

The Visual Representation of Caste: Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* and Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to understand the visual representation of caste in two Tamil films: Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018). The paper argues that the directors of these films have used colours and other visual elements in a systematic way in their representation of caste in Tamil society. *Kaala* speaks on the land rights of Dalits and their cultural resistance, and *Pariyerum Perumal* is an anti-caste cinema highlighting the intersectionality of love and caste. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part draws on semiotic theory to understand the use of colours in cinema and looks at how different colours function in the two films under discussion to suggest caste distinctions. Against the background of the use of colours in the Tamil cultural context, the paper analyses specific scenes to argue that colours such as black, blue, white, and saffron work as part of a code in these films. The second part of the paper describes the use of symbols, images, and myths to represent the plight of oppressed caste communities and their experience of emotions such as fear, joy, and sorrow. These have been viewed with reference to the ideas and philosophies of Dr B. R. Ambedkar and E. V. R. Periyar, along with other nuances of caste. The third part examines and interprets the reactions of spectators to the representation of caste through colours, symbols, and images in these films. The spectators view them as caste films, and the body of the oppressed has been subverted. The spectators understand the visual representation of caste through aesthetics of Dalits and other visual signs such as torture, resistance, wound, urination, and humiliation are analysed.*

KEYWORDS: *Tamil cinema, caste, code, semiotics, colours, images, symbols, visuals, affect*

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Introduction

Nationalism is an integral part of India. Likewise, cinema influences everyday practices where caste is an integral part of living. Cinema is also an effective tool that includes print media, television, electronic media, films, and so on. The medium of cinema depends on signs, including words, images, symbols, and the non-verbal world. Cinema has become a manifestation of society, polity, and culture in the contemporary world to showcase caste hegemony, the privileged classes, and a capitalist mode of production in the neo-liberalization era. Indian cinema fails to represent Dalits' inclusiveness and their resistance even in the 21st century and is inherently a representation of caste hegemony and the exclusiveness of the Dalit's cultural and political identity even after the 75 years of Independence. Suraj Yengde (2018) says that "Indian Brahmanical academia, in the eyes of the dominant West, succeeds in presenting itself as marginalized; on the other hand, it commits un(ac)countable atrocities by evading the Dalit discourse and hiding the self-privilege in an oppressive caste society" (507).

Now, the phenomena of cinema have changed, and the space of cinema accommodates the assertion of Dalit cultural identity and their social consciousness. Pa. Ranjith says,

I will not accept that a film is just something you watch and leave. It is a mass medium that connects with every layperson. Cinema is how parties are born, how leaders are created, how a movement is fanned. It can be used by people to claim their freedom. And I use it against the Brahmanical system (qtd in Velayutham and Devadas 54).

In India, various cinema industries can be found, especially in South India, in the languages of Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu. Tamil cinema plays an indispensable role in shaping the cultural, social, and political everyday practices of Tamil society.

Tamil Politics, Cinema, and Caste

Robert L. Hardgrave says, "Film has become progressively pervasive in almost every aspect of Tamil society and perhaps most obviously in political life" (289). From the inception of Tamil cinema, for instance, film industry-cum chief ministers of Tamil Nadu such as M.G. Ramachandran, J. Jayalalithaa, and Mu. Karunanidhi had successfully begun their life in the cinema industry and succeeded in politics too. From

the Dravidian movement, Tamil cinema has been used as an object to represent Tamil society's political and social consciousness. The Tamil cinema industry has continued to adapt the nuances, tactics, and subjects in the films in response to the current geopolitical environment. Through cinema, the cultural phenomena of society can be captured with pictures of caste hierarchy, its historical and structural foundation, power politics, and so forth.

Pre-1950s Tamil cinema narratives were about the higher castes only. For the first time, C.N. Annadurai's (former chief minister of Tamil Nadu) film script *Nallathambi* (1949) narrates how a lower caste student pursues higher education, then returns home and speaks about social equality.

Mostly, in Tamil films until 2010, intermediate and lower castes have been shown as villains. The Brahmin caste is always portrayed as a saviour of the masses, the oppressed and the marginalized, for instance, *Ore Oru Gramathiley* (1987), *Gentle Man* (1993) and sometimes, intermediate castes too. Brahmins and other forward castes used movies to impose their hegemony on the Dalits. In opposite to this, both the chosen movies, the protagonists are from the Dalit castes. With the arrival of directors such as Pa. Ranjith, Vetri Maaran, Mari Selvaraj, and several others, an evident radical shift has been seen in the subjects of Tamil cinema. For Anand, Indian film "continues to be a major site which sustains and nurtures the caste system and Brahmanical social order" (qtd in Damodaran and Gorringer 8). There are films with titles that bear caste names like *Devar Magan* (1992), *Chinna Gounder* (1992), and so forth, and also various films are a glorification of a particular caste and its assertiveness, such as *Kizhakku Cheemayile* (1993), *Bharathi Kannamma* (1997), *Sundarapandian* (2012), and so forth.

Depiction of Caste through Colours

For any visual representation, a sign is a vital factor in understanding the meaning of a concept. Charles Sanders Peirce's ideas of the sign, which is divided into *iconic*, *index*, and *symbolic*. Brian Curtin's *Semiotics and Visual Representation* discusses the iconic sign bears a physical resemblance to its meaning, and index signs bear a resemblance to abstract things, emotions, ideas, and so forth. In contrast, the symbolic sign bears no resemblance to the material or mental form associated with the concepts, and it is culturally learned or conventions of language (53). Mari Selvaraj and Pa. Ranjith visually used these three types of signs to represent caste. Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal*

(2018, Indian Tamil language film) is an anti-caste drama, and the protagonist's name is Pariyan (Kathir). *Pariyerum Perumal* can be translated into English as "God Perumal, who mounts on a horse". If you look at the village in *Pariyerum Perumal*, it is located on the outskirts of the village of the caste-Hindus settlement called oor, the central part of the village, and Dalits have to walk a few kilometres to reach the bus stand. It visualizes inter-caste love amidst the non-Brahmanical caste hegemony in the regions of Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi of southern Tamil Nadu. In Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018), Rajinikanth plays the lead role as the leader of the oppressed caste, through whom the director Pa. Ranjith depicts the assertion of land rights by the lower caste migrants, set in the Dharavi slums of Mumbai. *Kaala* explores politics, social justice, Dravidian politics and anti-caste political thought, and the will of collective political resistance. *Kaala* symbolizes black, time, and the god of death. Throughout the movie, the protagonist Kaala carries out either visually or orally Dr Ambedkar's and E. V. R. Periyar's ideas.

This part analyses how the castes are interpreted by the hues of black, blue, white, and saffron. Colour does not possess or convey any meaning of its own, but it is often influenced by and associated with the cultural contexts in which it is depicted and generated. Colour contrasts were used in both Mari Selvaraj and Pa. Ranjith's films to describe the attributes of caste distinction with its inequalities, and other visual clues have been used to portray caste. Both the filmmakers marked the visualization of caste by applying various codes and their encoded meanings in Tamil socio-cultural products, where certain colours are assigned to certain meanings. Christian Metz says that "the various codes and sub-codes of film have different minimal units and mentions some of these: the shot (*or edeme*); the photogram (still frame); and the *cineme* (filmed objects or *iconeme*)" (qtd in Herbert Eagle 309). The meanings of colours are produced in a cultural context where the sign determines the nature of the meaning.

Louis Antony, a Periyarist, argues that the notion of the colour black has been changed after the inception of Thanthai Periyar's ideas and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu. In 1945, the DMK's conference at Tiruchirapalli adopted a black flag with a red circle in the centre. Louis Antony says,

Black represented deprivations and the indignities to which the Dravidians were subjected to under Hindu religion milieu. Red stood for the determined efforts to dispel the ignorance and blind faith among the people and to liberate them materially and mentally from all kinds of exploitation, especially of social and cultural (17).

After Periyar and DMK's inception, the notion of black was resistant to the Varna system and was a mark of protest against caste hegemony in Tamil Nadu.

The films provide visual representations of abstract and obscure concepts easily. Visual contrasts such as blue, black, and red represent Kaala (Karikaalan) throughout the film as he appears and the milieu too. It is a symbolic representation of B.R. Ambedkar, E.V.R. Periyar and Karl Marx, and their revolutionary struggle against the Savarna system. The antagonist, Haridev Nabinyakar (Nana Patekar), is visualized in white clothes and his surrounding milieu is covered with purity and saffron colour. It is a symbolic representation of Raman, a truly Savarna hegemony of caste. Hari Dada is a symbol of Hindu nationalism where caste hierarchy is the foundational structure for Hinduism. Throughout Kaala, Pa. Ranjith visually proposed the alternative form of Hinduism—Buddhism. Dr Ambedkar's *Buddha and Future of His Religion* (1950) compares the four founders of religions such as Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and Krishna, and he embraced Buddhism and defended it. Hari Dada is keen on development to cleanse the Dharavi slums and implement the cleanliness campaign of India and sign boards like "I am a patriot", "I will clean this country", and "I will make this country clean and pure". Words like pure and clean have been emphasized throughout the movie, and it is visualized when it comes to Hari Dada. Pa. Ranjith articulates how the idea of patriotism is linked to the oppressed classes, and Hari Dada tries to coerce all sorts of power to evacuate the Dharavi slums through conciliation, bribery, and force.



Figure 1: Top left, *Kaala* visualized entirely in black. Top right: *Kaala* and his milieu in blue. Bottom right: Visualization of the Vedic god and Brahminical devotion. Bottom left: Hari Dada symbolizes the purification of white. Source: Stills from *Kaala*.

In addition, the spectrum of the shot visually represented contrasts and paradoxes in terms of colours. The killing of a dog, *Karuppi*, is depicted in the first scene of *Pariyerum Perumal*. The dog is black in hue and is a victim of higher caste pride and the cry of the oppressed soul. A dog gets cremated in the same way as a human being. When *Pariyan* is in a depressed state, haunting images of the blue dog appear in the eyes of him to solve problems or remind him of Ambedkar's ideals. The *Karuppi* (name of a black dog) song visualizes the life of the oppressed and metaphor for every oppressed soul, and in that song, most of the people are half-nude and the spectators are made to feel that it is a caste movie. Even in the song *Vanakka Vanakkamunga* (Salute in Tamil – Gender neutral), the milieu, the half-nudity, and colour variations vividly show it as a visualization of the oppressed only and Dr Ambedkar's icons were presented.

Thus, these two directors used colours like black and blue, as well as white and saffron, to distinguish caste subtleties from the beginning to the end in both films. Other aspects, such as characters' apparel, the backdrop milieu, and other factors, are used as specific caste configurations. White and saffron, on the other hand, are used to represent the Brahminical hegemony of caste. Both the directors see colour as a symbol

of resistance, an act of rebellion against caste inequality and a representation of the oppressed classes.

Description of Caste through Symbols, Images, and Myth

A scenic narrative that captures the minute nuances of small objects is known as the visual. The visual representation could reflect unspoken dialogues and feelings, and the moving scene captures a lot. In the selected films, what are the caste paradigms that are visualized? In terms of visuals, how do we interpret Dalit assertions? What role does caste play in the representation of visual perceptions? In both films, the questions are answered through the use of symbols, images, and myths.

Cinema has the ability to transform symbols into moving images. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy says that “symbolism is the art of thinking in images” (qtd in Levine 1). Charles K. Levine (1974) says that “symbols are imprinted on the human mind and the actuality of human visual recognition or perception” (15). In film semiotics, Bill R. Scalia says, “filmic images are always iconic” (50). In a sequence of shots, the cinema is the smallest single unit of meaning assigned to the various signs on the screen. Bill R. Scalia (2012) has observed Christian Metz and says, “Shots (or sequence of shot) begin to constitute sequence of meaning, which evolve into Syntagmas that are, for Metz, comprised self-contained units of meaning” (48). This is clearly evident from the meeting between Kaala, the protagonist, and Hari Dada, the antagonist, who refuses to drink water from Kaala’s home. It is labelled as prejudice based on caste. It exists not only in Tamil Nadu, but also wherever Hinduism is practised. Caste Hindus use water as a marker for caste inequality in the name of purity. In the opening scenes of *Pariyerum Perumal*, “caste and religion are against humanity” is screened. Christian Metz says, “in the sign system in filmic discourse, the filmic signifier is the image [visual images] and its signifier is ‘what the image represents’” (qtd in Oyama 60).



Figure 2: The lower castes drink and take a bath in the pond (top left). The higher castes urinate on the same pond (Top right). The higher castes urinate on Pariyan (bottom). Source: Stills from *Pariyerum Perumal*.

The lower castes used to drink water from the same pond that the higher castes urinated in. In another scene, Pariyan is ridiculed, humiliated, and urinated on by the upper castes while attending Joe's (heroine) sister's wedding. Both are showcases of caste hegemony that prevail in society. Urinating on Pariyan suggests that Dalits are being suppressed to sustain caste hegemony.

A higher caste imprisoned Pariyan inside a room after peeing. Pariyan knocks on the door to come out of the room. The knocking door is a symbol of knocking the caste hegemony and frustration against the hierarchical order by which it is piercing through the consciousness of the spectators. Urination carries the connotation of being ugly, filthy, and untouchable, and it is also an act of embarrassment. Throughout India, various instances have been reported in daily newspapers—Changali Wala Village, Punjab (Prashar 2019), Charu district, Rajasthan (Mukherjee 2022), Karnataka Mudigere Taluk (Dalit forced to drink 2021), Krishnagiri, Tamil Nadu (Kumaran 2015), and other states where urination on Dalits was witnessed. It should not be seen as one person urinating on another individual. Urination on Pariyan is not the result of enmity between Pariyan and the higher caste individual, but a structural enmity between the communities of the higher castes and the lower castes.

When Pariyan's father goes to the college, he is humiliated and insulted by Pariyan's classmates and the upper castes force him to run half-naked. It suggests that the imposition of caste is not merely ideological, but the bodies of the oppressed castes are also subjected to ill-treatment. The subject of nudity comes in various scenes throughout the film, but being compelled to run half-nude distinguishes it from the others.



Figure 3. Left: Parai, a musical instrument, takes centre stage (a still from the song of *Urimayai meetpom* from *Kaala*). Right: Thavil is played during the rituals of Karuppi, a dog. Source: Stills from *Pariyerum Perumal*.

Discrimination in the representation of music and dance forms can be found since the advent of Tamil cinema. Brahminical music and dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music take centre stage. Therukoothu (street folk drama) was developed to represent the subaltern Tamil populace, and they were sidelined and marginalized. In both films, there is a strong folk music culture. Folk music is naturally found in people's daily lives, yet it does not have an organized structure, and it continues to exist from generation to generation. Pariyan's father performs a folk dance in the street. In Tamil Nadu, folk art is often associated with the poor and the underprivileged. In Ranjith's first movie, *Attakathi*, the song "*Adi En Gana Mayil*" for the funeral rites and parai, a musical instrument, was used, and in *Pariyerum Perumal*, for the rituals of a dog (karuppi), the thavil is used in the funeral. Valayappati Subramanian, one of the thavil vidwan (a person who is an expert for one of the barrel shaped percussion instrument, thavil from Tamil Nadu) said, "parai is played for funerals and thavil at auspicious functions, so the two cannot go together" (Olivannan).

The music of the parai and the thavil was used by both directors to commemorate death. There is a hierarchy in music too, and it is connected to symbols, caste, and culture. The word *Parai* in Tamil means to tell or speak. And the parai folk drum is predominantly associated with the untouchables of Tamil Nadu. Once, the parai was used only to symbolize impurity and degraded by upper castes and played for funeral rites and inauspicious ceremonies and the thavil was played on auspicious occasions. Both the directors tried to break this myth. At present, Nagaraj refers to Dalit relationships with the parai as a reference to the “cultural memory” of caste (qtd in Gorringer 5).

The person who follows the ideologies associated with saffron and white never plays musical instruments like the parai, which is actually made up of calf’s skin. Initially, the parai was played for funerals and to symbolize the denigration of Dalits. At present, the parai is used as a symbol of Dalit emancipation and asserts Dalit identity. Gorringer poses the question, “who speaks for the community?” He also questions the acceptability of the negative symbol as a positive identity, especially when it is still used as instruments that are being played at the funerals of people, predominantly by Dalit”(Viduthalai, P., et al 8).



Figure 4: Top left: Pariyan was beaten by the police while half-drowned. Top right: Police beat up people who were half-drowned on 23 July 1999 (courtesy Manjulai Massacre Archives). Bottom: 23 July, Memorial day of the Manjulai Massacre poster. Source: Stills from *Pariyerum Perumal*.

According to Herbert Eagle (1976), the shot is a basic component of a film’s language because of the following comparison and distinctiveness: visual images and

icons to real-life incidents, the sorts of photographs that resemble earlier taken images, and images of the films compared to a different time period (308–309). With regard to the Manjulai Massacre, this concept is pertinent — particularly images evoke memories of earlier real life incidents.

The song in the film, *Yaar nee* (who am I), was employed intertextually to remind us of the Manjulai Massacre, in which Dalit people were killed by the state bureaucracy. Pariyan gets beaten up by a cop while half-drowned, as shown in Figure 4. The scene alludes to the Majolai Massacre in a symbolic way. On 23 July 1999, the Manjulai tea plantation workers staged a protest on the River Thamirabarani in front of the Tirunelveli collectorate, Tamil Nadu, to demand increased salaries and the release of the earlier arrested tea plantation workers.

The people were forcefully lathi-charged and forced to rush into the water. This incident took the lives of 17 labourers. Dr T. Krishnaswamy, the founder of the Dalit political organization *Puthiya Tamizhagam* led the protest. The Manjulai incident was reported by the Human Rights Watch (1999) as violence against the Dalits (untouchable community) in Tamil Nadu as well as Dalit tea plantation workers. The Tamil poster demands the allocation of land for a memorial pillar for those who died in the Manjulai Massacre. From the facts, it is clearly understood that the Manjulai Massacre was a heinous act against Dalits.

In the same song, dangerous animals such as snakes, cats, scorpions, dogs, and centipedes are employed visually to symbolize the Dalit castes' ferociousness, rage, and oppression. At first, Pariyan was silent in character, but after smearing blue on his face, Pariyan got the courage to fight against the caste structure and become more vibrant in his attitude, behaviour, and actions. It implies that the ideas of Ambedkar provide formidable strength to fight against the caste structure of Tamil society.

Pariyerum Perumal narrates caste-killing, which was physically visualized by numerous disturbing pictures of dead bodies appearing in various locations, such as railway tracks, sewage, hanging from a tree, and bodies floating on the river, the pond, and so forth. All of the deceased bodies were splattered in blue. The director chose the colour blue for the dead bodies as a symbol of Dr B. R. Ambedkar's anti-caste activities. On the other hand, while the corpses are inert, Mari Selvaraj used the Dalit bodies as a weapon to fight against caste tyranny. The filmmaker's intention is to visualize these

images in their political and cultural context. Alex Pott writes that “images and objects are not only mediated by conventions, but meaning is largely activated by cultural conventions” (qtd in Curtin 52).

An old man keeps Pariyan’s unconscious body on the railway tracks, and sprinkles a beer mixture on him. Haunting images of the blue dog, or the illusion of the blue dog, arise, particularly when the dead Karuppi reappears, forcing Pariyan to rise before the train arrives. It alludes to an inter-caste marriage; E. Ilavarasan, a Dalit boy married Divya, a Vanniyar caste girl, and his dead body was found on the railway track of Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu, in 2013. It is suspected that caste fanatics killed him. Here, Pariyan has survived caste violence. The blue colour symbolizes Dr Ambedkar’s resistance against the Brahmins and other allied castes. Retired IPS officer and leading Dalit activist, S. R. Darapuri, said, “Blue in another shade is also color of the sky which shows vastness and that was the vision of Baba Saheb” (Why the Colour Blue). Throughout the film, pictures of stalwarts like B.R. Ambedkar and E.V.R. Periyar’s iconic photographs are visualized. It cannot be seen that just visual icons are represented in the film, but it makes the spectators revisit the ideology of both the leaders. In *Kaala*, for instance, the opening scenes—the iconic representation of Gautama Buddha, Jyotirao Phule, and Dr B.R. Ambedkar—were drawn in the wall paintings.



Figure 5: Left: A person gives money to one who is half-naked. Right: The body of Dalits tortured in the public sphere. Source: Stills from *Kaala*.

The early moving scene captures the whole narration of *Kaala*: the person who sits to give money to the half-naked person and another person who holds hands together and bends down in front of those who give money. The half-naked person's body and hands are tied to a small pole using a rope. He was tortured severely in the public sphere. In both instances, the person who gives money and beats another person is dressed up and decorated. It visually symbolizes the caste discrimination and economic exploitation prevalent in the hierarchical Indian caste society.

Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* begins with the description of the two worlds: portraying the masses of the marginalized who struggle to get single meals a day and their practices of everyday lives in Dharavi slums, where, in one room, more than ten people live. And on the other hand, it introduces the corporate world where the construction of big bungalows and their abundant wealth is described visually. It is there in all cities in India, such as Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai, and Chennai. The state ordered the demolition drive and threatened to wipe out Dhobighat from the slums of Dharavi, Mumbai, and the Dhobi community protested against the state's removal. The Dhobi community is categorized (Pareet, or Dhobi, including Gujarati Dhobi) in the central list of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) for the state of Maharashtra and their caste list entry number is 111.

In one instance, *Kaala*'s youngest son writes an application for water shortage, but it does not yield results, while the elder son, Selva, breaks a pipe to create water facilities. It symbolizes how long Dalits can be subjugated in the name of caste and hints that they should retaliate for their social, political, and cultural subjugation for a long-lasting period. Pa. Ranjith has conveyed that non-violent protest will not lead to success. Even constitutional rights will not be given to Dalits, but they should grab their rights through a protest culture or raise their voices against the state.

As Zelliott argues that the iconic photographs such as Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, EVR Periyar, Kanshi Ram, Shah Maharaja of Kolhapur, etc. used to remain as an identity of contemporary Dalit imagery and remembering historical struggles against caste system in the past (80). Hari Dada builds a world of Manu (Brahminical Ideology) and the portrayal of saffron colour can be found throughout the film and he is a representation of Hindu nationalist discourses.

In an interview with Cinema Viktan, Mari Selvaraj said: “*Pariyerum Perumal* ends with a three-person conversation, and I tried to make the presence of three people, even if they are absent, therefore as a filmmaker, I made it as two glasses and a flower” (Translated by me). The concluding scene of *Pariyerum Perumal* sparks a lot of debates among common folk, intellectuals, and Tamil academia. Particularly, one shot of the frame, two tumblers were separated by a flower. Glasses are visualised to symbolise equality, and placing a white flower in the middle of glasses is a symbol of love, hints love conceding everything, and loving each other can be a way to abolish the caste system. Two glasses, one filled with tea (made of milk) and the other one with black tea (made of tea leaves). Glasses are the same, but what they hold is entirely different. Similarly, humans are the same, but they differ in what is filled in their minds. It reminds Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, “Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind” (p.68).



Figure 6: Left: A scene from *Pariyerum Perumal* shows Pariyan, his father and Joe. Right: Three people represented by objects of glass and a white flower.

Both Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj attempted to reconstruct the myth of caste. As I understand, Myth is a component of society’s cultural and knowledge production. This knowledge production is constructed through individual or group identity with regards to symbols, images, and other visuals. According to Roland Barthes,

“ideology or myth” consists of the deployment of signifiers for the purpose of expressing and justifying the dominant values of a given society, class or historical period (the signs express not just “themselves”, but also kind of value system that surround them). As myths, signs tend to appear “natural” and self-evident (although they are basically always artificial, coded) hiding to the operation of ideology (qtd in Dwi Nur 8).



Figure 7: A still from *Kaala* depicts Rajnikanth with the text of Ravana Kaviyam (words in Tamil), Epics of Ravana.

Pa. Ranjith has used the myth of the Ramayana to narrate the hierarchical relationship that exists between Kaala and Hari Dada. The Ramayana is a Vedic culture and it is a result of Brahminical hegemony and operated in society as natural and common sense, hiding behind the Savarna system. Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* pictures the Gramscian notion of common sense and good sense (universal conceptions of life and a man) with references to the myths in *Kaala*. To turn common sense into good sense, moral and intellectual understanding is required and also peculiar nuances of the context and the way in which it is depicted. Marcus E. Green's *Race, Class and Religion: Gramsci's Conception of Subalternity*, argues that "common sense constitutes one of the factors that hinders the ability of subaltern groups to assert political autonomy and to overcome their subordination" (qtd in Cosimo Zene 125).

Pa. Ranjith attempted to make the spectators believe that Raman was an idealisation of Brahminical and Vedic gods, that is, common sense, and here, the role of moral and intellectual reform is needed to make people think critically to bring self-consciousness, particularly moving from the common sense of Raman into the good sense of Ravana achieved through the collective consciousness of reality. Since the Dravidian political parties came to power, it has not been accomplished in a single day; they have structured it as a collective consciousness of Tamil society that Ravana is the true emblem of morality and worshipped in Dravidian land.

In one scene, you can find the Tamil text of Puzhavar Kuzhandai's *Ravana Kaviyam* (Epics of Ravana). It was banned from 1948 to 1971, and later the ban was lifted. The book revolves around the story of Ravana as a true hero rather than Rama. Ravana, as a saviour of non-Brahmins and an iconic representation of Dravidian politics and the identity of the oppressed and confronting the casteist Aryan invaders, acts against the Hindu supremacy. According to Pa. Ranjith, the film depicts the contrast between fair and dark, Aryan and Dravidian. Pa. Ranjith says. "The film also incorporates the Ramayana in the narrative, in an attempt to show the opposition between fair and dark, between Aryans and Dravidians" (Naig).



Figure 8: After breaking the windshield of a car, Pariyan and the antagonist (a still from *Pariyerum Perumal*).

In *Pariyerum Perumal*, the antagonist does not come out of the car. Pariyan throws a stone to break the windshield, which symbolises that the higher castes should come out of the rigid caste structure to know that the oppressed castes have encountered and experienced suffering and oppression throughout history. It is implied that the upper caste should step outside of their comfort zones rather than the villain being shielded by a car windshield. The higher castes will go wild in society if their comfort zone collapses, regardless of the circumstances or scenarios. On the other hand, having broken the windshield, Pariyan begins arguing with the antagonist to address the caste issues. Both directors do not explicitly use the term "dalit" until the very end of their films, but they have depicted a visual representation of caste throughout the films.

The View of the Spectators

Both the filmmakers visualised colours, symbols, images, and myths to mark the identity of caste and have succeeded where the role of the spectators partakes in a

primary role in interpretation. The medium of film triggers human emotions better than any other creative art form, and it has the ability to influence people's minds. The film's primary aim is to make an effect on the spectator by employing numerous microscopic interpretations of the visualisations such as colours, symbols, images, and myths to depict it in the cultural context that the directors intend to convey. The film's description is more convincing and comprehensive. Between the filmmaker and the spectator, there should be minimum numerical and socio-cultural understanding. Both Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj took caste as a societal issue and addressed it in their cultural forum, the combination of both realism with fictional elements in a believable form. Christian Metz (1991) says, "A fairly convincing reproduction causes the phenomena of affective and perceptual participation to be awakened in the spectator, which, in turn, give reality to the copy" (6-7).

In Christian Metz's *Language and Cinema* (1971), the idea of writing is to pronounce the fact that "a film constantly 'reworks' the codes that underlie its manifestation, to the point of 'restructuring' the pre-existing system of choices" (qtd in Casetti 197). The stardom of Rajinikanth intertwines the identity of Dalit politics and its resilient reality, which is based on projections and identifications, with the spectator's perception. Christian Metz (1991) recalls Rosenkrantz, "the spectator is summoned to take a position in relation to these very real actors, rather than to identify himself with the characters they embody" (9).

According to Bill R. Scalia (2012), a shot comprises temporal and spatial location, and it resides within a rationally specified schema (47-48). The spectators should be located in that cultural and socio-cultural historical context. Then only will it impact the spectators' reactions to what the director is intensely trying to convey. Charles K. Levine (1974), the film critic, recalls Andre Bazin's statement, "the meaning is not in the image, it is in the shadow of the image projected by montage onto the field of consciousness of the spectator" (17).

The spectators recognise the trauma and violence as markers of caste, but there might be a simple way to say that it is violence, not caste violence. By understanding the colours, symbols, images, and myths in their Tamil cultural context, it is implied that they are anti-caste films and assert the rights of Dalits. Caste-related violence or caste killing has become common in contemporary Tamil Nadu. In both films, the spectators

see that the body and the caste are intertwined. The body is a symbol of caste oppression and subjugation. Torture, hurting, urinating, beating, and humiliation are all employed to subvert the lower caste. On the one hand, visualisations of the oppressed castes' hardships and struggles are contrasted with Sanskrit mantras, ritual threads, living a luxurious life, and employing all government apparatus to subjugate and are presented in a sequence of shots. Both the directors attempted to break the myth of caste as pure, high, clean, saffron, and so on, and they visualised the aesthetic of Dalit life in order to break the stereotype that Dalits are fragile, weak, and filthy. In both films, the notion of caste myth has been questioned in regards to the



intersectionality between caste and love, as well as between caste and the land.

Figure 9: A still from *Pariyerum Perumal*, a statue of Ambedkar protected by an iron fence, and *Kaala* where “Periyar EVR Chowk” is written in both Tamil and English and the statue of Periyar.

According to Metz, the basic unit of any film is the shot, which is neither symbolic nor arbitrary, but it is iconic. Throughout the film, the iconic visualisations of B. R. Ambedkar and E.V.R. Periyar can be seen. Therefore, it acquires a specific sense of caste among the spectators while the characters are tortured, wounded, and subjected to other forms of physical oppression. An iron fence around the statue of Dr B.R. Ambedkar clearly shows that even the statue of Dr B.R. Ambedkar is not safe in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj use film as a medium to claim Dalits' rights and resistance as well as to make the spectators aware of Dalits' consciousness and their position in society.

Conclusion

Both films question caste hegemony, and caste resistance is used to make the collective consciousness of society, and its implications of Dalit assertiveness are depicted in the historical-political contexts of Tamil Nadu. Both Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj visualise structural hierarchy and caste discrimination in the context of social, political, and cultural challenges in Tamil Nadu without exploring their anti-caste politics. Certain codes cannot express themselves directly in an environment dominated by Hindutva outfits. Therefore, filmmakers such as Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj use the visual medium as an effective instrument to give voice to the voiceless and oppressed. So far, both films stand out in mainstream Tamil cinema for representing caste through colours, symbols, and myths, and they have affected and influenced the spectators. To combat caste violence and discrimination in the contemporary era, both directors advocate that B.R. Ambedkar and E.V.R. Periyar's ideologies are remembered and followed.

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