

Political Commentary Through Dalit Filmmaker Pa Ranjith in Sarpatta Parambarai Film

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Abstract: Pa Ranjith is the first filmmaker in India to experience financial success while presenting Dalit characters as protagonists and giving attention to the long-lasting caste inequality that persists in the Tamil film industry, even though there have been affirmative action policies and laws against discrimination for many years, by briefly looking at one Tamil film *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021), written and directed by Pa Ranjith. The article will offer a critical reading of 'Sarpatta Parambarai'. This article proposes to use ethnography research. The research will be a qualitative study, and the methodology will be an analysis of the film observation and the use of secondary research resources to build up affirmation of my topic. Ranjith has developed a thriving cultural hub in Tamil Nadu to strengthen the Dalit community, formerly called "untouchables." The objective is to convert a well-known culture that has always stereotyped or disregarded individuals from lower castes in Tamil films. He has endeavored to highlight Dalit culture by including Dalit protagonists in his film and depicting their way of life, using native Tamil slang, music, cuisine, and at least a dozen components that accurately represent their life as can be.

Keywords: Dalit, Pa Ranjith, Tamil film, Sarpatta Parambarai.

1. Introduction

The mainstream Indian cinema has been responsible for maintaining a caste hegemony. Cinema, as a cultural product, form of expression and mass entertainment, appears to represent film characters in Indian Brahmanical background. In this article, a critical reading of contemporary Dalit directors' visual expression in cinema by analysing one Tamil film by award winning filmmaker Pa Ranjith: *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021). Dalit Cinema can be understood as a celluloid movement of visual creative art, made by Dalit film-makers, relating to Dalit subjectivities, inspiring socio-cultural criticism, and as a universal monument of time and space (Yengde, 2018) [10].

One could argue that Dalits never had a place to call home in Indian cinema since their existence is either downplayed or muddled. The other possibility is spectatorial identification, in which sizable majorities become seduced by a picture. Both instances merely demonstrate how Dalits are impacted by cinema, not the other way around (S.S. Bajwa & Surender Pal Singh, 2022) [4]. Pa Ranjith's direction in "*Sarpatta Parambarai*" can be said to be both socially aware and politically charged. Ranjith is famous for concentrating on the

difficulties and lives of the working class and the marginalized groups they stand for. In "*Sarpatta Parambarai*", he continues to show this commitment by narrating a story that brings out the lives of the working-class people in North Chennai and the issues they have to confront. Ranjith's film provides a subtle and real portrayal of the lives and encounters of these characters, emphasizing their humanity and value. The movie is notable for Ranjith's signature technique of including social and political discourse in the tale and his capability to make intense and effective scenes that reverberate with viewers.

The main theme of *Sarpatta Parambarai* is a clash between two competing boxing families whose rivalry has been ongoing for generations. Ranjith utilizes a familiar narrative format to portray a drama about a repressed community that has long been struggling for recognition. Kabilan (Arya) is inspired by the local boxing icon Rangan (Pasupathy) and yearns for a chance to demonstrate his capabilities. However, his dreams are cruelly blocked due to his social background. Apart from its gripping entertainment value, what makes this boxing movie so remarkable is that it does not overstate its mission to challenge the caste system and its related politics. It delicately touches upon those topics without being overly didactic.

2. Literature Review

A. Political Commentary

In India, political commentary of Dalit films directors not been the prime focus of several debates and discussions in both the academic and political spheres. In all levels and paradigms of academic Dalit films director research, our Indian society has not been well-represented. To gain insight into the politics of the Dalit community in Tamil Nadu, we must avoid being taken aback or disheartened by the persistence of untouchability in the birthplace of Periyar. Rather, it is crucial to acknowledge that the Dravidian parties' significance in the state's political landscape is not despite, but because of the central role that caste continues to play. Dravidian politics has concealed the caste-based nature of social institutions while appealing to Dalit voters through populist imagery, symbolism, and rhetoric, especially as it has been portrayed in Tamil cinema (D. Karthikeyan et al., 2012) [3].

The Ranjith film discusses a range of political problems, such as class struggle, systematic oppression, labor rights, social

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justice, and rebellion against the influential culture. All of these issues are incorporated into the film's narrative and characters. It focuses on the adversities experienced by the working class in North Chennai and their oppression by the more influential culture. It also mentions the need to end the mistreatment of laborers and has fair labor practices. The movie also delivers the message of the requirement for a more equitable society in which the members of marginalized communities can obtain the same opportunities and rights as those in the dominant culture and contest existing norms and unjust systems.

The class divide in the film showcases the difficulties experienced by working-class people and how they oppose and confront systemic oppression. The next political issue is systematic subjugation in the film scrutinizes how minority communities are oppressed and utilized by powerful groups and organizations. Also, he has give more emphasis on employee rights. which draws attention to the requirement for equitable labor practices and the rights of workers to a safe and respectable work setting and last, it also deals with social justice. Promotes a more equitable and fair society where minority groups are given consideration and respect.

By addressing these political problems, the film acts as a tool for raising awareness about the struggles encountered by working-class individuals and the desire for social and political transformation.

B. Bringing the Dalit life Experience to the Screen: A Dalit Director

There are several advantages to a Dalit director like Ranjith making a film. Boosting Representation could lead to a higher representation of marginalized groups in the film industry, essential for fostering diversity and inclusivity. Hari dada, the antagonist of Kaala, was portrayed by Ranjith using white frames. In contrast to Nayakan, this colour play breaks down the still visuals of mainstream Tamil cinema. Kaala inverts the pictures as opposed to typical films, which deconstruct through language that alludes to previous films (Manhu Edachira, 2020) [8].

In Sarpatta Ranjith has portrayed a unique point of view on the screen, which could provide a more realistic and compelling story. Sarpatta you can see the best effort to maintain accurate depiction: A Dalit director is more likely to depict the lives and perspectives of Dalit individuals accurately, as they have a personal connection to the community.

Ranjith has broken the stereotypes in Tamil cinema, dispelled preconceived notions, and promoted a more nuanced representation of Dalit people and their experiences. Dalit directors' films show their commitment to the struggle for social justice and bring attention to the issues faced by Dalit communities. Although a director like Pa Ranjith relies on a team to bring their ideas to life in an audio-visual medium, the ultimate essence of a film is determined by the director themselves.

C. Tamil Cinema's Relationship to Caste

The relationship between Tamil cinema and caste is complex. Caste has been a prevalent theme in Tamil films for many years,

with movies often depicting caste-based discrimination and prejudice. Some films have also challenged these attitudes and sought to break down caste-based barriers, promoting messages of equality and social justice. Less focus has been placed on how caste plays out in the artistic arena of film, despite the fact that volumes have been devoted to exploring the role of caste in Tamil politics.

the attempt hit out at sections of Schedule Castes and demanded dilution of the law aimed at curbing antiDalit atrocities. Dalit youth were accused of fomenting social tension as they ensnared girls of other communities with their bogus proclamations of love (Leonard, 2015) [7].

The movie "Vekkai," adapted from Poomani's novel, which was written by a Dalit and touched on the issue of caste, has been given a more explicit treatment by filmmaker Vetrimaran, who focuses on panchami lands. This recent trend, starting with Pa Ranjith's films "Madras" (2014), "Kabali" (2016), and "Kaala" (2018), as well as his production of "Pariyerum Perumal" (2018), is indicative of the evolution of Tamil cinema's approach to caste-related topics

self-assertion of Tamil culture has persistently interrogated the centrifugal forces of Indian nationalism [...] nowhere else in India has cultural nationalism worked so successfully to dislodge upper caste hegemony, to carve out a non-Brahminical public sphere (Gopalan, 1998) [6].

However, it is also worth noting that the Tamil film industry itself has been accused of discrimination against members of lower castes and marginalized communities. The industry is dominated by a few dominant castes, and there have been allegations of exclusion and discrimination against members of lower castes and marginalized communities in the industry.

In recent years, there has been a growing push for greater representation and inclusivity in Tamil cinema. This has led to the creation of more nuanced and authentic depictions of caste in Tamil films, as well as greater opportunities for members of marginalized communities to participate in the industry. It is only in the 2010s that we see the film industry starting to acknowledge and represent Dalit struggles in films such as Madras (2014) and Kabali (2016) (Damodaran & Gorringer, 2017) [2].

Although the relationship between Tamil cinema and caste is complex and multifaceted, it is a reflection of the broader social, cultural, and political realities of Tamil Nadu.

D. The Depiction of Dalit Characters in Tamil Cinema

Historically, Dalits have been depicted in Tamil films in a stereotypical and often negative light, reinforcing harmful and insensitive societal attitudes about this marginalized community.

For many years, Dalit characters were often portrayed as subservient, poor and uneducated. This portrayal reinforced negative stereotypes about Dalits, perpetuated discrimination and prejudice against them in Indian society, and perpetuated the systemic discrimination and prejudice they face in Indian society.

In recent years, there has been a growing push for more nuanced and authentic depictions of Dalit characters in Tamil

cinema. This movement has led filmmakers and actors to challenge harmful stereotypes and promote greater understanding and empathy for this marginalized community.

In recent years, some Tamil films have sought to address the issue of caste-based discrimination and the experiences of Dalits in Indian society. While the portrayal of Dalit characters in Tamil cinema is still far from perfect, it has come a long way in recent years and the industry is gradually becoming more inclusive and representative of India's diverse communities.

E. Sarpatta Parambarai – Dalit Cinema

Pa Ranjith who has made a significant impact on Indian cinema with his unique style of filmmaking. His first film was "Attakathi", which was his directorial debut in 2012, which received critical acclaim and also prove to be commercially successful. His other successful films including "Madras" (2014), "Kabali" (2016) and "Kaala" (2018). All the film he directed received high acclaim for their appealing storylines and interesting storylines.

Various forms of Indian media, including literature, films, television series, and cartoons, have been successful in creating stereotypical images of Dalits. These depictions have helped establish a standard pattern of representation, commonly referred to as a "default" portrayal. The Dalits are presented as submissive animate selves, degraded and destitute with almost no hope for a better future (Wankhede, 2013) [9].

Kabilan, a fan of the Sarpatha clan headed by Coach Rangan Vathiyar (Pasupathy), is at first destined to watch matches from afar. His mother, who is violently (and sometimes loudly) against anything to do with boxing. However, the rivalry between the Idiyappa and Sarpatha clans changes things for Kabilan; he takes on the challenge of defeating Idiyappa clan's star boxer Vembuli (John Kokken) in order to gain glory and honour for his family name.

F. Beyond the Margins: Empowering Dalit Women in Sarpatta Parambarai

In the context of a Sarpatta film has represented women empowering, "Beyond the Margins" advocates women in the film beyond the social, economic, and political constraints that have traditionally marginalized or excluded Dalit women from commercial cinema. It implies an effort towards greater inclusion, visibility, and empowerment of women in his films. Women from "low" castes share many cultural and emotional traits with women from "higher" castes, including expectations. The erasure and silence of this emotion may have aided in the universalization of Dalit histories, but it did not contribute to the feminism of "low" caste women (Atwal, 2018) [1].

Mariyamma is Kabilan's wife, and in the film, she is shown as a fierce and unflinching woman who speaks her mind and punches above it. While she supports her husband kabilan in his game of boxing, she also doesn't hold back when it comes to fulfilling her needs as a wife. Mariyamma asserts her strong nature when Kabilan loses focus on his boxing career. She helps him get his life back on track and lets him achieve his dream of becoming a boxer.

Typically, in Tamil cinema, Dalit women characters are

portrayed as powerless, lacking a voice on any issue in their lives, and having a limited understanding of how to manage their lives. But, Ranjith film Dalit women characters are represented as being able to speak their minds and support their husbands in pursuits such as boxing. Sarpatta portrayals challenge the typical stereotype of Dalit women being submissive and powerless.

G. Flavors of Resistance: Depicting Dalit Cuisine in Sarpatta Parambarai

The consumption of beef shot in film is very rare and sensitive in Indian film industry, and the consumption of beef by Dalits will also rare in films, which may lead to protested. While there have been instances of beef consumption being depicted in Tamil cinema, it is relatively rare, and the representation of beef and Dalit cuisine in Tamil cinema often reflects broader social and political debates.

Indian films, consumption of beef has been portrayed as a symbol of resistance against Brahminical oppression. Some have portrayed it as a means of challenging caste hierarchies and asserting cultural identity; however, such portrayals are often met with controversy, and many filmmakers choose to avoid the issue altogether. The representation of Dalit food in Ranjith's sarpatta portrays it as their primary cuisine, and depicts the consumption of beef with a sense of pride. In his films, he does not portray the act of eating beef as inherently wrong or sinful. Despite societal pressures for the Dalit community to conceal their consumption of beef, Ranjith's films have helped to increase respect for Dalit cuisine among others by representing it with pride and authenticity.

In Tamil cinema, the portrayal of beef and its connection to Dalit cuisine has been met with criticism from some quarters. However, for other films, the portrayal of beef consumption in Tamil cinema is seen as a way of highlighting the complex social and cultural issues that surround the consumption of beef in India, and the challenges that Dalits face in asserting their cultural identity and challenging caste-based discrimination. Although the Dalit community faces pressure from society to hide their consumption of beef, Ranjith's films have played a significant role in increasing respect for Dalit cuisine by authentically representing it with pride.

H. Linguistic Rhythms and Musical Flavors of Chennai's Slang

Linguistic rhythms" are the patterns and cadence of spoken language that contribute to the overall musicality of an utterance. In Chennai, these linguistic rhythms could refer to the unique patterns of Tamil slang or dialect that are used in the city and how these linguistic patterns intersect with its vibrant music scene.

Ranjith used the chennai slang in sarpatta and lyrics in the songs also carried the same flavor to give his characters a distinct identity and to create a sense of realism. In films like Madras and Kabali, Ranjith has incorporated chennai slang in songs with new rhythm with local music touch. Which was appreciated by the youths of the tamil audience - local dialect in lyrics of the songs and in dialogues making them more

authentic and relatable for Tamil audiences. The lyrics in sarpatta movies have a distinctive flavor because the local dialect frequently mix rhythmic beat of parai instrument with slang from Chennai. For instance, the main character Arya in "sarpatta" uses a lot of slang from Chennai, which helps to establish his connection to the city and its residents.

Pa Ranjith's use of Chennai slang in his films has contributed significantly to creating an authentic sense of place and identity. By incorporating local language and dialect, Ranjith has made his films more relatable and accessible to the audience while also establishing a strong connection between the characters and their surroundings. This use of Chennai slang adds to the realism and depth of his films, creating a unique and memorable experience for viewers.

I. Speaking Truth to Power: Political Commentary in Pa Ranjith's Cinema

Political commentary that is rooted in the reality of modern India, Sarpatta movie encourage viewers to consider the social and political systems that influence their daily lives. His movies are a potent vehicle for bringing about social change and raising public consciousness of significant political issues. Tamil cinema has always dealt with politics, but Sarpatta makes explicit references to the parties and individuals.

Ranjith has effectively portrayed the backdrop of the film set in the Emergency period through his visuals, without depicting any political demonstrations or protest speeches that occurred during that time. Both the ADMK and the CPI continue to offer their support to Mrs. Gandhi, and M.G. Ramachandran went to Delhi to personally convey his endorsement of the Emergency. He appeared hopeful that the central government would intervene to oust the DMK government.

At first, it appeared that the Tamil Nadu Government may have been taking a gamble by provoking the Center to impose President's Rule in the state, believing that this would significantly improve the party's chances in the upcoming elections (Forrester, 1976) [5].

DMK, AIADMK, or the Congress party are represented by prominent characters in the movie. There are explicit allusions to EVR Periyar, Ambedkar, Karunanidhi, MGR, Indira Gandhi, and even M K. Stalin. The film story is set in the backdrop of the Emergency period (1975).

The film in the background of emergency period in India, Dalits faced significant oppression and violence, with many being subjected to forced sterilization and other forms of human rights violations. The film also depicts how political parties exploit Dalits for their own gain, and how Dalit boxers were coerced into becoming rowdies to bolster the parties support during emergency period in India.

Another Political commentary in this film was under the background of MISA Act. The Indian government employed MISA to arrest political dissidents and journalists who voiced

their dissent against the government, with many of them being subjected to torture and other forms of abuse during detention. The extensive use of MISA and other emergency laws during the emergency period is widely regarded as a significant infringement of human rights and a challenge to democracy in India.

In the movie "Sarpatta Parambarai," Rangan Vaathiyar is a respected figure in his community because he has won significant matches for his club. Kabilan deeply respects his coach for his character and expertise in boxing. However, when Rangan Vaathiyar is arrested under MISA, Kabilan loses his motivation to continue practicing boxing. This ultimately leads him to engage in illegal activities, resulting in significant personal and professional problems.

3. Conclusion

The cinematic works of present-day Dalit filmmakers in India, such as Pa Ranjith, involve the use of resistant historiography. They employ innovative techniques in visuals, sound, music, and cinematography to challenge the stereotypical representation that Dalits have traditionally been subjected to. The objective of this paper is to evaluate and advocate for a political commentary and anti-caste aesthetics that is embodied in sarpatta films. The argument presented is that the filmmakers who understand the culture and real struggle of Dalit people are represented as realistic possible in a commercial film. Which not only disrupt the unconscious biases associated with Dalit representation in the background of caste, their thoughts and speech. With the help of filmic visual aesthetics and also create affective and expressive Dalit life film.

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