination. There has been a custom even now in a few places that Dalit students are compelled to be seated at the back benches of the classrooms as the hero of the movie was seated at the back and not allowed to be seated at the front benches. The campus communities of most of the colleges reflect the caste-mindedness among the students by the formation of friends' groups based on caste. This film also reflects the affinity and animosity among the students based on caste in the college campus. The director shows that the prejudices based on caste are not only in the mind of the students but also among the principals and professors of the educational institutions. During the admission of Pariyan in the law college, the principal from higher caste tells Pariyan 'a guy like you should be lucky enough to join this college.' It means that 'a guy like you from a Dalit community though not worthy to join this college, yet you are lucky enough to join it.' It reflects the strong discriminatory mind of many principals who are from dominant castes over the people of lower castes. The law college principal, having understood Pariyan from lower caste, suspects him potential troublemaker. It reflects most of the educationalists from dominant castes considering the Dalit students as habitual offenders.

The intimate relationship of a Dalit boy with a higher caste girl vice-versa is considered to be unacceptable and punishable in the eyes of guardians of caste-pride. In this movie, the intimate relationship between the Dalit hero Pariyan and his classmate Jo (Jothi Mahalakshmi) from higher caste is regarded suspiciously by the family of Jo. There were many physical and mental violence on Pariyan and even an attempt to kill him. In the movie *Pariyerum Perumal*, the director shows the different aspects of honour killing by portraying a professional killer of an old man who has killed many couples who are involved in inter-caste love, and he also attempts to kill Pariyan.<sup>41</sup> The director casts his suspicions on most of mysterious suicidal deaths of the couples specially near the train tracks as nothing but honour killing. In this movie, the director shows the killing of hero's dog *Karuppi* (blacky) on the train tracks as a symbol of honour killing of many Dalits in similar fashion. Both the people of dominating high caste and the people of dominated low caste consider the domination and discrimination in the name of caste as a status quo in the Indian social structure which is transmitted tradition. Though this movie based on Dalit issues, yet it is accepted, appreciated and acclaimed by the people of different castes, classes, and creeds. The critics, people from the film industry, and media unanimously came forward to applaud the director for giving an inspiring message in an incredible way. One of the reasons is that the director has presented different issues on discrimination against Dalits in the day to day life without much exaggeration in most of the scenes. He does not just criticize the people of upper caste for the discrimination against the people of lower caste, but he makes the people aware of the inhumane actions accepted and transmitted for several years as a tradition without giving a second thought to them. Thus, the

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<sup>41</sup> Karthikeyan Damodaran, "*Pariyerum Perumal*: A Film That Talks Civility in an Uncivil, Casteist Society," *The Wire* (12 October 2018): 4, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://thewire.in/film/a-film-that-talks-civility-in-an-uncivil-casteist-society>.

new wave films have not only made the Dalits aware of the discrimination against them, but also has made the higher castes aware that the suppressing the Dalits is inhuman. Thus, the portrayal of discrimination against Dalits in a novel and creative way in recent movies, have brought a paradigm shift in the mindset of people of all castes from suppression of Dalits to liberation of Dalits.

## Conclusion

Tamil cinema has a great influence on every aspect of the Tamils, not only as a medium of entertainment for the masses but also a source of their values, beliefs, and life as a whole, reflecting the various ideologies, problems, social issues, politics, and cultural values of different times in the history of Tamil society. In a way, the subject matter of Tamil cinema depends on the paradigm shifts of ideologies in Tamil society. On the other hand, Tamil cinema, as a very powerful medium, is a tool to bring changes in Tamil society both positively and negatively. This paper analyses the interplay of the caste system in Tamil society and Tamil cinema. Discrimination based on caste is one of the fundamental and most profound problems in India since it determines one's status, lifestyle, profession, and one's entire life. Moreover, it is also the source of conflict and discrimination among people of different castes. Tamil cinema has produced many films which deal with the caste system in Tamil Nadu. There have been many paradigm shifts in the portrayal of caste in the history of Tamil cinema in terms of higher castes, lower castes, inter-castes, and subaltern classes and its impact on the society.

At the beginning of Tamil cinema, the movies focused on various elements and myths in religious literature which justified caste hierarchy and domination in Tamil society. However, the Dravidian Movement (1930s to 1950s) promoted the ideals of self-respect, equality, and justice among all the people without any regard to caste or creed. The movies which were made during the Dravidian Movement have been very critical of caste-discrimination in Tamil society and have promoted the importance of social equality. Hence, there was a paradigm shift from earlier movies focused on religious sentiments which accepted the caste hierarchy and discrimination as part of Tamil tradition. Dravidian films motivated the Tamil society to oppose caste hierarchy and question discrimination against lower castes.

The liberalisation of the Indian economy (1990s) paved the way to the commercialisation of Tamil cinema. Tamil cinema has shifted its orientation towards tapping into the sensibilities and tastes of this new film audience. During this period, films have been centred mainly on themes such as romance as well as institutional and bureaucratic inadequacies. In a sense, the films became a lot more sensual, intense, and explosive in their visual form. There was a paradigm shift on the genre of Tamil films from socially focused issues to the sensual needs of the market.

The dominance of the intermediate caste in the history of Tamil Nadu is reflected in the caste-based Tamil films. There were many movies produced glorifying the intermediate castes, expressing the caste honour and pride of landowning intermediate castes, and belittling or implicitly neglecting lower castes. The repeated portrayals relating to particular castes



reinforce the dominant social narratives and legitimize social institutions like caste hierarchy. On the one hand, caste-based movies have been a motivating factor for people of the same caste to come together for support in good and bad situations. The songs and punch dialogues of Tamil cinema praising dominant castes were used in different social functions as a means to gather the people of one's own caste. In a way, Tamil cinema has given a creative way of keeping the caste structure as a status quo in the society. On the other hand, it has become a source of casteism in the mind of the people causing caste-conflicts and violence between different castes. There are many incidents in which caste-based films have been the motivating element to dominate and discriminate the people of lower castes. There are many caste-based fan clubs for an actor of the same caste that have turned into political parties which try to promote the values and ideals of their own caste while neglecting the total welfare of Tamil society. Most of the time they have become the cause of chaos and hatred among the people of different castes in Tamil society. It is a vicious circle of the images of casteism reflected in the movies, and the movies creating a new space for casteism to live in society.

In most of the Tamil movies, the Dalits were presented as subservient, submissive, and dirty. Though there were a few Tamil movies which emphasized the importance of the social equality of the Dalits in a sympathetic manner, there were many Tamil movies which made use of the Dalits as a matter of laughingstock. The moviemakers adopt the collective consciousness of considering the Dalits as low in the society as a social fact and showed it on the screen as a social reality. It is very difficult to challenge and change the social facts as they are coercive and uniform in their effects. The social facts of discrimination, inequality, prejudice, and hostility faced by Dalit communities by dominant groups are shown in the movies as a normative function of their social reality. In a way, the movies have been a tool for the denigration of the Dalits. In the history of Tamil cinema, though there were many movies produced representing the social concerns of the Dalits, most of them were very subtle and passive. One of the reasons is that most of the high skilled personnel in the Tamil film industry such as producers, directors, camera operators, and editors were from high castes, and low-skilled workers with no say in the films hailed from the lower. However, during the recent past years, filmmakers from the Dalit community are representing the concerns of the Dalit community in a more authentic way. They have managed to raise critical questions on the stereotypical representations of the oppressed and the people of minority castes on the screen. The Dalit filmmakers encouraged many able assistant directors, technicians, and lyricists from similar backgrounds enabling them to produce very authentic Dalit-related movies on the screen. This helped anti-caste films to win both critical acclaim and commercial success. It has paved the way to produce movies which give voice to the voiceless subaltern people. It has brought a paradigm change and created a new wave in the Tamil film industry. In the new wave films, there is a major shift in portraying passive Dalit characters to assertive Dalit heroes. The new wave films have dared to show the real situation of the misery of the Dalits on the screen and have given voice towards the liberty and equality of the Dalits. The new wave films have not only made the Dalits aware of the discrimination against them, but also has made the higher castes aware that the suppressing of the Dalits is inhumane. The portrayal of discrimination against Dalits in a realistic way in recent movies, have brought a paradigm shift

in the mindset of people of all castes from suppression of Dalits to liberation of Dalits.

Thus, the portrayal of caste in Tamil cinema has had many paradigm shifts reflecting the caste consciousness of the Tamil society on the screen. On the other hand, movies also as a powerful medium have brought a change in society's views on caste related issues. Among various changes in Tamil cinema, there is one element which is very common in most of the movies, is that the emphasis and glorification of Tamil culture and its identity irrespective of differences among the people of different castes.

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