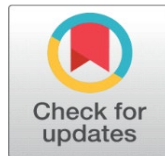


SUBALTERN IDENTITY AND FILM CODE IN CINEMA FROM THE SOUTH OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In 2023, the Indian film industry's market size surpassed 197 billion rupees, showcasing a significant recovery trajectory following the COVID-19 pandemic (Statista, 2024), with South Indian cinema in Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, and Telugu languages gaining notable popularity. South Indian cinema has historically been interwoven with regional politics, with films reflecting social and political tensions through ideologically charged narratives. These cinematic narratives frequently construct heuristic, hyperreal imagery, drawing upon real-life references yet developing unique symbolic characteristics on screen. Through a critical examination, this study reveals how the intertwined themes of endogamy, identity politics, hegemony, and exclusivism are embedded within the philosophical foundation of these films, reflecting or refracting the societal dynamics they aim to represent or critique.

Keywords: Caste Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, Subaltern Identity, Dalit Cinema

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. PHILOSOPHY OF THE CINEMA CODE: SCREEN AND THE VIEWER

The philosophy of cinema as a "code" of interaction between the screen and viewer positions film not merely as an entertainment medium but as a profound site of cultural and philosophical reflection. Cinema, synthesizing diverse art forms—painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, music, and theatre—emerges as a distinct aesthetic language capable of mirroring, critiquing, and reconstructing societal narratives. Drawing from Walter Benjamin's idea of "aura" and the reproducibility of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, film democratizes access to visual and auditory experiences that once belonged to the domain of fine art, embedding itself in the collective consciousness and shaping cultural perceptions (Benjamin, 1936). By capturing and reproducing society's complex layers, film operates as an ontological and epistemological medium that represents, distorts, and constructs social reality.

The evolution of cinema along lines of technological advancement, narrative experimentation, and aesthetic transformation has amplified its reach and significance within global culture, necessitating critical philosophical inquiry into its impact. Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "time-image" (Deleuze, 1985) underscores cinema's capacity to alter our experience of temporality, freeing narratives from linear constraints and thus enabling film to engage with deeper psychological and philosophical questions. The transition from classical "movement-images" to "time-images" in cinema allowed filmmakers to explore memory, trauma, and consciousness, positioning film as a medium that does not merely

reflect reality but also dissects it. In this sense, cinema becomes a space for examining identity, ideology, and the subjective experience of time.

Viewers engage with the “language” of film through a complex interplay of narrative, aesthetic, and symbolic codes, forging an interpretive relationship that aligns with Michel Foucault’s concept of “subjugated knowledge” (Foucault, 1980). Film functions as a repository of marginalized narratives, bringing to the fore “subaltern” experiences that challenge dominant discourses around race, class, and caste. This function is especially pronounced in films from marginalized communities or “Third Cinema,” which use the cinematic code to resist hegemonic representations and foreground subjugated identities (Solanas & Getino, 1969). In Indian cinema, the intersection of caste and race, especially within the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), illuminates how film can serve as a political and philosophical commentary on social structures that are otherwise normalized or overlooked in dominant media.

Cinema’s ability to engage viewers in a reflective process on identity formation extends into the realm of “hyperreality,” a concept posited by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1981). In hyperreal cinema, films do not merely replicate reality but generate a “reality effect,” where representations may become more significant than actual events. This has implications for identity politics within film, as cinematic portrayals of caste, race, or gender can become the defining images through which societies interpret these identities. Films that engage in identity politics transcend traditional narrative structures to function as philosophical investigations, prompting viewers to question constructed identities and the ethics surrounding them. Through this lens, film becomes not only a means of passive observation but an active participant in the construction of cultural identity, shaping viewers’ perceptions of self and society.

Furthermore, film’s dichotomy of diegetic (narrative-contained) and non-diegetic (outside the narrative) elements enables it to create layers of meaning that resonate with audiences on both conscious and subconscious levels. By examining these elements, particularly in cinema from the Global South, a deeper understanding of how marginalized communities use film to assert agency and reframe societal roles emerges. In critical Indian cinema that deals with issues of caste and race, for instance, diegetic elements such as character actions within the narrative reveal internalized social hierarchies, while non-diegetic sound, color, and cinematography emphasize external forces shaping these identities. This layered approach allows cinema to both depict and question systemic discrimination, providing a philosophical commentary on social stratification.

In conclusion, film as a medium embodies an intricate code that operates as both a philosophical inquiry and a site of cultural negotiation. By synthesizing multiple art forms and leveraging narrative structures, film constructs a “hyperreal” space where viewers confront and interpret complex societal issues. Critical cinema that addresses subaltern identities and engages with theories like CRT disrupts conventional narratives, enabling film to function as an instrument of cultural critique and identity formation. Through its layered cinematic language, film thus serves as a vital tool for questioning, resisting, and reshaping societal norms, embedding itself as a dynamic philosophy that resonates across temporal and cultural boundaries.

2. INDIAN CINEMA AT THE CROSS JUNCTURE

Indian cinema stands at a crucial juncture, both culturally and economically, as it navigates transformations in audience engagement, technological advances, and the shifting balance of regional influences within the industry. In 2023, the Indian film industry’s remarkable growth, with a market value exceeding 197 billion rupees, signifies recovery post-COVID-19 but also underscores the sector’s responsiveness to new trends, such as the increasing influence of regional cinema and digital platforms (Statista, 2024). This growth occurs amid structural shifts in the industry’s traditional dynamics, with South Indian cinema—encompassing Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, and Telugu films—now accounting for a substantial portion of national revenue and cultural impact. In 2022, South Indian cinema’s collective box office revenue surpassed Bollywood, marking a paradigm shift that challenges Hindi cinema’s historic dominance and reflecting an increasing demand for diverse narratives and linguistic representation (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2023).

The dichotomy between Bollywood’s hyperreal escapist format and the realism of Indian parallel cinema is pivotal to understanding the evolving identity of Indian cinema. Bollywood, long characterized by its spectacle—vibrant colors, lavish sets, and elaborate song-and-dance sequences—has traditionally offered a form of “hyperreality” as described by Jean Baudrillard (1981), where heightened representations of reality serve as an escapist outlet for audiences. Conversely, the parallel cinema movement, influenced by Italian neorealism and auteurist principles, emerged in

response to the formulaic nature of Bollywood. This movement sought to represent social realities, addressing complex themes of class, caste, and identity (Prasad, 1998). Over time, however, these two distinct forms have increasingly intersected, creating a hybridized cinema that combines Bollywood's commercial appeal with the thematic depth of parallel cinema. This blending reflects what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as a "third space," a cultural space where hybrid identities and mixed forms of expression emerge, challenging monolithic representations of Indian society.

The South Indian film industry has leveraged its long-standing connection between cinema and socio-political movements, often using film as a platform for articulating Dravidian ideology and subaltern perspectives. Dravidian films, particularly from Tamil Nadu, have historically used cinema to challenge caste-based hierarchies and promote linguistic and cultural pride as part of the larger Dravidian political movement. This intersection of cinema and regional politics, exemplified by figures like M.G. Ramachandran (M.G.R.) and Karunanidhi who transitioned from film to political leadership, aligns with Antonio Gramsci's notion of "cultural hegemony" (1971), whereby subaltern groups contest dominant ideologies by constructing their own cultural narratives. Films from the South, such as RRR (2023), which achieved international recognition and awards, have brought regional stories to global platforms, subverting the traditional Bollywood hegemony and creating new spaces for cultural negotiation and representation.

Moreover, the rise of South Indian cinema parallels global shifts in digital consumption, where streaming platforms enable regional films to reach wider audiences beyond language and geographical barriers. The digital age has intensified what Walter Benjamin (1936) termed "the democratization of art," allowing South Indian films, once confined to regional markets, to achieve pan-Indian and international viewership. Streaming platforms have not only enabled regional films to transcend linguistic boundaries but have also catalyzed a shift in audience preferences toward content that reflects local identities and challenges the dominance of Hindi-language narratives. This transformation has led to the industry's increased adoption of advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual production, allowing filmmakers to explore complex narratives and innovative visual aesthetics that appeal to contemporary audiences (The Hindu, 2024).

As the Indian cinema landscape transforms, the industry also confronts significant challenges, particularly in sustaining multiplex attendance amid the popularity of streaming platforms and the rising costs of production driven by high actor fees and elaborate production demands. This trend reflects Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944) "culture industry" thesis, where commercialization pressures within the arts lead to standardized production and consumption patterns, risking homogenization in the pursuit of mass appeal. However, the resilience of the Indian theatre-going population, which grew by 29% in 2024, suggests a cultural attachment to the cinematic experience that resists full digitization (Ormax Media, 2024). This attachment underscores the unique social function of cinema in India, not merely as a form of entertainment but as a communal space where identity, politics, and cultural pride converge.

In summary, Indian cinema is at a crossroads where the convergence of commercial cinema, regional narratives, and digital technology creates a multifaceted industry that increasingly reflects India's linguistic and cultural diversity. The rise of South Indian cinema and its entwinement with political and social resistance amplify the industry's potential to challenge dominant narratives and introduce alternative perspectives. As the sector navigates these changes, Indian cinema is poised to redefine its identity on both national and global stages, offering a platform for new voices while grappling with the economic and cultural forces that shape the film industry in a globalized world.

3. INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM AND DRAVIDIAN IDEOLOGY

The traditional caste system of India traces back to over 3000 years ago when Aryan-speaking nomadic groups migrated to India. The Aryan priests divided the society into four hierarchical groupings amongst the Hindus viz. Brahmins (priests, teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers, warriors), Vaishyas (landowners, merchants) and Sudras (servants). Thakrar (2001, pp 2-3) mentions:

The Sanskrit word for caste is jati; the term varna denotes a group of jati, or the system of caste. One cannot choose one's jati (caste); it is defined by birth [...] The common understanding of caste is "a rigid social system in which a social hierarchy is maintained generation after generation and allows little mobility out of the position to which a person is born" (Encarta). In addition, around three thousand sub-castes exist in India, often with an administrative or corporate structure, illustrating the rigidity of this culturally structured system. Although the latter is true, caste, no doubt, keeps changing, and customs come and go; the pattern alters, but the principles that govern it are exceptionally constant for a human institution [...] The Bhagavad-Gita says the following about the varnas ("colors"): The works of Brahmins, IVatrryas, Vaisryas, and Shudras are different, in harmony with the three powers of their born nature. The works of a

Brahman (associated with the color white) are peace, self-harmony, austerity, purity, loving forgiveness, righteousness, vision, wisdom, faith. The Gita continues to note the works of a Kshatriya (associated with the color red): to have a heroic mind, inner fire, constancy, resourcefulness, along with courage in battle, generosity and noble leadership. Trade, agriculture, and the rearing of cattle are the works of a Vaishya (associated with the color yellow). Finally, the works of the Shudra (associated with the color black) are performing different acts of service.

There are several arguments around the description, translation and practice of caste system in India. One being that this structure has been utilized at different levels for political control during the colonial and post-colonial period. The stratification of the society based on caste has for long given hereditary entitlement for some and segregation/oppression for others. For example, the Shudras (the lowest cast) also known as Dalits, which literally means 'broken to pieces', were considered falling outside the system and deemed polluting, hence 'untouchables'. The term 'untouchables' has been abolished by the Indian Constitution three-quarters of a century ago. The constitution of India safeguards these groups of people who had been discriminated for long under the Scheduled Castes Order of 1950. However, the concept of the supremacy of upper castes remains prevalent in the mindsets of some social structures because of the "strength of their traditional social institutions and beliefs" (Kolenda 1978).

Dravidian ideology gained momentum in the early 1930s and pushed forward the reclamation of race and culture against Aryan supremacy and dominance of upper castes. The self-respect movement, Dravidian Movement and Independence struggle were the major social reformation movements that had taken place during the 1930s. Dravidian Nationalism was thus based on three ideologies: dismantling of Brahmin hegemony; revitalisation of the Dravidian Languages (that include Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil) and social reform by abolition of existing caste systems, religious practices and recasting women's equal position in society. The Dravidian movement, a reformist movement in the 1940s had strong interconnection of politics and the Arts that included theatre and cinema. In the contemporary context, MK Stalin, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu has stated that the Dravidian ideology has helped the Dravidian people break the centuries long oppression and discrimination along the line of caste based on Varna Dharma and Aryan ideologies.

4. CASTE UNDER CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Race and castes are cultural creations and identity markers in social structures. Classifications along the lines of race and caste revolve around the notion superior, inferior or polluting in extreme cases with symbolic references. Race and caste have found commonality along the themes of social rank, discrimination based on purity and pollution, endogamy, occupation assigned, hierarchical sanctity, stigma and shame, community based ostracisation, superiority or inferiority designated by birth, negligence/sidelining by the authority, justification for the existent system, namification of the lower other (Yengde, 2022). Struggle against racism and casteism has been intertwined in its ideology as the Dalit Panthers took inspiration from the Black Panther Party civil rights movement in the United States. Thakrar (2001, pp. 6- 8) mentions:

... examples of these "inferior" jobs in the US included work such as cleaning and disposing of the dead; these were sometimes even labeled as "immigrant" jobs' [...] Earlier, the US also maintained slavery and "dirty jobs" for the slaves and immigrants respectively. Since these and other occupations were and still are viewed as "unclean," those that perform them in India became the "untouchables" (recently referred to more commonly as Dalits) and were "out caste" to preserve the whole caste and society from pollution. A white man's job, similar to a Kshatriya, on the other hand, would entail more office or professional work, and, ironically, in the US one could be considered "white" or racially superior even among those of the same "race" if he held a higher paying, more acceptable job of this type. Therefore, race and caste do, in fact, have some common origins in terms of attitudes, but they are placed within such different contexts that the complexities of caste systems go beyond simple discrimination and categorization for economic reasons.

Ayyathurai (2021) theorises Caste Critical Theory (CasteCRIT) in relation to Critical Race Theory based on historical, socio-political, and psychological factors in the conceptualisation of casteism where CasteCRIT looks at intersectional aspects of caste, race, gender and class. Oppression under casteism also falls under the three facets defined by David and Derthick (2017 pp 11, 86) viz. institutional, interpersonal, and internalised:

Institutional oppression is when stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination are expressed—whether intentionally or unintentionally, consciously, or unconsciously, and overtly or covertly—through society's policies, laws, regulations, assumptions, standards, cultural norms, and practices [...] Interpersonal oppression can be conceptualized as when

stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination are expressed by individual towards other individuals [...] Internalized oppression is when the oppression that permeates the environment is able to seep into oppressed individuals who, in turn, begin to think, feel, and behave in biased ways towards themselves and their own group.

Caste Critical Theory under Critical Race Theory thereby looks at overlapping themes of language and race dominance, endogamy, purity and pollution, inferior and superior constructs of privileges or lack of it. Caste and race have been found intertwining along the line of white supremacy and caste supremacy based on social construction that is endemic being transnational in nature (Chaudhury 2018, Delgado & Stefancic, 2013, Grzanka, Gonzalez, & Spanierman, 2019).

5. DALIT CINEMA AND THE SUBALTERN IDENTITY

Dalit cinema, as a mode of resistance, employs subaltern theory and postcolonial critique to interrogate and subvert dominant narratives about caste and identity in Indian society. The concept of "Dalit," as Bharati (2002) emphasizes, functions beyond mere caste designation; it represents a consciously constructed identity that challenges the inherent hierarchies and systemic exclusions in Indian social structures. This aligns with Gramsci's notion of the "subaltern," which describes groups positioned outside the structures of hegemonic power, silenced by the socio-political mechanisms that dictate what is visible or invisible in society (Gramsci, 1971). Dalit cinema draws from this subaltern critique, constructing a cinematic space where marginalized narratives are not merely displayed but are critically engaged and destabilized, forcing audiences to confront the institutionalized prejudices that reinforce caste-based oppression.

The emergence of Dalit-centric films, such as *Visaranai* (2015), *Kabali* (2016), *Uriyadi* (2016), *Kaala* (2018), *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Asuran* (2019), and *Karnan* (2021), represents a significant departure from traditional Indian cinema, where Dalit characters were either marginalized or erased altogether. These films not only depict caste-based struggles but embody elements of Critical Race Theory (CRT), particularly the notion that institutionalized oppression is maintained through cultural narratives that normalize and naturalize hierarchy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). By constructing narratives rooted in Dalit experience, these films challenge audiences to reconsider the hegemonic caste structures that inform the Indian socio-political landscape. The Dalit Panther movement, inspired by the Black Panther movement, further influenced these cinematic works by emphasizing the need for cultural and social reclamation of identity, which these films achieve by asserting Dalit identity within the aesthetic and symbolic realms of cinema.

In contrast to earlier, desaturated depictions of Dalit lives, these films introduce a bold and valorous aesthetic that employs vibrant colors, striking visuals, and assertive symbols to communicate the agency and resilience of Dalit communities. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," where marginalized identities are redefined and hybridized, this new wave of Dalit cinema creates a visual language that disrupts the dominant narrative gaze, constructing an alternative space for Dalit subjectivity to be reimagined and celebrated (Bhabha, 1994). By employing symbols such as the bull in *Karnan* or the escaped animal in *Jallikattu*, these films utilize metonymy and allegory to underscore the humanity and strength of Dalit characters, often in confrontation with oppressive caste hierarchies. These aesthetic choices resonate with Gilles Deleuze's idea of "minor literature," where a marginalized group's language or visual narrative is transformed into a revolutionary form of expression that critiques the dominant culture (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986).

The intertwining of Dravidian political ideology with Tamil cinema further exemplifies how film can function as a site of subaltern agency. Figures like M.G. Ramachandran (M.G.R.), Muthuvel Karunanidhi, and Jayaram Jayalalithaa, who transitioned from cinema to significant political roles, illustrate how the cinematic platform in Tamil Nadu has historically served as a means of asserting Dravidian identity and countering North Indian cultural dominance. This dynamic aligns with Stuart Hall's theories of cultural identity and representation, which argue that marginalized identities use cultural spaces as sites for contesting hegemonic narratives and renegotiating selfhood (Hall, 1997). In the case of Dalit cinema, these films serve not only as cultural artifacts but as political interventions, asserting a subaltern viewpoint that confronts and complicates dominant representations of caste and social hierarchy.

Moreover, the South Indian cinematic style, known for its exaggerated spectacle, plays a pivotal role in amplifying Dalit and subaltern themes within a popular format. By using cinematic codes from popular Tamil and Malayalam film genres—including hyper-stylized action sequences, symbolism-laden narratives, and elements of social satire akin to the

Theatre of the Absurd—these films engage the “culture industry” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944) in a way that both critiques and utilizes its influence. This approach not only captures the attention of broad audiences but also critiques the deep-rooted ideologies that underpin casteism. For example, the climactic human pyramid in *Jallikattu*, symbolizing the primal aggression and hierarchical struggle of the human condition, acts as a reflection on the inherently violent and oppressive nature of caste dynamics, challenging viewers to confront the uncomfortable truths of caste-based social organization.

These films, therefore, transcend conventional narrative forms to become philosophical inquiries into identity, subjugation, and resistance, employing a filmic language that does not merely depict but also dissects the structures of power. Through the dramatization of caste-based oppression, Dalit cinema pushes the viewer to recognize and question the ethics of casteism and racism within both the historical and contemporary Indian context. The philosophy of these films, based on lived experience and cultural memory, extends beyond representation, inviting viewers into a dialogical engagement with subaltern theory. By transforming the cinematic gaze, Dalit cinema not only expands the scope of Indian cinematic aesthetics but also offers a potent framework for rethinking identity politics in modern India.



Figure 1 Tamil Nadu: Followers seeking blessings at M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) temple (Saju, 2021). MGR was a popular Tamil actor and later served as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu state.

6. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Based on the above discussions, four contemporary films from the South of India have been selected for this study viz. *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), *Jallikattu* (2019), *Kantara* (2022). The first two films deal with caste-identity politics and the latter two address identity politics in relation to atavism and feudalism. The films were selected based on their acceptance beyond the regional audience and popularity being well accepted and acclaimed both by the people of dominant and dominated castes and language. The films have been critically acclaimed for depicting the unique cultural context of subaltern identity positions in the form of valorised and stylised cinematic expressions. The study looks into theoretical and philosophical understanding of these films with the following objectives:

- 1) To elucidate the philosophical underpinnings and ideological orientation of the selected films.
- 2) To evaluate how film form and content depict subaltern identities.
- 3) To analyze the recurring themes and visual rhetoric of these films, utilizing Caste Critical Theory within the scope of Critical Race Theory.

The select films through their well-rounded characters, storyline and visual metaphors address issues around identity politics that enrich the examination of Caste Critical Theory under Critical Race Theory. Using reflexive analytical approach of film analysis, this study makes an inquiry into the narrative structure, character growth, and semiotics of visual communication to deduce the film philosophy and ideology. Based on emerging themes from the select films a

systematic analysis is conducted using coding procedure that is further mapped on to themes related to Caste Critical Theory under Critical Race Theory. The following sections deals with the analysis of each of these films.

7. PARIYERUM PERUMAL (2018)

Directed by Mari Selvaraj, *Pariyerum Perumal*, meaning a folk god who mounts on a steed, is a Tamil film set in 2005. The title of the movie was named after Kuladevata (clan deity) *Pariyerum Perumal* who is venerated by people of the filmmaker's caste and his family in Puliyanikulam village near Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India. Thereby the film being a strong narrative and representation of the people it depicts through the visual rhetoric of the film. The protagonist of the film is named after the deity. He joins law college because he wants to become a lawyer like Dr BR Ambedkar, one of the architects of the Indian Constitution who adopted various means to safeguard Dalit rights. Ambedkar launched the Neo Buddhist movement in India, which is a religious, as well as a socio-political movement towards Dalit emancipation. Through the main character's journey, the movie uses multiple symbols and metaphors reflecting the humiliation of Dalit students in the educational institutions in some places. *Pariyan's* friendship with an upper caste girl Jo further takes the story forward through the different plot structures to highlight the unjust caste based atrocities faced by Dalit minorities. The following section describes the cinema code used by the film in portraying these issues.

Initiating the very voice of resistance, the film begins with the title card "Caste and religion are against humanity". This connects to the earlier discussion in this paper where in section 3 the connection between caste and religion has been mentioned. The opening sequences show how *Pariyan* loses his pet dog *Karuppi* where his dog is tied to a train track and killed by upper caste men. Its death on the train track is symbolic of the many honor killings of the Dalits. *Karuppi* is compared to the main character *Pariyan* (and all Dalits). It is symbolic based on the Tamil saying that 'though we bathe a dog well and keep it very clean, yet we cannot allow it to share the main living space with a dog.' This, *Pariyan* further reinforces in the later part of the film when he addresses the upper caste people by saying, "As long as you people want us to live like dogs, our lives will never change" (*Pariyerum Perumal*, 2018). The dog *Karuppi* (in blue colour) is used as a strong visual motif throughout the film. The blue colour is considered the symbol of Dalit community based on Ambedkarite ideology. The colour blue is used multiple times in the film in different spaces representing the Dalits in different montage sequences.



Figure 2 Usage of the colour Blue as motif in the film (*Pariyerum Perumal*, 2018)

The film further moves on to show how the classroom is not a space of equality where oftentimes a student from the Dalit background is compelled to sit in the last row. This in itself continues the earlier discussion on inequality of designation of spaces where as per CRT and Caste-critical theory there is the concept of superiority of some and 'othering' of some. Based on the actual lived experiences of the subaltern communities, caste-based affinity and animosity amongst the students in the college is shown throughout the film. Using the coinage of the word Red (signifying the upper caste), graffiti on the wall adds another layer of symbolism referring to the dominance of the upper-caste. Another scene shows the name of a boy from a higher caste written in red on the desk in front forcing *Pariyan* to move to the seat in the last row. A report in Indian Express mentions how students in Tirunelveli wear different coloured bands to distinguish and identify the castes of the students (India Today, 2015).

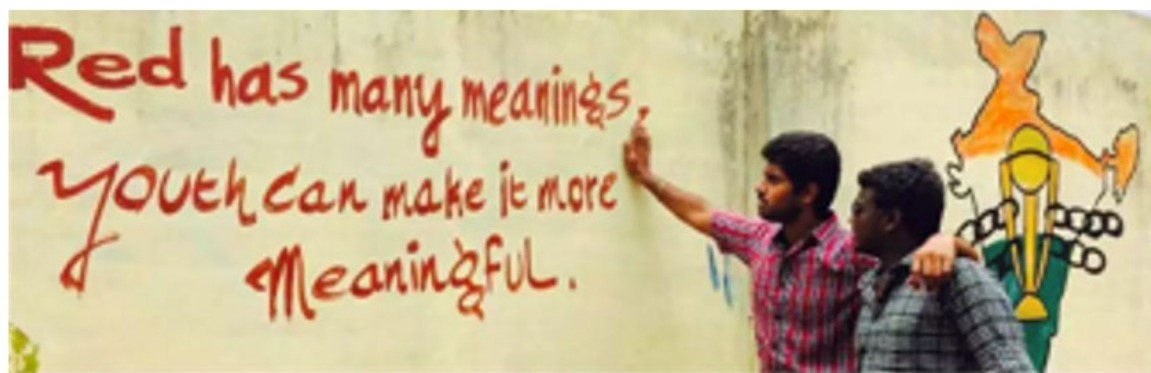


Figure 3 Red (signifying the upper caste) (Pariyerum Perumal, 2018)

Another important reference in the film is when the teachers and students of the class mock Pariyan for his lack of knowledge in English language, reflecting the colonial remnants of race and language positioning in identity formation. One of his teachers further goes on to question if Pariyan has joined the college because of the Quota system. This scene points to the lived experiences of individuals from subaltern communities who are often mocked upon for the government reservation/ quota system, which is in place for their empowerment. This form of mockery builds around people belonging to the subaltern communities, where the people from these communities are considered as lacking talent and knowledge and making it into the mainstream structures only because of reservation/ quota. This form of mockery itself is a direct reflection of racism. Through the different scenes and dialogues in the sequences in the college premises, the film shows how attaining higher education (and access to education) is still a struggle and a big achievement for individuals from the subaltern communities. Access to higher education is often not a very natural progression; it is not their natural social security.

Another disturbing scene in the film is when Pariyan is peed upon when he goes to attend an upper-caste wedding on invitation by his college friend Jo. This scene is not just a cinematic social drama but is based on actual similar incidences faced by subaltern communities. One real-life incident being as recent as July 2023, refer July incident 'Man seen urinating on Adivasi man in Madhya Pradesh arrested, booked under national security act' (Scroll, 2023). The film takes a philosophical stance in reflecting upon the inner worlds of subaltern communities, their individual self-preservation, atrocities, injustice and ethics, thereof serving as the very basis of Caste Critical Theory under Critical Race Theory. These themes are strongly reflected in the modern upbeat song Naan Yaar (who am I?). The song is translated as following (CK, 2018):

Who am I? What am I? Why am I different from you? What makes me so abhorring that you cannot touch me? Why do you hate me so much that you stay away from me? We look up to the same gods, but you keep me away from them. We live together, but you build a wall to separate me. Why did I choose to color myself blue? Why in this sea of blue, do I find some solace? Why? Oh why? I only ask for the same dignity to life, that you grant to yourself. Grant that unto me. Jai Bhim!

This song can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxYdH58_0P0

The use of camera angles and production design shows the character imprisoned in the system. The song uses metaphors of snakes, scorpions, and rats, to depict the venom of injustice and inequality based on caste applicable under Caste Critical Theory under Critical Race Theory.

The song also touches upon the issue of honour killing and manual scavenging. Skulls painted on the walls in the song denote people murdered in the name of honour killings. The old man character in the film, who is hired for honour killing, proudly claims that his act is a service to Kulasamy, the clan god. The film is full of visual rhetorics like Ilayaraja's portrait signifying how music/ art belonged only to higher caste, tonsuring of the head of a girl belonging to higher caste for falling in love with someone from a lower caste etc. The two-tumbler system shown in the film has very strong significance. Some interior villages still follow this two-tumbler system where a Dalit cannot drink from the same glass as used by the upper caste. This practice is in line with the concept of "pollution" as described under section 4 (Caste under Critical Race Theory). However, the last scene of the film with the two glasses and jasmine flower in between is interpreted as being symbolic of hope for the future of equality. The film through the usage of various cinema codes and

journey through the inner worlds of the characters shows internalisation and institutionalisation of discrimination and its transmission in the social structure.

8. KARNAN (2021)

Directed by Mari Selvaraj, *Karnan* is a film made in 2021, which is set in the 1990s. The film is loosely based on an actual incident of Kodiyankulam violence in Tirunelveli district that occurred on August 31, 1995 where an altercation between a bus driver and a student, left 18 people from both the upper and the lower caste dead. This was followed by a 600-strong police force ransacking the mainly Dalit village of Kodiyankulam (Daksnamurthy, 2021). The film shows how the village Podiyankulam, referred to as “wasteland” has been ostracised for many years by other communities. The villagers have been deprived of basic amenities symbolic of the negligence and deprivation faced by the Dalit community. To invalidate the very existence of the village and its people, the village is denied a bus stop for basic transportation in the rural location. The larger system denying the basic rights of the villagers leads to denial of some basic human rights as shown in the opening scene of the film where a girl is left to die in the middle of the road due to lack of transportation during a medical emergency.

The premise of the film shows that the villagers live in close ties with nature, and these elements are very intricately interwoven in the film, capturing the micro-processes of village life. The film's narrative intricately weaves nature and animal symbolism—like pigs, eagles, and donkeys—to represent Dalit identity as seen in scenes such as the protagonist cutting a donkey's tether, a metaphor for breaking free from subjugation. This act encapsulates a desire for liberation from societal constraints that limit Dalit aspirations and upward mobility, mirroring CRT's examination of institutionalized oppression. The film puts in good usage of closeups in its visualisation along with the incorporation of folk art making this film rich in showing the culture of the village



Figure 4 Poster of the film *Karnan* (Karnan, 2021)

with artistic experimentation and symbolism. A headless torso, the cycle of oppressed life shown from an unborn child to the oldest women in the village; eagles swooping on chicken, magical realism aspects of the dead girl roaming as a folk deity, dream symbolism offer the multi-layered. representations. The village folk deity gives her own face to the village people who died with their identity and existence never acknowledged. The dead receive the identity of the village goddess.



Figure 5 The village goddess of Podiyankulam (Karnan, 2021)

The scene where the protagonist cuts the string tied to a donkey's feet metaphorically represents unleashing of his anger towards oppression. The donkey in the film is also representative of the lower caste. Donkey is generally considered dumb and lowly. However, in the film one sees that when the donkey is set free, it is not as dumb as it seems to be but it knows exactly what it wants. The village is rich in its art and culture, however all of this is unrecognized and ignored by other communities and is looked upon as non-existent. The film's contextualization in this line is in line with

the Critical Race Theory of systematized and institutionalized nature of maintaining status quo, curbing the social aspiration and preventing the upward mobility of subaltern communities. The film also highlights the plight of the women in a patriarchal society. Karnan, the protagonist of the film questions all of these inequalities including the imbalance in gender roles.

The name of the protagonist in the film is derived from the Hindu epic Mahabharata, where Karnan is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India revered in Hinduism. In the Mahabharata text, Karnan is the son of the sun god Surya and princess Kunti, and thus a demigod of royal birth. However, the son of Surya and the eldest of the Pandavas is denied his rightful place because of circumstances. This is representative in naming the protagonist of the film and the film itself Karnan in line with Dalit identity where owing to circumstances, the rights of the Dalits are denied. The protagonist's name challenges the discriminatory framework, with an upper-caste police officer's reaction highlighting societal discomfort with Dalits assuming dignified or heroic identities. This scene reinforces CRT's principle that dominant groups maintain social stratification by denying marginalized identities' validity.

This scene goes in line with our earlier discussion in section 4 Caste under Critical Race Theory where an individual is doomed or entitled/labelled for life depending on the caste he/she is born into. Changing of name is an important marker for some individuals from subaltern communities and in the lived experience of Dalit identity positioning to re-situate their identity framing as an individual and for larger acceptance by the mainstream. As the caste of an individual can be easily identified by their names, surnames in particular.

The plot of the film further develops to a bus crossing the village being vandalised as a sign of protest. This is when the police and the entire system turns against the village to oppress them further and silence the voice of dissent. Karnan leads the countering force of the village. In addition, just like the donkey who is set free, the villagers now seem to find their liberation in voicing out against the oppression and opposing forces of the hegemonic structures that restrain them.

In Karnan, Selvaraj's cinematic style—including close-up shots and elements of folk art—augments the film's engagement with identity politics by bringing the microcosmic realities of Dalit life into sharp focus. The use of symbols, such as the headless torso and dream-like appearances of a dead girl as a village deity, highlights the fractured yet resilient identity of Dalit communities, urging viewers to confront the ongoing oppression and invisibility imposed by the dominant caste system. This film, through its use of Caste Critical Theory, illustrates how caste functions as a persistent racialized system, aligning with CRT's broader arguments about the institutionalization of racial and caste hierarchies. Ultimately, Karnan calls for reflection on the philosophy of caste as a societal constraint and its dehumanizing impacts, emphasizing the urgent need for liberation and the reclamation of identity for marginalized communities.

9. KANTARA (2002)

Kantara meaning 'mystical forest' directed by Rishab Shetty is set in three-time settings viz. 1847, 1970 and 1990. The film revolves around history, myth, folklore and fraught power dynamics of social and divine, feudalism, environmentalism, superstitions and bureaucracy. The idea of land ownership and encroachment are built around agency of the indigenous people (coined adivasis), the feudal Zamindar (landowner) and the state actors as forest officers. The film is based on a metaphor of Panjurli Daiva a symbolic representation of a boar who as a fallen man seeks redemption (Basu and Tripathi, 2023). The opening scene set somewhere in mid-19th century connects the autocrat to the demigod Panjurli in the forest where the demigod mentions that the land rights should always belong to the indigenous people if he wants peace to remain. Panjurli further warns that should the king overrule this agreement, Guliga the ferocious spirit would consume and destroy everything. In the 70s, the landlord as the king's inheritor desires to reacquire the land inhabited by the adivasi community. Here, the Bhootha Kola (meaning spirit play) steps into the pivotal role as the interlocutor. Bhootha Kola is a spirit worship ritual celebrated by Tulu-speaking people. The film Kantara presents divinity through the performances of the Bhootha Kola based on traditional belief systems.



Figure 6 Bhootha Kola in Kantara film

Tamalapakula (2022) describing identity positioning around religion and counter religion mentions that:

The fascinating part of the religiosity is that the god Panjurli is not a 'Vedic Hindu' god, with Muralidhar asserting "my belief is different from yours." Muralidhar does not even hesitate to disrupt the Bhootha Kola as it is believed to be the religion of lowered castes/outcastes, one that has no relation to the Vedic religion that the dominant castes practise. Both for the dora and for Muralidhar, Panjurli is a demigod worshipped by the forest dwellers. Though the dora sponsors Bhootha Kola performances in order to seek the approval of the Adivasis, he doesn't believe in Panjurli or Guliga, the gods of the outcastes. Even in the narration of the story of the 'good' king who was in search of peace, Panjurli is referred to as a mere pestle used for grinding spices. Dora Devendra practises the Brahminic religion and upholds untouchability. He washes his hands after touching Shiva and gets his house ritualistically purified by a group of Brahmins after Shiva enters his house. Thus, the film makes a clear demarcation between Brahminical Hinduism and the religiosity of the outcastes.

Kantara film using cinematic expressions tactfully positions religion as a form of revolution. The film subtly layers the concept of 'othering' through religion besides addressing the philosophical question around, who does the land belong to? The film Kantara shows how indigenous communities have always associated themselves to autonomy, independence and proximity to nature. However, this harmony had been disrupted through boundary marking and identity framing during the colonial period that extended to the post-colonial period in the independent nationhood. The indigenous people feel this balance of self-governance and independence has been disrupted through the agency of state and issues around land rights. Land and forest have always been the conflict zone for indigenous identity, capitalistic move and control by states. The philosophy of the film also investigates tribal assertion, spirituality and community consciousness.

The film narrative also touches upon layers of women empowerment, misogyny and the very issue of untouchability. The protagonist of the film who is also the director of the film takes up the role of Shiva who becomes the Bhootha Kola. The character growth of Shiva in his human self, when not possessed by the spirit of Panjurli, sees a change in graph. From being a docile follower subordinate to the upper-caste landlord, he later on raises the voice of dissent in questioning discrimination and untouchability. Following Shiva's character journey and growth, the film addresses the issue of caste and religion identity politics. In one scene, when Shiva and his friends leave the landlord's house, the space that they had occupied is cleansed with the sprinkling of the holy Ganges water to sanctify the "polluted" space. People from the lower caste eat their food outside on the floor of the upper-caste people. Shiva in another scene, enters the house of the landlord (otherwise forbidden in relation to the concept of "pollution" mentioned in the earlier section 4 Caste under Critical Race Theory) and eats across the same table as a sign of protest.

The film philosophises 'Daivam Manushya Rupena!' around good overcoming evil. This is based on the concept of Avatara a deity descends in the form of a human. In this film's case, it is Shiva as Bhootha Kola. The divinity of both Panjurli and Guliga take the form/ avatara of Bhootha Kola to protect the forest and its people. Basu and Tripathi (2023, p 5) view the film as an indigenous approach to nature and natural under the New environmental paradigm where 'all living beings manifest equal claims on natural resources'. Kantara as a film philosophy and ideology interweaves these multiple issues through aesthetic cinema code. The Bhootha Kola performer in the end of the film mystically disappears into the

darkness of the forest proving its divinity leaving the viewers with the lingering thoughts led by the philosophy of the film where the dialogue states, “The circle of fire didn’t brighten the forest, instead it pushed it into further darkness”.



Figure 7 Bhootha Kola performer disappearing in a circle of fire in the forest

10. JALLIKATTU (2019)

Jallikattu a 2019 Malayalam film directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery was chosen as India's official entry to the Oscars 2021. The film derives its name from a bull-taming sport of Tamil Nadu that is over 2,000 years old. Animal right activists moved the Supreme Court seeking a ban on Jallikattu under cruelty to animals besides posing a threat to humans. Jallikattu was banned in 2014; however, there was widespread protest across Tamilnadu that was akin to the anti-centre attitude of 1960s when Hindi was made the official language of the country. It was again the Dravidian political parties, which led the pro-Jallikattu movement (Hindustan Times, 2017). The ban was considered a negation of Tamilian identity. Hence, through an amendment in 2017, the ban was lifted. Jallikattu as a cultural event is considered a public display of men’s valour and the owner of the bull. Sen (2017) states, “First, Jallikattu is a sport or tradition (call it what you will), which is practised only by upper castes. No Dalits or lower castes are allowed to participate. Second, no women are allowed to participate. This is a male tradition”. Based on this backdrop is the film Jallikattu which follows a nonlinear narrative structure of a bull that has escaped and creates havoc in the village. Centered on the single event of men trying to tame the bull, the film uses cinematic codes to reveal that man and beast are no different and raises the question of who is the greater beast that needs to be tamed? The bull in this film serves as the metonym for beastliness.

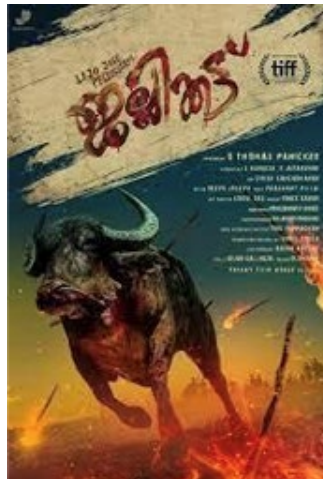


Figure 8 Poster of the film Jallikattu

Recipient of numerous awards, the film uses strong cinematography and sound design to bring out the theme of atavism and anthropocene to blur the lines between man and beast. The film switches between themes of civility and savagery, conscious and instinct, primal supremacy, man vs nature and herd consciousness. The film constantly uses the non-diegetic sound motif of “Jeeji Jeeji” and “Ufff” sounds associated with primal instincts. There is also the constant clock sound ticking sound as a metaphor to mechanised human lives that is superimposed onto the visuals of male chauvinism and arrogance as shown in the village setting. The montage segment of animated cavemen in the film draws parallel to the very basic nature of men linked to atavism which is universal in terms of human nature.



Figure 9 Usage of cavemen imagery in the film to Atavism and Anthropocene

The filmmaker also uses multiple closeups with textural details to bring out the crudeness and primal aspect of men. As the tension builds up, the film shows the herd mentality and mob psychology at its peak around the survival of the fittest. Operating around plebeianism, the film has no hero as such. The film further makes use of Krzysztof Kieslowski's “retroactive reasoning” to use imageries to put across the philosophy of Jallikattu in a very subtle but strong manner in-order to make the viewers reflect on the complex political construct of supremacy constructed by men. Towards the climax, one of the characters Kuttachan claims “human meat is the tastiest ” thereby using meat as a metaphor in the film to assert the frenzied savagery of human quest to supremacy. The film is universal in its philosophy in line with Freudian concept of Civilisation and Its Discontents where primal instinct hidden within us is exalted in fantasy or pathologised in violence (Reji, 2019). The heuristic multilayered end sequence of the film climaxes to the formation of a human pyramid with all the men pouncing on the bull to grab a pound of flesh basically to reaffirm their supremacy to satiate their ego rather than their hunger. In the end, the bull sinks in the mud puddle and all that is left is men pouncing on men in the human pyramid. This final shot leaves the audience lingering on with the philosophy that the film propagates.



Figure 10 Last frame of the film Jallikattu

These films represent indigeneity not through exoticization but through intimate, culturally coded depictions that align with Fourth Cinema's goals of preserving and foregrounding indigenous cultural identity.

The study of these films reveals how cinema can function as both an ontological and epistemological tool, reflecting and reshaping understandings of caste and identity. Ontologically, these films bring forth the lived experiences of Dalit and indigenous characters, using film as a medium to articulate the complex realities of cultural tradition, human memory, and caste-based oppression. Epistemologically, these films prompt audiences to critically examine their assumptions, highlighting how caste-based discrimination, rooted in ideas of purity and pollution, is a deeply ingrained societal construct. This aligns with Gramsci's theory of "cultural hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971), where dominant groups maintain social control by establishing cultural norms that seem "natural" or "normal." By exposing the constructed nature of these norms, films like *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Karnan* challenge the audience to recognize casteism not as an unfortunate byproduct of society but as a system actively upheld by institutional structures and social conditioning.

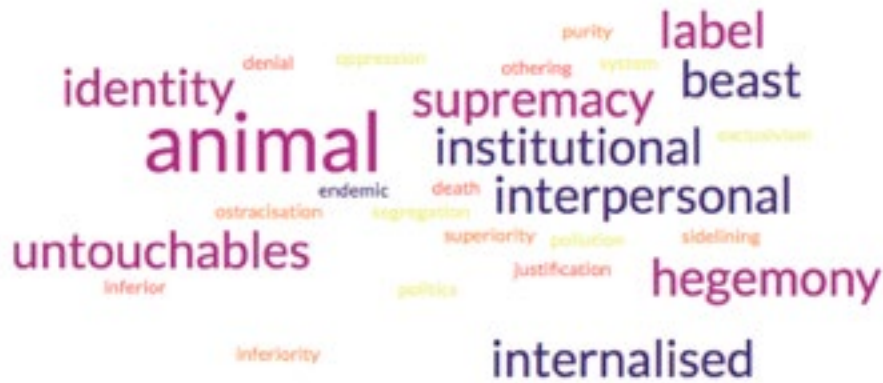


Figure 13 Word Cloud showing film themes overlapping with Caste Critical Theory under Critical Race Theory

In this light, these films embody a resistance philosophy that not only critiques but also provides avenues for empowerment. The commercialization and popularization of films that focus on subaltern identities challenge hegemonic narratives within the Indian film industry, demonstrating that there is a substantial audience for stories that address caste-based oppression and identity politics. As Bell Hooks argues in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (1996), cinema can be a powerful vehicle for social change by allowing audiences to encounter alternative perspectives that may shift or expand their understanding of reality. By making subaltern narratives accessible to mainstream audiences, these films democratize the cinematic space and amplify the voices of communities that are otherwise marginalized.

Furthermore, the blending of traditional cinematic codes with subaltern narratives and aesthetics facilitates a dynamic that evokes both empathy and critical reflection among viewers. This approach aligns with the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued that the role of art is to awaken consciousness, to create an emotional connection that compels viewers to confront social issues (Sartre, 1948). Through aesthetic choices—such as close-up shots of marginalized characters, symbolic color palettes, and non-linear storytelling—these films transform the viewer's experience from passive consumption to active engagement. By immersing audiences in the visceral realities of caste oppression, they make the emotional weight of systemic discrimination felt rather than simply understood, prompting a deeper introspection about societal structures and the moral frameworks that support them.

In conclusion, *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*, *Jallikattu*, and *Kantara* exemplify the potential of cinema as a medium for social critique and resistance. Through the lens of Caste Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory, these films expose the cultural and institutional mechanisms that perpetuate caste-based discrimination and valorize subaltern identities. By bridging personal narrative with broader social critique, these films utilize the philosophical dimensions of cinema to transform the viewer's engagement with caste and identity. Rooted in the philosophy of lived experience and cultural memory, these films not only depict the reality of marginalized communities but also serve as catalysts for challenging deeply ingrained social hierarchies. In doing so, they position cinema as a powerful medium for critical reflection and

transformative action, engaging audiences in a necessary dialogue about identity, equity, and social justice in contemporary India.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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