

The 'Distanced' Caste Subject and its Object of Relation in a Transcendental World: A Study of Select Tamil Movies By Kamal Haasan

Dr. Abilash Chandran¹, Abirami Abi²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Christ University,
abilashchandran.r@christuniversity.in, ORCID ID: 0009-0009-7137-250X

²Assistant Professor, Jain University, Research Scholar, Christ University, Department of English
abirami.av@jainuniversity.ac.in, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2750-5263

Abstract:

In this research paper, the significance of the complex position that the role of caste holds in Tamil Cinema and its characters is exemplified. The presence of how caste and why the characters are boxed in a particular fashion are analysed and questioned. Simultaneously, a divide between the hegemonic and the subordinate is displayed with interconnections. In this work, how and why Kamala Haasan's initial film characters were selected within the framework and how those characters representing marginalised groups removed the stereotypes are explained. This research follows a descriptive approach, applying a qualitative measure using popular culture's lens, namely distance by John Fiske. Sociological conceptualization and criticism of the caste system by M.K Gandhi, B.R Ambedkar and M.N Srinivas have also been used to frame the discussions on debates and positions on caste in the Indian context. In this paper, the analysis of the selected characters and their structure is explained, and how it has been modified with the assistance of cinema is reflected. The work's limitation is that it has only been exemplified in select Tamil movies acted by Kamal Haasan. The scope of the work is to draw further connections and explain the evolutionary transformation with particular reference to Tamil Cinema. The arguments raised in this research are summed up as conclusions.

Keywords: Tamil cinema, caste, distance, oppressed and varna system.

INTRODUCTION:

Caste as a sociohistorical phenomenon has undergone a tremendous and subtle transformation since Indian Independence. It has severely impacted Indian social life and has ingrained in the minds of people; it also reflects as a political discourse while essentially remaining as an unavoidable menace. It serves as a valid tool to capture vote banks (for mainstream politicians), disrupt dominant notions (for Dalit thinkers and activists) and appeal to the mass consciousness as far as popular media is concerned. The constant preoccupation with caste in India is not only because it is a reality that leaves indelible marks on one's social being in everyday life, but it is also because caste has continued to remain an irresolvable riddle till now. It is a riddle in its very epistemological nature, from Periyar, Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar, Gandhi, and M.N. Srinivas. From pioneers such as Ayothi Thass Pandithar, M.C Raja, Sivasanmugam Pillar, Rettamalai Srinivasan to modern Tamil Dalit intellectuals such as Bama, Cho Dharman, Imayam and Stalin Rajangam, many have attempted to address the issues of caste in their works and writings. Correspondingly, the growth of contemporary Tamil cinema stems from the presence of caste-based films, such as Nayagan (1987) and Chinna Gounder (1992). Contrastingly, challenging and removing the absence (normalising the marginalised) of caste, the stereotypes associated with it are being voiced out in films, for example, like Karnan (2021) and Pariyerum Perumal (2018). All these lead to the one unifying strain in their question: what is the varna-caste combine and its role in defining social hierarchy? Does varna assist a human belonging to the marginalised uplift themselves from their status? Does varna pave the way for caste to be propagated, or was varna a kind of pure consciousness that was later corrupted to become the castiest consciousness (as Gandhi would have it)? Is varna a fluid, plastic form of socio-psychological hierarchy that allows Tamil cinema of the past few decades to imagine a less rigid understanding of the phenomenon to exist? This article attempts to engage with this problem and exemplifies its various contradictions.

In this research, the role of caste is interconnected with the select Tamil movies and its characters are explained with examples. This paper reflects on the growth and initial status of Tamil Cinema, with the characters' growth mentioned. The first section of the paper reflects on how caste is structured within the varna system. The second section of the research states and cites the pioneers and thinkers' views of caste

in India. In the third section, the concept of distance from cultural studies and the culture of everyday life by John Fiske is explained. In the last section, an analysis of the character's structure is identified within their limits and how there is a division between the dominant and the subordinate is also discussed.

Historical Account of Indian Cinema and Caste

Walter Benjamin described cinema as an art form that is “capable of demonstrating how matter plays tricks on man.” “Hence” he says, “films can be an excellent means of materialistic representation.” (23). In the case of Indian cinema, it is a popular cultural form that engages with complex and multifaceted issues such as caste and other social inequalities. This reflects the varied discourses regarding these issues at different sociohistorical phases of the country since the early 20th century. Significant strides have been made in various technical aspects, such as production and storytelling. Additionally, cultural narratives have influenced stereotypes of caste mindset, religious bigotries, communal hatred, and patriarchy, as well as impacted projects, ideas and concepts such as nationalism (post-Independence era), anti-corruption movement and modernism, which has bogged down the progressive democratisation of the form. The very role of caste is intricately connected to upward mobilisation, patriarchy, religious and cultural institutions, and social mobilisation for the purpose of poll campaigns, and implementation of social justice measures such as reservation and redistribution of land. Cinema in various regional languages, as well as Bollywood, clearly demarcates caste boundaries, as do other regressive social tendencies, to discuss the various discourses that captivate the public imagination. Caste can be identified as fluid, as in various movies, the same construct is to the context of the film. The sad reality of oppression faced by people is projected to a limited extent in the initial context of Bollywood films. For instance, speaking in the context of Kachra's character in *Lagaan* (2001), Sudhanva Deshpande claims that “Dalit characters are by and large absent in commercial Hindi cinema. Excluded and silenced, the question of their positive portrayal therefore does not arise.” Similarly, Suraj Yengde lists out the following as among the limited movies that addressed the condition of the suppressed castes: “*Sujata* (1959), *Ankur* (1974), *Diksha* (1991), *Bandit Queen* (1994), and some non-Hindi films such as *Balayogini* (Child Saint; Tamil/Telugu, 1936), *Nandnar* (Tamil, 1942), *Rudraveena* (Telugu, 1988), *Mukta* (Marathi, 1994) and *Kottreshi Kanasu* (Kottreshi's Dream; Kannada, 1994)” Changes happen with the evolution of time. In recent years, a growing movement within the Indian film industry to challenge caste-based norms has been well recognised. Filmmakers like Nagraj Manjule, with movies such as *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016), have attempted to engage with the struggles and aspirations of Dalit characters and have provided a counter-narrative to the mainstream portrayal. Similarly, the film *Article 15* (2019) addresses the caste issues. In South Indian languages, with the arrival of Pa. Ranjith with *Attakathi* (2012), *Madras* (2014) and later with his launch into the mainstream with Rajinikanth as lead character in *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018) and introduction of Dalit filmmakers, such as Mari Selvaraj, via his production house, the cultural and mind scape of Tamil cinema was shaken up. Similarly, Mari Selvaraj's *Maamannan* (2023), Karnan, and *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) in Dalit film language and Karthik Subbaraj's *Jjigarthanda DoubleX* (2023) also made an impact in the film language for SC and ST communities. Dalit ideology is no longer an academic interest or the political vehicle of the marginalised communities; it has rather become the dominant discourse of Tamil commercial cinema; one can read the camouflaging of Dravidian discourse as Dalit narrative in the post-Ranjit era. Most importantly, in the last few decades, the fascination of the Indian viewing public with the fluid changes in social power of various caste groups in the hierarchy, which has largely remained mobile (standard) and in flux since the colonial era has led to camouflaging the caste question in the form of debates on justice, equality, and radical sociopolitical changes. Suraj Yengde makes an incisive analysis of this. Bollywood has successfully elided caste as a theme by subsuming it within categories of ‘the poor’, ‘the common man’, the hard-toiling Indian or, at times, the orphan (*Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* [1978] being one of the popular films in this category). This manoeuvre was promoted by parallel cinemas, such as art cinema and documentary film, which fused their own agenda of ‘populist stereotypes of the marginalised lives, hardly entering into the core debate of social realities’. Films such as *Awara* (1951), *Naya Daur* (1957), *Hum Hindustani* (1960), followed by those from the decade of the 1970s *Gopi* (1970), *Zanjeer* (1973), *Roti Kapada Aur Makaan* (1974), *Deewar* (1975), *Parvarish* (1977), *Khoun Pasina* (1977), *Kaala Patthar* (1979) provide fitting examples of a popular cinema informed by the struggles of the downtrodden, in which caste might be extrapolated—although it is rarely overt—as one of the variables producing subalternity.

In terms of Tamil films, 1930s saw the emergence of the new popular cultural medium Cinema in the theatre and it was welcomed with much enthusiasms by the marginalised communities, which created much anxiety in the minds of the dominant castes according to MSS Pandiyan: “Though this anxiety was

initially framed in terms of low cultural tastes of the subalterns and resolved within the binary of high culture vs low culture, the elites were soon confronted with newer problems. Quickly, they realised that Cinema as a medium carried the unwelcome possibility of upsetting and recasting the already existing and carefully patrolled boundaries between high culture and low culture." Realising the tremendous social influence, political scope, and business scope of Cinema, the elites soon gave up their preoccupation with Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam and invested heavily in films. Later in the 1950s, Dravida Kazhagam's offshoot party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, used the medium for its ideological and political propaganda and to engineer social changes. Since the chief ministers starting from Annadurai, Karunanidhi, and MG Ramachandran have been associated with Tamil cinema, progressive ideology has become inseparable or indistinguishable from the popular discourse of social realist movies. Tamil film scholar and historian Stalin Rajangam observes that the leftist narratives found in the eighties Tamil Cinema, such as Kan Sivanthaal Mann Sivakkum (1982), are a camouflaged pro-Dalit narrative. Even when engaging with anti-reformative or regressive notions, the movies have to disguise themselves as reformative and egalitarian. For example, 90s popular movies such as Yajaman (1993) and Chinna Gounder promote feudalistic and patriarchal tendencies but pack them within the discourse that speaks loudly of egalitarianism between the downtrodden village folk and the feudal lord, sacrifices done by the latter for the betterment of society and so on. Since narrating the audience stories of Dalit uprising against upper caste landlords would not be pleasing to the palate of the audience of the time, the narrative is presented in the proletariat versus capitalist framework. Similarly, the recent movies by Mari Selvaraj Karnan and Mamannan engage with Dalit politics in the vein of Dravidian party politics and historical events related to it. In this context, a specific and unique type of double or triple action films that dealt with caste fluidity, predominantly figuring Kamal Haasan in the lead, warrant a discussion, as they are unique in raising questions as to what is caste if anyone can be a part of any caste, how caste is identified and marked in characterisation of the films if there is caste conditional, how does 'distancing' enable the delineation of caste inequalities, and finally while we realise where it all begins in the films' narratives where does it all end and why it does not end even after the conflict is resolved in the story?

While there is significant research on caste inequalities in Indian cinema discourses, and Kamal Haasan's films such as Thevar Magan (1992) and Virumaandi (2004) have been criticised for promoting dominant caste ethos and inequities, the chosen movies on caste fluidity such as Apoorva Sagodharargal (1989) and Michael Madana Kama Rajan (1990) have not drawn enough interest in the film studies domain, which is the literature gap that warrants this discussion on the questions raised by above movies.

Methodology: The Concept of Distance and Caste Mobility

John Fiske used the concept of distance to engage with "the culture of everyday life" to show how the distance between the subject and the object of practise or the space occupied by the same can become an important marker of "difference between high and low culture, between the meanings, practices, and pleasures characteristic of empowered and disempowered social formations." (p. 154). While Fiske's theory largely focuses on cultural studies, popular media, and audience interpretation in the Western context, but on caste inequality and its expression in film discourses in the Indian context, his interventions in sociocultural constructs of inequality and exploitation suggest that the ideas hold potential to study how inequality is negotiated with in popular discourses such as Tamil cinema that takes a Gandhian approach to caste dynamics (such as those of Kamal Haasan mentioned in this article) in the context of Periyar and Ambedkar's strong critical stances on the same.

Fiske's theory identifies "distance" as a marker of difference between "high" and "low" culture, in which the dominant class often creates a distance between themselves and the "common" people. The reverence to "high culture" objects such as cinema and the transcendental presence of images that are detached from everyday life and its social and historical context may be seen as enabling film discourses to find a parallel with the caste system. The distancing is used to reinforce social hierarchies and establish control over in a state of proximity. The Indian caste system creates inequality and social rigidity by culturally drawing boundaries between people and establishing them by codifying the same in everyday experience. As these forms of graded inequality faces scrutiny and opposition from activists, intellectuals, and the oppressed people, a sociocultural context is set where the idea of caste and means to alleviate suffering from caste oppression are negotiated between various parties involved in the process, filmmakers being an important agent in such negotiations as cinema is an important sociocultural medium of social transformational discourse in India, especially in Tamil Nadu. A Fiskean method of analyzing how distancing is enforced or reduced via visualization of the everyday distancing between individuals through caste codification, though it has no precedent in such published scholarship, is seen as necessary for this study.

In the Tamil movies chosen for this study, characters who are doubles by birth and related by the umbilical cord, but cast aside the hierarchical spectrum by chance, engage and negotiate with caste power. The movies, by subconsciously raising notions of the varna system, show the lucid and fluid rise and fall of characters in the caste hierarchy chain. The article aims to study using Fiske's concept of distance to look at how the narrative uses space and distancing as a tool to realise this movement in the power dynamics in the chosen movies. Fiske looks at distance as a physical as well as metaphysical entity - the more the distance between the consumer of art ("spectator") and the object of consumption ("art object"), the more the sociocultural power and aesthetic significance, he claims in the context of popular culture. It is important to look at the same interpretation of the transposition of the physical into the metaphysical realm in the context of the caste system as narrativised by the movies in the plot context of double siblings separated across families, circumstances, and space, which provides fodder to the lack of upward mobility of characters in the caste ladder. The characters, though, who belong to the supposedly dominant caste, are constantly facing the threat of being dislocated and thrown into the hole of the lower caste domain, owing to the distancing of the body from the subject of the activity. To take one among the chosen films for research, Michael Madana Kama Rajan, for a specific example here, in one of its most popular comic scenes, a cook, Kameshwaran, belonging to the Brahmin varna (which is a caste as well), faces the anxiety of imminent ostracisation because of his accidental closeness with the meat. On the other hand, when the same character is later forced to take on the name and role of his Vaishya double, Madan, in disguise, he faces a similar threat. Interestingly while closeness to the object of pursuit as a Brahmin cook (vegetarian vs non-vegetarian material) causes dismay, obviously because of the possibility of pollution of the body by the non-vegetarian food, when the same challenge is presented in the context of pursuit of the object of Vaishya occupation - a large sum of money kept in a locker belonging to Madan - the closeness of the object causes further distress, possibly because of the pollution threat, though it is not as severe as the former. The pre-assumption of varna fluidity embedded within the movie narratives is coupled with the fear of disruption and imminent pollution, which fuels the dramatic anxiety in the films. The immanence of the worldliness (crime such as producing counterfeit money, abducting the victim, and so on) is juxtaposed to the transcendentalism of the business transactions, scientific research ("Dasavatharam") where the object of relation is forever banished to a time and space beyond the immediate and the immanent, and the spatiotemporal distance enables the presence of social power, made socioculturally possible by the caste markers.

Radical Thinkers vs Engraved Casteism:

Drawing from the literature and research status, this article will provide a brief sketch of scholarly contributions of a few important Indian thinkers on caste. Pioneers such as Jyothi Rao Phule voiced for Dalit empowerment and addressed the caste discrimination faced by the marginalized. The foremost among them was the champion of the movement to annihilate caste - Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. His understanding of caste was much nuanced and significant. For example, he claimed that the untouchables were never untouchable to start with. They occupied a higher position in the hierarchy before changes in the sociopolitical scenario, such as invasions, Brahmanical interventions, and changing patterns of empires, reversed their social position.

"It is clear that impure work was done by the slaves and that the impure work included scavenging. The question that arises is: Who were these slaves? Were they Aryans or non-Aryans? That slavery existed among the Aryans admits of no doubt. An Aryan could be a slave of another Aryan. No matter what Varna an Aryan belonged to, he could be a slave. A Kshatriya could be a slave. So could a Vaishya. Even a Brahmin was not immune to the law of slavery. It is when Chaturvarna came to be recognised as a law of the land that a change was made in the system of slavery." (Ambedkar 56). Ambedkar notes that by the time Chaturvarna was codified, slavery had changed from a fluid to a non-fluid construct. Slaves could now be made in a descending manner only. "The new law declared that a Brahmin could have a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and a Shudra as his slave. A Kshatriya could have a Kshatriya, a Vaishya and a Shudra as his slaves. A Vaishya could have a Vaishya and a Shudra as his slaves. A Shudra could have a Shudra only." As per this shift in slavery codification, a Kshatriya could be a slave in the household of a Brahmin, but not in the household of a Vaishya, and so forth. Can a Brahmin remain a slave, too? Yes, he could, provided his master is a Brahmin. This was the phase in the Indian caste system when the purification-impurification binary was present in terms of higher castes, too. A Brahmin or a kshatriya, too, could do scavenging, but not for anyone below their caste status. Ambedkar observes that "it is, therefore, obvious that the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas who are admittedly the Aryans did the work of scavengers which is the filthiest of filthy occupations." (57)

The Fourth Varna – How the Varna System could be Self-generative

In *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946), Ambedkar describes how the varna system was a system in flux. It was not as rigid as the present caste system. He notes that there were initially only three varnas, not four. Shudras were not part of the original plan – only Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas formed the three-varna system. Then, where did the Shudra come from? According to Ambedkar, they were Kshatriyas debased and ousted from the varna system, owing to their bitter conflicts with the Brahmins. The Brahmins refused to perform Upanayana to the Shatriya-cum-Shudras, which led to their ultimate degradation and the formation of the fourth varna to accommodate them. It is interesting to note here how, unlike the commonly held notion of caste as an identity inherited by birth, Ambedkar built a case for caste as being a lot more fluid in its attribution of identity and status to certain communities over time and how it could be seen as possessing a sociocultural plasticity (though, of course, detrimental to social well-being).

The Broken Men: Outsiders to the Oppressed

In *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* (1948) Ambedkar counters the commonly considered belief that the Dalits were made untouchable in terms of their occupation as scavengers and their resulting lowest social status. He claims that Dalits were not outcasts to begin with. For example, though there are mentions of the soon-to-be-formed Dalits (Antyajias) in the Rig Veda (between 1500 and 1000 BCE) and Mahabharata (circa 3102 BCE), they were not untouchable in either of them. Rather, they were broken men – people living outside the village boundaries. He even says that "there was no untouchability in the time of Manu. There was only Impurity" (111). According to him, there were slaves within the four varnas, not outside them. This means what is considered the subject position of the Dalits at present was occupied by all four varnas. This also means that a Brahmin could have also dealt with the impure and sullied himself. He could have worn the mask of a 'Dalit' (metaphorically speaking), though only within the clan of the Brahmins. Ambedkar rejects racial difference and occupation theories as plausible explanations for the origin of the untouchables. He insists, in conclusion, that the Brahmanical contempt for Buddhists could have been a reason for a community to be ostracised as untouchable at a certain stage in Indian history. Interestingly, through the course of his argument, Ambedkar does envision a past society that was without untouchability. Such a society had a system of division of people, but those whom we now consider as Dalits were "Broken People" living outside the village of the four varnas. "The foregoing researches and discussions have proved that there was a time when the village in India consisted of a Settled Community and Broken Men and that though both lived apart, the former inside the village and the latter outside it, there was no bar to social intercourse between the members of the Settled Community and the Broken Men" (19–20). He claims that as these Broken Men began consuming beef, they were ostracised as untouchables (which has resonance with the beef ban movement of the radical Right in India now, with Muslims taking the place of the untouchables). So, how do we measure the status of these Broken Men who were outside the Varna framework? Nothing stops us from imagining these Broken Men to be on par with the Brahmins, Vaishyas, or Kshatriyas, though they were beyond such a classification. If certain people are not unequal, then they are equal to all, right? So, by going back to the early Indian history of castes in their larva stage, Ambedkar imagines a non-Dalit subjecthood for the Dalits. While in the films we are about to discuss, caste mobility is imagined within the caste framework using Varna beliefs. Ambedkar imagines this as a non-Dalit, pre-caste subjecthood compared to post-caste Dalit subjecthood. Another important difference is that in the films to be discussed, the imagination takes place in terms of mostly the middle castes and the upper castes, and rarely regarding the Dalits. However, recent Dalit cinema has begun reclaiming narrative space to foreground the lived experience and resistance of Dalit communities. In her analysis of Mari Selvaraj's *Maamannan* (2023), Abi shows how the film offers a radical departure from caste invisibilization in Tamil cinema. Through powerful metaphors, anti-caste imagery, and symbolic use of the Parai drum, pigs, and songs, the film foregrounds a Dalit father-son duo's struggle for dignity and justice. The transformation of "Mannu" (mud) into Maamannan (emperor) becomes a metaphor for caste assertion and self-worth. Selvaraj rejects dominant cinematic norms to envision a new aesthetic and political language for Dalit subjectivity, guided by icons such as Ambedkar, Periyar, and Buddha (Abi 2023). Unlike films that focus primarily on middle-caste mobility, *Maamannan* challenges systemic oppression and articulates a vision of Dalit liberation from within the framework of caste experience itself.

Gandhi's Justification of the Varna: Individual versus Social Fluidity

Gandhi's clarifications and justification of varna are controversial and contestable. He claims that it is "a predetermination of the choice of man's profession". It is "a law of heredity" since a man's varna structure must follow his ancestors' profession. It is a system the Hindus discovered for their welfare and development. Gandhi compares this discovery to Newton's discovery of the law of gravitation. Varna is a system disassociated and detached from caste, which is a "travesty of varna that has degraded Hinduism and varna". Isn't the varna system one of social oppression, one that engenders inequality and exploitation? Gandhi considers varna to be beyond such negative associations, since he looks at it through his lens of idealism. He imagines a Vedic age in which people belonging to all four varnas were treated and considered equal. So a "carpenter's son never wanted to become a lawyer" since the latter was not a lucrative position then. But, as M.N. Srinivas points out, Brahmins were of higher status and were closely associated with the ruling class. This, in fact, later led to a conflict between the two varnas. So, Gandhi's conception of an egalitarian varna-based ancient India might be misplaced idealism.

But what is important here is that Gandhi conceived of the varna as a system of fluidity, though not social but individual-based. It allowed people to choose and pursue a way of life without compromising their ambition and mission to fulfil their economic needs, as it happens in a modernist industrialised society, as Gandhi understood it to be. But isn't the hereditary occupation model inherently unjust and oppressive? Gandhi justified it by saying that material development is inferior to spiritual development, and that varna enables one to pursue spiritual development without worrying over material acquisitions, since everyone was assured some kind of monetary sustenance within the varna system, which the industrialised world does not usually permit. But in his zeal to promote and protect varna, Gandhi refuses to consider the soul-destroying function of a socially oppressive system such as varna. He may justify the degrading nature of varna as caste in the present day as not representative of the original ideal system. So he exhorted the higher castes to treat those of lower castes with dignity and kindness, and claimed that one could be a Brahmin, Vaishya or Kshatriya irrespective of one's birth. Gandhi himself is an example of such fluidity he was born a Vaishya but pursued a profession in straddling law and political leadership. Ambedkar's main point of difference from Gandhi is in the negligible importance he gave to social structures in enabling inequality, oppression, and human degradation. Ambedkar claimed that varna is not an ideal form that later degenerated, but that it was the seed from which the monstrous tree of caste took root and flourished. So he refused to accept the social fluidity of varna. For example, Gandhi never considered whether he could have grown to be the Father of the Nation if he were an untouchable himself. Gandhi considered only the individual fluidity that the varna and caste system accorded. How did Gandhi understand individual fluidity in terms of varna? Gandhi's understanding might be based on the premise that the goal of any human life is spiritual realisation. One's occupation is a tool to achieve this goal. So, since it is the goal, not the tool, that determines one's greatness, all are the same. In his "Talks with an American Clergyman", Gandhi claims that a wood chopper and the president of a nation are one and the same according to Hinduism. He says that even Gladstone used to chop wood, and so Lincoln could also chop wood, and there is nothing degrading in it. The clergyman argues that one may chop wood out of an interest, but that should not be construed as one's fixed occupation or calling. Here, Gandhi reasserts his belief that one's calling could never be the presidency but the pursuit of spiritual growth. But this justification of varna hardly holds water since it again fails to consider the degrading and oppressive nature of social stratification based on one's profession and social standing.

Varna according to M.N. Srinivas: Sanskritisation and Westernisation

In India, Social Structure, M.N. Srinivas notes that the four varnas sprang out of two classes mentioned in the "earliest literature": the fair- and dark-skinned people, the Arya and Dasa, meaning respectively the non-natives and natives. From this distinction came the "Brahma, Ksatra and vis", which were finally divided further into the four varnas. Though the occupations of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya were defined in Vedic literature as known now, those of the Vaisya and Sudra are not so clearly defined. The village headman was a vaisya, and his servants were sudras. So, the Vaisya were not businessmen in those times. In the post-Vedic period, the caste system was consolidated and rationalised by the Brahmin, whose political clout had grown tremendously by then (3). Then, in the 6th Century, came the "Kshatriya movement against Brahmanical supremacy" Buddhism, which is also a counter-Vedic religious movement and a social protest against the rigid caste system of the times. The Bhakti movement, according to M. N. Srinivas, is a similar rupture that took place in the socio-religious fabric of Hinduism. It was "a protest ... against the division of human beings into high and low castes". But the Bhakti movement transformed

ultimately into a parallel effort at reconstituting the caste system, as the Karnataka version of the Bhakti movement, the Linkayats, who initially were progressive and anti-casteist and invited people from lower castes, including the Dalits, to join them, later turned into a "congeries of small, endogamous jatis" (4). The same fate awaited another branch of the Bhakti movement, the followers of Kabir. Thus, the Bhakti movement historically represented yet another social movement towards imagining the caste structure as a fluid phenomenon.

This was followed by the ultimate transformation phenomenon called colonisation. Education, wealth and social mobilisation were enabled by the British rulers, so that India progressed from being a conglomerate of local agrarian communities to a land of educated and cultured communities (vying with each other to progress and occupy a higher place in the caste hierarchy) who would be ideal consumers of industrially produced goods imported from England. With the coloniser promoting Westernisation, rationalism, and democratic values such as equality and fraternity, the colonised people of India realised that they could be equal to others. But there is a catch: they are not equal to anybody; rather, they want to be equal to the Brahmins. In his *Social Change in Modern India*, M.N. Srinivas' social mobilisation of the lower castes took place in a much more robust and aggressive manner during the British Raj, as has never been seen in Indian history. Educational, economic and political opportunities provided by the Raj helped certain castes grow wealthy, and as a result, they sought a higher ritual status in the caste hierarchy. The tools they employed for this were Westernisation and Sanskritisation. Many castes, including the "Oliman castes of East India ..., the Noniyas (salt-makers) of Uttar Pradesh, the Kolis of coastal Gujarat and the Kharwas of Saurashtra" shifted positions in the caste hierarchy. What about the untouchables? Yes, they are too. For example, the "Ganjam Harijan" community grew rich by tapping into International trade in hides and skins, objects that traditionally defiled and defined their untouchable status. The newly acquired wealth eventually translated into a higher caste status for them (96). So the Britishers became the enablers of caste mobility in India. But this was not a novelty, claims M.N. Srinivas. In ancient times in India, "any caste that achieved political power at the local level could advance a claim to be Kshatriyas. Second, the king in traditional India had the power to promote as well as to demote castes, and he occasionally exercised this power to bestow a favour on a caste or punish it." However, the king cannot promote or demote arbitrarily; if the affected communities resented it, they would flee the kingdom, as they were predominantly agrarian communities, and cultivable land was freely available throughout the nation. So fearing such discontent and resultant migration, the king negotiated between the demands of the Brahmins (whom he consulted in such matters) and the resentment of the agrarian communities. According to M.N. Srinivas, the Britishers promoted this traditional fluidity to a great extent, but they also functioned as a nodal point of negotiation between higher and lower castes in terms of social mobilisation (as the kings did once).

Varna in the Collective Unconscious in Tamil Movies

We have seen how various thinkers, social reformists and theorists have conceived of the varna system as a fluid conceptual entity, each in their own domain. Now let's discuss how the varna is imagined by the collective unconscious of the Tamil film audience. Tamil cinema is unique in imagining and visualising caste transformations and their ensuing complications. In Tamil cinema, we come across situations where characters shift their caste roles in a bottom-to-top or top-to-bottom manner. In *Ore Oru Gramathile* (1987), a Brahmin woman feigns to be a Dalit, exploits the reservation policy and gets the job of a collector. In *Idhu Namma Aalu* (1988), a Dalit puts on a disguise as a Brahmin to make a living as a priest. Both disguises create immense stress and complications for the characters. While the former is placed on the plane of ethics, the latter functions on the plane of progressive change. In Shankar's films, caste disguises function in the domain of metaphorical social transformations. A Kshatriya or a Brahmin is not a social being but a construct within the framework of his social reformation ideas, concept of masculinity and aesthetics. On the other hand, we find such a transformation or caste status shift happening outside the silver screen, in the realm of stardom image construction. Rajinikanth was built as a middle-caste icon, with films such as *YaEjaman* (1993) and *Muthu* (1995), among others, that were released in the nineties. Though there was a lack of clear caste markings, he represented the landed gentry of a particular region in such films. In *YaEjaman*, it was implied that he represented the Gounder community. Apart from this, Rajinikanth always voiced an overt Hindu religious fervour through his character and hero introduction songs in the films. He titled his films as *Annamalai* (1992) and *Arunachalam* (1997) to explicitly state his piety and devotion towards Saivite gods. This is in marked difference from other mass market heroes such as Kamal Hasan, Vijayakanth, and Sharath Kumar who portrayed characters representing certain powerful

communities in Tamil Nadu, such as Devars, Gounders and Nadars. But they stayed clear of religious affiliation. Rajinikanth, during this period, was clearly moving towards a pro-RSS and Hindutva ideology. He even made public his close association with BJP leaders such as Advani and Modi. So, Rajinikanth was never a poster boy of the progressive thinkers and writers in Tamil. They castigated him for his regressive and male-chauvinistic views (expressed in his film dialogues) and his political leanings towards Hindutva ideology (in real life). Then came a sudden transformation in the image of Rajinikanth with the release of the Dalit filmmaker Ranjith's *Kabali*. With *Kabali*, Rajini's image shifted from being a pro-Hindutva majoritarian, cattiest actor to a pro-Dalit, progressive icon leading the struggle of the untouchables in the state. Interestingly, this switchover in Rajinikanth's caste image took place suddenly, without ideological justifications or discussions, purely in the cultural domain, in the collective unconscious of the masses, as much outside the aesthetic framework of filmmaking as it is within the framework. Thus, this becomes an example for middle-to-bottom transformation of caste status, though in the process of an actor's image-building. Interestingly, such a middle-to-bottom caste status shift was also successfully imagined in the career of M G Ramachandran during the construction of his image as the saviour of the masses. In Madurai, *Veeran* (1956) M G Ramachandran played the character of the Dalit legend and leader Madurai Veeran. He represented the undue exploitation of the courageous Veeran at the hands of the king from the royal caste and his eventual death sentence. With this film, M G Ramachandran enabled the Arundathiyars, a Dalit community, to reimagine him as their caste leader. Later, M G Ramachandran achieved a similar caste metamorphosis within and outside the film framework by portraying a fisherman in *Meenava Nanban* (1977). This transformation is visualised a little differently M G Ramachandran, in his appearance and characterisation, appears unlike an uncouth and uneducated fisherman in the film. The title also claims that he was the "friend" of the fishermen's community, not a fisherman in identity. So this is a quasi-caste metamorphosis.

Kamal Hasan and Caste Transformation:

Kamal Hasan, through this kind of political positioning of himself as one belonging to the dominant caste, yet the awakened, liberal-minded one, one who takes the cudgel on behalf of the oppressed communities. So, he is a Brahmin (by birth) and yet not Brahmanical (as a Gandian and Periyarist in terms of ideology, a critic of caste system and a meat eater by choice) (Salim, 2024; Nath, 2016). Kamal Haasan's influence in screenplay and direction of films in which he stars is documented, and hence it is largely obvious that structuring and positioning of caste transformation within the story and in scenes reflect his position in the larger social debate on caste inequality (Kumar, 2019; Ramesh, 2020). In his comedies, this double positioning is achieved much more smoothly and in a subtler fashion. In some of his comedies, the middle-caste protagonists or supporting characters disguise themselves as Brahmins, or caste identity confusion happens because of misunderstanding or deceit. Kamal Hasan here uses this plot device to question the rigid positioning of castes in our social structure and prejudices, as well as stereotypes related to this. In Michael Madana Kama Rajan (1990), he Kamal uses the commonly employed plot device of newborn children lost and brought up by people belonging to different sociocultural, economic and caste backgrounds. M G Ramachandran's *Kudiyirundha Koyil* (1968) and *Enga Veetu Pillai* (1965) are examples. In these films it is mostly emphasised that even though a person's caste backdrop and status shifts temporarily and as a result his or her (mostly his) personality is distinctly changed too, he or she invariably relapses/recuses to his or her "original" nature – which is the native behavioural pattern of his family identity, which could be interpreted as the "original" caste identity. *Kudiyirundha Koyil* is a good example. In this film, the "socially misplaced" child, brought up by a crime lord, grows into a thief, but he later, once he finds his family and realises his real identity, smoothly shifts back to his original position as a socially responsible and morally upright man. But in *Enga Veetu Pillai*, a similarly misplaced child is brought up by a farmer in an innocent and straightforward family environment. His brother is brought up in his family home by his deceitful uncle, and he grows into an inhibited and diffident personality. So, we have an exactly opposite scenario here in comparison with the previously mentioned film. So, the characters, after they grow up, are misplaced by accident again. They end up living in new households, and their personalities fit perfectly there. So, the characters' "original nature" is shown as plastic and malleable in this film. A person's personality is not constant, but rather constantly evolving/hacentreenter to fall back on, and they would express their identity and essence itself contingent on the to depending on the sociocultural backdrop in that emerges in the film's scenes or sequences which drop he finds himself in. If we consider the two different families that bring up these two persons as metaphors of (higher and lower) castes, we may get a progressive picture of caste fluidity. The caste

disguises and transformations that Kamal Hasan's comedies visualize follow a pattern similar to the above-mentioned movie by M G Ramachandran. To analyze this aspect of his comedies and sci-fi fantasy movies, let us take a closer look at the character crossovers in two films in the late 80s and through to the 90s and 2000s, both featuring Kamal Hasan in the protagonist's role: *Apoorva Sagodharargal* (1989) and, *Avvai Shanmughi* (1996), *Michael Madana Kama Rajan* and *Dasavadaram*. All four films follow the confusion that ensues when twins, quadruplets, unrelated doubles, or a person in two disguised roles cross paths. Using this plot device, these films imagine what would ensue if men from certain castes were transplanted outside their familiar boundaries, in alien community scenarios.

In *Apoorva Sagodharargal*, caste identity is not let out openly, but subtly suggested with the names of the main characters. Kamal Hasan appears in three roles in this film. He is an upright, courageous police inspector, Sethupathy. The name is common in the Thevar community, and is an indirect reference to the title given to the marava community leaders during the beginning of the 17th Century in Ramnad and Sivaganga regions in Tamil Nadu. Sethu in the name refers to the pilgrimage places in Sethusamudram, and pathi is the guardian. So the name implies that the community's leaders once served as chieftains under Nayak rulers and protected the pilgrims. Director Bala's *Sethu* (1999) and S.U. Arunkumar's *Sethupathi* (2016) feature courageous and ruthless male protagonists with caste markers for the Thevar community. The names of the villains – Dharmaraj, Francis Anbarasu, Nallasivam and Satyamurthy, imply they mostly hail from the middle castes. The villains cruelly slay Sethupathi after he arrests them on gold smuggling charges. So, the film begins with a metaphorical battle for power and wealth between the powerful middle caste groups in Tamil Nadu. Sethupathi's twin sons escape the villain's reach and grow up in entirely different environments. The younger one is adopted and brought up by Muniyamma in a slum. The name Muniyamma and the slum backdrop suggest she could be a Dalit. So, the younger son, Raja, grows up into a Dalit. He is naïve, smooth-talking, and charming with women. His elder brother Appu grew up in a circus, brought up by his affectionate mother, and under a progressive-thinking boss who has adopted him as his protégé. Which among these two sons is the avenger is the question posed by the movie: "Who is the avenger of the Father's death?". Since the actions and traits of characters in the film are metaphors for the inter-caste conflicts for political power and wealth, the question we must ask is: whom do these twins now represent? We have identified the younger son as a Thevar in temporary disguise as a Dalit. Similarly, the elder son's proclivity towards intelligence, trickery, guile, and his midget appearance might remind us of the mythical figure Vamana – the fifth avatar of Lord Vishnu. According to Hindu mythology, Vishnu is incarnated as a dwarf mendicant Brahmin to kill the Asura King Mahabali. Mahabali sponsors a sacrifice and performs a gift-offering ceremony for the Brahmins. When the midget Brahmin approached the king, the latter was mildly amused and asked him to request any amount of material wealth. But the midget Brahmin surprises and amuses him further by asking for three paces of land. The king is much more amused with this demand, and so instantly grants the wish, thus underestimating the immenseness of God's presence. Vamana suddenly grows into a giant of cosmic proportions; he covers the earth and the heavens with his two steps, and asks the astounded king for the third pace of land the humbled king offers his head, which Vamana steps upon to send him to the patala, the mythical underworld. These mythical tales could have played a huge role in establishing the stereotype of the guileful Brahmin in Indian society. Kamal's role as the midget son avenging his father's death plays upon this stereotype – he teases and tempts the villains, who initially mock his short stature, into traps, and then kills and disposes of them in the goriest manner imaginable. One is stricken with arrows and smashed with a sledgehammer; a tiger is set upon the second, who is mangled and tore into pieces; the third is made to shoot himself in a scene of great cruelty, fun, and pathos; the fourth and leader of the villains is made to fall amidst the circus lions – he is brutally attacked and torn apart by the predators as the shocked audience watch in stunned silence. The midget son achieves all this without his physically stronger brother's assistance; in fact, he even saves his fitter brother from pursuing police and villains a few times. If we read this whole narrative as a parable for Tamil Nadu political history, we get a more complete and clearer picture when we consider the twins, representing Dalits and Brahmins, as combining forces to defeat the middle castes. The Dravidian Parties (AIADMK and DMK) that have been ruling Tamil Nadu for the past half a century are seen as a movement of the middle castes against the upper caste Brahmins. V. Geetha apprising the Dravidian rule in Tamil Nadu points out that though the Dravidian Parties have implemented progressive policies that helped in the social and economic advancement of the "Backward Castes" (which included the middle castes and the Dalits – the "touchables: and the "untouchables"), these rulers have always sided with the "touchables"

whenever as conflict arose. "Dalit intellectuals have argued that while Dravidian rule might have brought some gains for sections of the Backwards Classes, it has also perpetuated discrimination and violence against Dalits. Regardless of what party the members of any caste might prefer, their political authority—and so social authority—is often deployed against Dalits, with the tacit support of local bureaucracies often staffed with their caste fellows. In several crucial respects, the Dravidian movement's insistence on social justice has failed to hold out against the complex realities of social and economic change in the state, as well as against obstinate casteism and patriarchy." (Geetha, V) Sameera Ahmed asserts that the Dravidian political ideology is indeed a "hate narrative" against the Brahmins, who – she claims – are politically marginalised. "Not even one among the 234 MLAs in the Tamil Nadu Assembly is a Brahmin." Interestingly, in her article, Sameera Ahmed also takes the attack to the "well-off members" of the middle castes, under the umbrella term of the "backwards classes", who siphon off the reservation privileges intended for the Dalits. The "idealism which once symbolised the Dravidian movement is now in shambles. DMK Chief Karunanidhi continues to propagate a narrative of hatred against Brahmins, which is often laughable. ... the party has continued to pay lip-service to the Dalits even as tensions simmer between the Dalits and OBCs." So, a battle line is drawn between the Dravidian ideology-chanting middle castes and the Brahmins. And where does the Dalit hold their forte in this battle? Where does their loyalty lie?

A 2007 political report on Bahujan Samajwadi Party supremo Mayavati's ascendancy in the Uttar Pradesh electoral scene thrones her as the "Dalit Queen, Now Brahmin Messiah". Mayavati gave tickets to 89 Brahmin candidates to counter the Yadav populace supporting her opposition force, Mulayam Singh Yadav. Her Dalit-Brahmin alliance proved to be a winning formula. She won 206 seats and became the chief minister. Sagarin, in his blog post, argues in favour of the Dalit-Brahmin alliance to overcome the powerful empire of the middle castes. He argues against the Amdedkarite narrative that Brahmins created the ideology (Manu Dharma) that drives the hateful, oppressive and hegemony-promoting caste system. Sagarin claims that even if the Brahmins were "keepers of rituals" that impose and reinstate caste beliefs, the ruling and business (middle) castes – Kshatriyas and Vaishyas – threatened the "timid Brahmins" to convert the narrative of occupational characteristics into that of "birth". The narrative implied is one of varna. He justifies this stand by claiming that Brahmins were too few in number and are not known for aggression, and so they would not have had the wherewithal to propagate the caste system. Rather, speaking from experience, he claims that Brahmins are more friendly towards Dalits than the middle castes. Moreover, the landowning middle-caste communities have more at stake in maintaining caste oppression since they need the cheap labour called Dalits. Also taking cognisance of the rampant violence against the Dalits engineered by middle castes in Tamil Nadu, he asserts that Brahmins never carry out such violence. He lists leaders from the Brahmin community who have worked towards the liberation of the Dalits: "Sankara", "Vaidyanatha Iyer", "Ramanujacharya", and "Bharathiar".

In an excerpt from Saathi Intru (2014), an important anti-caste, pro-Dalit proclamation, C. Latchumanan, Stalin Rajankam, J. Balasubramaniam, A. Jagannathan, and Anbu Selvam succinctly and emphatically state that the current atrocities against the Dalits and their resultant miseries are caused by middle castes (caste Hindus), and not the Brahmins (religious Hindus). This anti-caste narrative might be seen to soften the blows against the Brahmins. Caste existed in India much before Brahmins regularised and ritualised it. When Brahmins came to the fore in the age of the Chola empires in Tamil Nadu, they were used by the middle castes to subjugate the Dalits. When the Brahmins made the best use of the opportunities in the newly established bureaucracy under the British Raj, resentment was felt by prominent middle castes such as Vellalars. This led to the establishment of Tamil Nationalist parties such as the Justice Party (whose offshoot was DMK), which had the sole purpose and ideology of Brahmin opposition. This proclamation by the Dalit scholars might be read as disregarding the social justice narrative of the pro-Dravidian ideologues. The emerging picture could be that the middle castes created and propagated caste oppression for their selfish gains, and they utilised Brahmins for their ends. The proclamation might be seen as very subtly washing the sins of caste superiority away from the Brahmins and establishing the middle castes as the sole target for the Dalits. Interestingly, once atoned, the Brahmins' path towards joining hands with the Dalits in politics and cultural spheres could be seen as to have been cleared. Also, it is to be noted that this proclamation handles varna gently and seems to almost forgive it for serving as a foundation for caste (as caste existed before Manu created the varna). Coming back to Apoorva Sagodaragal, we could see how the film could be interpreted as setting up a narrative of Dalit-Brahmin alliance brutally demolishing

the social order of the caste Hindus (the middle castes). But this could only be a temporary daydream – once the twins come to know of their true identity, they leave behind the disguises of Dalit and Brahmin masks and go back to their middle-caste fold. But, on the other hand, while the film sounds progressive in stating that a person's original nature is shaped by the circumstances in which he is raised and not by his caste or birth, it could be read as reinstating caste stereotypes as it treats caste markers as metaphors and plays upon them (A middle-caste man, brought up as a Brahmin, still exhibits the stereotypical Brahmanical guile and intelligence).

The disguise plot device in these films could be interpreted as enabling the movie makers and audience to imagine the complications, absurdities and excitement that a caste status crossover could give rise to, but which is quite impossible to experience for the majority of the Tamil public. Seen from this perspective, one could claim that Tamil audiences have a deeply set subconscious desire to temporally collapse and travel past caste boundaries in imagination, but still stay within the oppressive and entrenched boundaries in reality.

The Fiskean concept of distance between the high and low in social hierarchy as manifested in popular culture enables us to further analyze the problem. As he points out, instead of being deceived by the visual media as a passive viewer, the audience would benefit from selectively looking at points of identification and distance (1987). In this context an analysis of how the audience would make sense of caste mobilization with regard to movements across caste codified spaces by characters who are born into middle castes and who easily slip into dominant caste roles and exploit the caste markers to achieve their objectives paints a picture of caste negotiation, criticism of caste rigidity and oppression while not proposing a complete annihilation of the caste system. In a Fiskean analysis one might note that the usage of doubles and their transformation in the caste hierarchy points out 'transcending' caste identity, through the stratified space of graded inequality, while retaining the contingent identity and caste marker one is raised but not born into is put forward as an alternative by these select Kamal Haasan movies. Fiske observes that when media enables one to transcend the material conditions culturally it ensures that one remains at the same unequal social status and the process of distancing oneself or one's experience from the world or space is intrinsically problematic.

CONCLUSION:

This research focuses on the evolution and transformation of casteism in the select Tamil films. This paper does not justify the Varna system; however, it aims to study and understand how the collective consciousness of Indians imagines a fluidity and flexibility within the rigid caste system, through popular cultural forms such as cinema. The need for such a scope for imagination is this: it is the fluidity imagined that enables Indians to tolerate the rigidity in the caste system in reality. The concept of varna could also be looked at in this fashion. Thus, caste and varna occupy binary positions within the Indian collective consciousness. Cinema serves as a space where casteism was in the initial period to the contemporary times, breaking the traditional stereotypes associated with the movie characters, which is witnessed with pro-Dalit films. In this paper, the complicity of each character and how they were projected are noted. As examples of the wide spectrum of how Tamil films with doubles consider caste negotiations, it considers a detailed analysis of Michael Madana Kama Rajan and Apoorva Sagodharargal. The scope of this research paper is to approach different movie characters with a new notion. In this research, the analysis focuses only on select Tamil Kamal Haasan films, as it is the limitation of the paper.

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