

Politicizing Art: Conceptualizing Representation and Agency of the Subaltern in Tamil Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to evaluate the cinema of the marginalized by exploring prominent Tamil movies to analyse the representation of the idea of emancipation of the marginalized. The paper juxtaposes ‘savarna gaze’ in filmography with the works of acclaimed Dalit Bahujan directors (whose works have led to mainstreaming of Dalit narratives and politicization of Dalit subjects through the utilization of symbolism of Dalit politics) in order to explore the political and aesthetic necessity of ‘descriptive representation’ and the ways in which representation signifies relations of power. From the critique of the prevalent development discourse in Kaala to an overtly Ambedkarite vision (of mobility through education) in Asuran, the paper attempts to lay out the desire to organize people for a revolutionary change that Tamil cinema brings out with the help of differing political ideologies (in the process, embodying the tendencies of the contemporary subaltern politics in order to reimagine the Dalit–Bahujan identity). The issue of ‘masculine’ Dalit cinema is flagged as part of concluding remarks: a section that also tries to acknowledge some recent initiatives that have added to the democratization resultant of social media and assisting in the opening up of the (online) public sphere.

KEYWORDS: *Tamil cinema, caste, representation, agency, oppositional gaze*

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The popularization of the mass culture or the so-called culture industry has proved to be a lucrative trade and has extended its influence into almost every crevice of society to the extent that the distinction between culture and society grew increasingly uncertain. Far from providing an antidote to power, culture has seemingly turned out to be deeply collusive with it.

Art and Resistance: Looking at the Frankfurt School

In the year 1936, the journal of the Frankfurt School published two essays concerning modern art. While Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' has been one of his most notable works, Theodore Adorno's 'On Jazz' has been severely criticized. Benjamin was concerned with how new technological art forms, in particular cinema, might revolutionize human sensibilities, and perhaps even make them more resistant to fascism. Benjamin hoped for its liberating potential; that photography and cinema would blast open the cultural tradition, and liquidate the power that the ruling class has exerted over the masses by means of the aura of authenticity, authority and permanence of works of art. Contrary to this, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer found in Hollywood cinema a kind of sexual disappointment: the culture industry, they wrote, 'endlessly cheats customers out of what it endlessly promises, especially in terms of sexual pleasure. In erotic films, for instance, everything revolves around coitus because it does not take place'. Similarly, jazz for Adorno seemed to promise liberation but only delivered ascetic denial. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that mass media 'infects everything with sameness'. Cinema, certainly in the hands of the Hollywood 'culture industry' that Adorno and Horkheimer excoriated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, has been an ideological tool for the domination of the masses rather than revealing to them their plight under monopoly capitalism. They went to the extent of making parallels between Hollywood and Hitler's Germany! Standardization and pseudo-individuality were among the salient traits of popular music in Adorno's eyes. Recognition of the familiar was the essence of mass listening, serving more as an end in itself than as a means to more intelligent appreciation. Once a certain formula was successful, the industry promoted and plugged the same thing over and over again (Jay, 1973). What

Benjamin hoped would be consciousness-raising has, quite often, been merely brain-numbing (Jeffries, 2016).

Whereas the Frankfurt School examined the power of mass media to seduce the public into compliance with authoritarian rulers or to be distracted by consumption, the Birmingham School (primarily Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall) emphasized a dialectical relationship between power and resistance, conceptualizing popular culture as a site where power is both established and destabilized. The Birmingham School followed the idea of Walter Benjamin who believed in the ability of media to provide the masses with the possibility of producing revolutionary art, as opposed to the top-down model of production and consumption proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer.

It is against this backdrop that the revolutionary aspect of Indian cinema in the context of caste is to be looked at. This article attempts to evaluate the cinema of the marginalized by exploring some of the most prominent Tamil movies in order to analyse the representation of the idea of emancipation of the marginalized. Anti-caste cinematic aesthetics not only problematize the caste consciousness of its spectators but also successfully inverts mainstream stereotypes and goes on to play an imminent role in the emancipatory struggles of the marginalized, thus becoming instrumental in political processes. Suraj Yengde has argued that such cinema ‘has the potential to offer performative resistance to the interwoven threads of the caste–capital nexus’ especially the ‘callous silence about the caste privileges enjoyed by most cinema practitioners, critics and commentators’ (Yengde 2018). It acts as a platform to challenge the dominance of the norms and values of the dominant castes and classes (Gramscian hegemony). Hence, following Gramsci, such anti-caste aesthetics shall be seen in terms of a ‘counterhegemony’ based on the values and norms of the subaltern sections and such struggle against hegemony must be appreciated in the larger context of revolutionary politics. The politicization of art to lay out the desire to organize people for a revolutionary change that Tamil cinema brings out with the help of differing political ideologies (in the process, embodying the tendencies of the contemporary subaltern politics in order to reimagine the Dalit– Bahujan identity) certainly seems to be an

interesting phenomenon. It is so primarily due to its social, political and ideological objectives and its ability to politicize wider sections, its capacity to question the existing hierarchical relationships of power and exploitation.

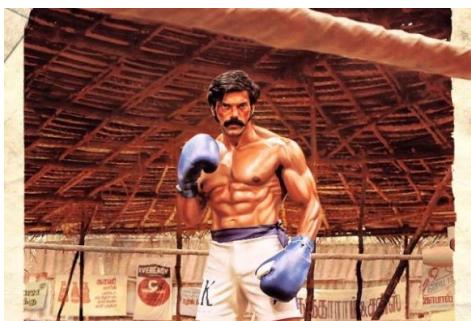
I

The article intends to analyse the shifting (and evolving) narratives of caste, by focusing on Tamil cinema (depicting a region known for its progressive welfare politics) because ‘cinema, as a sort of microcosm, provides a model for the construction of subject positions in ideology’ (Penley, 1983). Playing on Laura Mulvey’s acclaimed idea of the ‘male gaze’ of the camera (and its object always female: always implying a separation between the object and the subject of such gaze), we see a similar cinematic portrayal of Dalits as ‘objects’ in Indian cinema (a trend that thankfully seems to be changing, thanks to the likes of DBA filmographers). This explains the misrepresentation of Dalits by ‘woke’ Savarna liberals as aptly shown in *The Discreet Charm of Savarnas* (2020) directed by Rajesh Rajamani. It is a satire depicting the inherent hypocrisy of such woke attitudes which capture the search for actors looking like Dalits by Savarna short-film makers. The ‘gaze’ is also crucial, as argued by bell hooks, when considered ‘as confrontational, as a gesture of resistance, a challenge to authority’. She further posits, ‘even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency’ (hooks 1992). It thus becomes crucial to juxtapose ‘savarna gaze’ in filmography with the works of acclaimed Dalit Bahujan directors (whose works have led to mainstreaming of Dalit narratives and politicization of Dalit subjects through the utilization of icons and symbolism of Dalit politics as well as affirmation of their subjectivities). Such counter gaze or counter representation constitutes not just a depiction of newer kinds of subjects but also goes a long way in the reformulation of the groups’ identities. Additionally, this ‘politics’ of aesthetic representation, as Lisa Disch calls it, is imperative in problematizing the mainstream or accustomed depictions of marginalized communities (in order to ‘challenge hegemonic subject formations’) (Disch, 2016).

In this backdrop, it becomes crucial to view the emergence of DBA directors as well as courageous Dalit ‘heroes’ (interestingly all these roles have been played by non-Dalit actors and Indian cinema experiences almost complete absence of Dalit actors!) in the recent years (focus here being only on Tamil cinema) to counter the ‘aesthetic regime of stereotypical representation’. In her attempt to explore the possibilities of anti-caste aesthetics, Manju Edachira argues, ‘anti-caste aesthetics is an aspect of “becoming” in India. A becoming which is inevitable in the case of Dalits, where being itself is violated’ (Edachira, 2020). She also highlights the movement from the negative to the positive, i.e., from the preoccupation with misery and humiliation to the aesthetic exploration of the beauty of life and its inherent struggles. Further, she has argued that directors like Pa Ranjith and Nagraj Manjule try to move beyond the simple and straightforward categorization of their works as ‘Dalit cinema’ or ‘Dalit popular’ by problematizing the ‘mainstream’ by bringing in the discourse of caste within it.

One must view Tamil works from a certain historical perspective as it has witnessed a strong connection between politics and cinema over the last couple of decades. Director Pa Ranjith who identifies as an Ambedkarite is widely known for movies like *Kaala* and *Kabali* which are mainly about celebrating Dalit assertion. The recent jewel in his crown (and one of the nicer sports flicks in recent times) is *Sarpatta Parambarai* where the director is successful in portraying the life of the working class, their culture as well as an assertion of their identity in the region of North Madras by documenting the rich boxing culture of the area. What we have here is an ever-assertive Kabilan, which is interestingly another name of the Buddha, is posited against the antagonist Ramana: a clever choice of names to affirm Dr Ambedkar’s well-known hypothesis that Indian history is the history of conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism (Prabakaran, 2021). This is in accordance with the ‘politics of naming’ that has been central in Ranjith’s earlier works as well. For example, the name of the movie as well as Rajnikanth’s titular character *Kabali* (which is apparently a lower caste name in Tamil Nadu) is significant for the assertion, valorisation as well as recognition (reinforced by Kabali’s dialogue that he is not like the small characters in old Tamil movies by his name:

a dialogue delivered in a low angle shot, emboldening his charisma, thereby countering the stereotypical expectation of a Kabali). Similar is the case with *Kaala*, meaning black in Hindi. However, the protagonist is named so because black signifies the colour of labour/hard work. Manju Edaichar links it to the 'right to name' or embrace a name that was an integral aspect of Ambedkar's anti-caste politics, i.e., to embrace names that were not in accordance with the caste conventions. With a clever screenplay, distinguishing soundscape, and brilliant editing, its take on a range of socio-political issues (from the criticism of the Emergency to the ghettoization of Dalit communities in the urban outskirts to the social welfare Dravidian politics to the careful positioning of portraits of Periyar and Ambedkar to the empowerment of the oppressed), it comes off as an intense sports drama that successfully incorporates clan pride and caste dynamics within the sports milieu.



Poster of Sarppattai Parambarai, 2021 (Source: Google)

Such posters and stills highlight the usage of lower angle shots to capture the physicality and aura of a Kabilan that pierces the camera with his assertive, intense gaze and thus appears more glamorous and powerful!

Pa Ranjith's *Kaala* is crucial for its starting premise is the centrality of land, especially its centrality to the identity (especially for the immigrant workers who were pivotal in the very construction of the city) of the subaltern residing in the slums of Dharavi as it deals with the dispossession of the right of the urban poor to their land. It also seems imperative to juxtapose the presentation of Dharavi in *Kaala* with Mani Ratnam's *Nayakan* (the former intends to eulogize the black colour while the latter seems to fall into the mainstream trap of dressing the 'hero' Velu in all white). The syncretic, composite culture of Dharavi very clearly puts the main theme of harmony forward, as a

counter to the Hindutva politics of the right wing. In his EPW piece, Swagato Sarkar has argued that ‘the film deliberates on democracy beyond elections—a post-political society—and how Dalit politics would respond to capitalism and Hindutva’ (Sarkar, 2018). It once again carefully positions prominent Dalit Bahujan symbolism: be it the busts of Buddha and Ambedkar or the blue chairs and views the cleanliness drives of the state as a furtherance of the Brahminical binaries of purity and pollution. The ideological differences between Kaala and his son Lenin (rightly named so) is an analogy for the inescapable political differences between the Dalit Bahujan politics and that of the left where the former attacks the latter for trying to impose changes without understanding the intricacies of the social milieu and the lives of the slum dwellers, while at the same time not abandoning either of the two: no matter the differences between Kaala and Lenin, they hold on to one another till the end. The use of social media, the large-scale *langars*, the maintenance of larger solidarities across caste or religion, and the slogans of ‘No Land, No Vote’ increasingly bore a resemblance in my opinion to the 2021 farmers’ protests (certainly one of the most remarkable agitations in post-independence India). The movie also successfully reconceptualises what it is to be a hero: Rajnikanth’s entry song is sung in the third person, unlike the earlier depictions of the protagonist as ‘the larger than life Rajni’ (Edachira 2020). However, Sarkar is critical of the ultimate relapse of aspirational revolutionary politics into ‘populist subnationalist politics’. He also interestingly accuses Ranjith of not resisting ‘the technocratic gaze by continuously using drone shots of Dharavi, which converts the area into an abstract topography of the planners’.

Another noteworthy work is Vetrimaaran’s *Asuran* (2019) about Sivasamy’s journey (played by Dhanush) of struggle, oppression, loss and redemption, meanwhile focusing on the transformation of the protagonist’s vision: from the initial resort to violence as a response to caste oppression to realizing the Ambedkarite vision of education as the ultimate tool in the quest of emancipation. Riveting direction, graphic violence and action choreography render a sense of melancholy as well as vulnerability. The chants of

'Rise, Asuran, Rise' remind one of Dr Ambedkar's formulation of the Asuras and the Aryans in his work on The Untouchables.

II

Postcolonial studies use the term 'subaltern' to refer to marginalized populations. The term was coined by Antonio Gramsci in relation to cultural hegemony that excludes certain groups of people from the social and economic institutions of society. However, in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak is critical of Gramsci's conceptualisation of the subaltern as he fails to provide an account of the phased development of the subaltern. She argues that the 'colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous'.

Spivak's work on defining the subaltern and their ability to speak is certainly one of the best-known works associated with the Subaltern School. Spivak problematizes ethnocentrism which is commonly associated with the investigation of a different culture based on the (Western) "universal" concepts and frameworks. It is the (Foucauldian) nexus between knowledge and power that uses hegemonic vocabulary to define the 'other', which is seen purely as an object of study (though Spivak is critical of Foucault too). Such colonial project of knowledge extraction is augmented by the recognition of the Western scholar as objective and scientific in the process of 'constructing' the truth (which Spivak's work aims to 'deconstruct'). Such knowledge also constructs identity, in this case of the people of the third world whereby any deviance from the 'ideals' of the West is seen as mere aberrations.

Spivak takes the example of *Sati* which was outlawed by the British colonizers in an attempt to 'construct' the civility of the British vis-à-vis the barbarity of Indian men. *Sati* was seen as an ideology of self-sacrifice on the one hand and was categorized as murder on the other hand. Brown women were thus saved from brown men by white men (rendering women as having no agency altogether). She thus argues that the free will of the constituted sexed subject as female successfully disappeared in the process.

Spivak also criticised Foucault and Deleuze who posited that if given a chance, the oppressed (via solidarity through alliance politics) can speak and know their conditions.

In the context of erstwhile colonies marred with the circuit of epistemic violence of imperialist law and education, Spivak then raises the question: can the subaltern speak?

The representation of the subaltern becomes crucial when looked at in the context of the recent movie *Jai Bhim*. Again, in Spivak's work, there are two senses of the term representation: one is representation as 'speaking for' as in politics, and the other is representation as 're-presentation' as in arts and philosophy. *Jai Bhim* is based on real life incidents where innocent tribal men were wrongfully incarcerated and brutally tortured by the Tamil Nadu police. It is only through the hard work and perseverance of Advocate Chandru (the protagonist from a better-off caste and class, with a conscience) that justice prevails in the end. The whole idea that the marginalized can only be represented by a 'saviour' (for the lack of a better word, certainly), that it is only through the benevolence of a relatively privileged man that they can access justice makes one feel uneasy.

The question of political representation, i.e. who is the right representative is also pertinent as one intends to take into consideration the interplay between political and aesthetic representation. What then becomes crucial is not simply who represents or speaks for a particular section (the "we"), 'but to interrogate how that "we" is pictured and to analyze the possibilities and constraints on action that such picturing produces' (Disch, 2016).



A still from Jai Bhim (2021) Source: Google

The initial poster too received ample flak that depicted a larger-than-life Suriya with a miniature size depiction of the tribals. While taking into account the criticism, the later poster showed him standing alongside the tribal 'subjects'. The above presented still clearly shows the way in which top angle shots and selective lighting (and darkening) are used in the movie to minimise the 'voiceless' whose cause is taken by the righteous

protagonist. This is nothing but stereotyping of the tribals and hero worship of Suriya's Chandru. The very portrayal of the saviour complex of the protagonist as an emancipator might seem very problematic. The question is not merely 'can the subaltern speak?', it is rather that if they speak 'will they be heard?' and the concept of agency then takes a much more complex shape.

However, such an argument can be critiqued for emphasising a purely autonomous domain of the politics of the subaltern (as was done by the subaltern school theorist) which derided the Marxist notion of mass mobilisation (especially in the case of the peasantry) on the basis that 'the social origins of the personnel involved in the task of mobilisation are "elite" or that the claim of mobilisation is itself a myth' (Mukherjee, 1988). However, the Marxist framework emphasises the specific historical context and does not simply characterise an 'outsider' as being anti-subaltern. What rather matters is the ideological and political contributions made by the 'outsider' as well as her commitment to the social or class struggle.

III

This section deals with the problem of reification resultant of what has been termed as the politics of presence by problematizing the Recognition/ Redistribution debate that unfolded between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler. The basic premise of the debate regarding the demand for recognition and redistribution is that the demands and strategies for one element block and cancel out the modalities for the other mode of justice so that each demand thus becomes a standalone demand.

According to Nancy Fraser, the cultural politics for recognition has resulted in the blocking of demands for redistribution and further complicated the differentiation/de-differentiation dilemma. It has consequently led to the twin problems of 'reification of identity' (whereby identities come to be seen as natural and given, and not constructed) and the displacement of class questions. The kind of essentialisation that is entailed in the politics of presence tends to naturalize historically constituted identities by claiming the identities as those that cannot be breached (Gudavarthy, 2018).

It is through the lens of Fraser's problem of politics of recognition and assertion by valorisation leading to the reification of historically constructed identities that one questions the DBA demand for retention of the specificity of their identity. In such circumstances, recognition cannot be demarcated from prejudice, thereby making social mobility extremely difficult. Politics of presence then seems to cancel politics of dignity.

Fraser suggests that misrecognition must be fought without entailing reification, and thus calls for 'politics of deconstruction' which would ensure instability, open-endedness, multiplicity and fluidity of identities. It would enable a movement away from fixity, towards identifying the historical contingencies of identity formation as well as the unstable relation with other identities.

However, there are plenty of shortcomings with such theorization. Fraser herself seems to be treading towards the normative path here. Also, the idea of deconstruction seems workable when seen in the context of gender and sexuality, but is it really workable with respect to caste or religion? For instance, do Dalits even have the real-time choice of deconstruction? In absence of such choice and flexibility, it is here that counter-narratives of Dalits become increasingly necessary (which would be discarded by Fraser as the reification of their identity due to her disparaging view of identity politics, as something that hinders the solidarity of the proletariat and delays the toppling of the capitalist system). Anne Phillips has rightly argued that Fraser is looking for cultural politics without culture!

Judith Butler criticized Fraser for reducing culture to a secondary place, as has been done by conservative Marxists who reduce identity to being factional and particularistic in their quest to replace it with the universality of class. Unlike Fraser (and Chantal Mouffe's idea of a 'rainbow coalition'), Butler argues that differences cannot be erased, and thus solidarity between different social groups does not mean synthesis or consensus, it is rather about sustaining conflict in politically productive ways. She tries to break the binary between cultural identity and materiality (Fraser's 'bivalent categories') by arguing for the 'materiality of culture' such that the social differences are not external but internally and materially connected. This relationality provides the very condition for

solidarity. According to her, Fraser tries to ‘redomesticate differences’ under the banner of class politics.

The question again comes back to how the DBA can fight against the stigma of their identity while simultaneously retaining the specificity of their identity and if recognition or assertion can be separated from prejudice. However, the counter question to be posed here is if the assertion of DBA as DBA leads to continued prejudice, should such fixity not be attributed to the gaze of the dominant groups. It thus seems imperative for the DBA to engage in their own meaning-making processes and create their own counter-civil sphere via cultural resignification to provide new alternate imaginations.

Concluding Remarks

What is of particular interest, in my opinion, is to take into consideration a different facet of the ‘reification’ of the DBA identity, i.e. the essentialising of the identity shadows the questions of intersectionality. This must be understood in terms of the absence of prominent (read: mainstream) female Dalit directors /filmographers (a fact that is not usually brought to the fore while eulogizing the rising prominence of several DBA filmmakers: Dalithood is thereby ‘masculinised’, to borrow Rege’s term), primarily because ‘Dalit women talk differently’. The assertion of female Dalit voices, as Sharmila Rege has argued in her seminal essay, is imminent to the discourse of gender and caste (Rege, 1998). It thus makes the Dalit female standpoint crucial even in the realm of cinema. However, it is important to point out that Rege is critical of Gopal Guru’s straightforward argument that social location and experience determine one’s perception of reality and thus representation of Dalit women’s issues by non-Dalit feminists seems less valid (Guru, 1995). She rather intends to avoid the narrow scope that ‘direct experience based authenticity’ and the resultant ‘narrow identity politics’ entail and moves towards the idea of ‘reinventing’ and ‘revisioning’ oneself as a Dalit feminist.

We thus witness the portrayal of the DBA woman as an object of sympathy (Jai Bhim being the poster boy of such a common, misplaced ‘gaze’). It might then be felt that Dalit cinema is turning out to be a masculine venture, especially given the difficulty of finding a Dalit woman’s ‘voice’ in filmmaking. However, this is not to say that Ranjith’s

women characters too are simply confounded in victimhood, we do certainly see some assertion, some agency. It becomes crucial to acknowledge the sincere efforts of independent filmmakers, particular mention here of The Blue Club which is run by Priyadharsini, and is dedicated to providing space to marginalised women's voices and adding weight to the Dalit women's movement. It seeks to challenge the outright Brahminical patriarchy associated with filmmaking, be it the absence of space for women's ideas, or the sets being dominated by men, or the harassment that is faced by Dalit women from men as well as upper caste women. Initiatives like The Blue Club help in the creation of documentaries or short films that are written, directed, and conceptualised by women, thereby enriching the Dalit feminist lens.

With respect to Dalit women's voices, while filmography presents a dismal picture, the radical music of Ginni Mahi seems relevant for such counter-culture due to her successful incorporation of Dalit cultural symbols, practices, and icons, especially drawing on Dr Ambedkar's ideas (though music is certainly beyond the scope of this paper). Ginni's *Danger Chamaar* comes to be a quintessential example of the oppositional gaze. It is sure to be celebrated as a much-needed intervention in the quest of assertion and valorization of the Dalit identity, while simultaneously aspiring for an equal society, reminding one of Dr Ambedkar's often-cited quote: "Our is a battle; Not for wealth, not for power, Ours is a battle; for freedom; For reclamation of human personality." The last remark that I would like to make is with respect to the democratizing role that social media has provided by providing platforms that assist in the opening up of the (online) public sphere (in Habermas' sense of the term). One can certainly problematize the extent of such 'democratization', but that is not what I intend to take up here. The most recent case in point is the short video app *Jai Bheem* which acts as a platform for artists especially from socially marginalized communities to become a part of the entertainment industry. Its motto is to 'create a unique profile for yourself and earn money and fame all along'. Such interventions become crucial to challenge the stronghold of the *Savarna* elite and their prejudices, that act as gatekeepers for the art industry by guarding it via class

and social networks as well as nepotism, thus paving way for greater participation, representation and diversity thereby strengthening the movement for social justice.

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