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## Mari Selvaraj, 'Maamannan', and the Cinema of Caste in Tamil Nadu

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A theatrical poster for *Maamannan*, directed by Mari Selvaraj. The film is explicitly a work on casteism and representation in electoral politics – and a response, Selvaraj has claimed, to the 1992 hit *Thevar Magan*. Photo: Red Giant Movies / Wikimedia Commons

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# Mari Selvaraj, 'Maamannan', and the cinema of caste in Tamil Nadu

A new generation of Tamil filmmakers are confronting the caste-glorification films of the past – but controversy is often quick to follow, and Tamil cinema's history with caste is more complex than many recognise

In June, during a televised extravaganza to debut the original music for his latest release, *Maamannan*, the director Mari Selvaraj ran into controversy. In the presence of Kamal Haasan, one of the Tamil film industry's biggest stars, he made some critical comments on *Thevar Magan* – a 1992 release, starring Haasan, that is considered a landmark of Tamil cinema, and has become an emblem of caste pride for the Thevar community. Selvaraj said he was deeply affected by the film – to the point that the hero of *Maamannan* is based on Isakki, a character in *Thevar Magan*, where he appears as a loyal and subservient aide to the protagonist – and also acknowledged that it was celebrated by many directors for its cinematic language. But, alongside this, he implied that *Thevar Magan* had had a troubling impact on society. An open letter written by Selvaraj to Haasan some years ago also came to light, where he accused not just the film but also the veteran actor of being casteist.

As Haasan's fans rushed to his defence, those claiming anti-caste ideals extended their support to Selvaraj. The director soon clarified that the misunderstanding between him and Haasan was like one between a son and his father, but the controversy continued past the film's release in late June. This did not affect the film's success, but brought to the fore an energetic and ongoing debate on caste and representation in Tamil cinema, with Selvaraj and *Maamannan* at the centre of the latest skirmish as a new wave of anti-caste films challenge the Tamil film industry's old ways.

Of late, Tamil films challenging caste oppression have become subjects of considerable debate in the media as well as elite intellectual circles. Recent films by the directors T J Gnanavel, Pa Ranjith and Vetrimaaran,

as well as Selvaraj's releases, have been read as contributing to anti-caste discourse, besides being commercially successful. *Maamannan* – meaning “emperor” or “king of kings” – is a case in point. It tells the story of a politician, Maamannan, and his son Athiveeran, Dalits from the Arunthathiyar community who have seen the worst of society and politics. (Warning: Spoilers ahead.) Maamannan rises to become the speaker of the legislative assembly, going from a person earlier expected to remain standing in front of the powerful to one who will now be the first to take a seat before others, including the chief minister, can take theirs. Along the way, the film unpacks not just casteism in society, but also the difficulties involved in the politics of proportional and effective representation of the oppressed castes.

Parallel to this trend, films glorifying caste pride have also continued to appear, but these have mostly not enjoyed the kind of success they earlier had, particularly in the 1990s. As an example from that time, consider *Thevar Magan*, which Selvaraj claimed as inspiration for his new film.

### **Fathers and sons**

Popular Tamil cinema presents the south of Tamil Nadu as something like the Wild West, where the law is lax and men with handlebar moustaches, armed with machetes, rule the streets. Reality, however, is often a lot less exciting. The region, home to the Meenakshi Amman temple – one of the most beautiful holy sites in India – has historically been associated with the flowering of Tamil culture, and is actually no more or less violent than, say, towns like Coimbatore or Dharmapuri to the north. Cinema associates this supposed wildness with a particular community – the Thevars, a caste cluster comprising Kallars, Maravars and Agamudaiyars, mostly located in southern Tamil Nadu. Reputed to have a martial history, in colonial times they were branded a “criminal

tribe” for their participation in many local rebellions, greatly hurting their educational and employment prospects.

Into the 20th century, they were mobilised by U Muthuramalinga Thevar to oppose colonial rule and demand the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act. Many Thevars still see this leader as a saint and view him as having contributed to their becoming a politically powerful community in the post-independence period. The nexus of cinema and caste can be witnessed every year on his birth anniversary, when many southern towns are bedecked with huge posters and banners of *Thevar Magan*.



A theatrical poster for *Thevar Magan*. The 1992 film has become a touchstone of Thevar pride, and banners and posters for it feature every year in celebrations to mark the birth anniversary of U Muthuramalinga Thevar, an iconic leader of the community. Photo: Wikimedia Commons / Raaj Kamal Films International

A logline for *Thevar Magan* would be: How a modern, urbanised son is forced by circumstance to step into the shoes of his traditionalist, rural

father. Sakthi, played by Kamal Haasan, returns to his native village after completing his studies in London, bringing along his Telugu girlfriend. His father, Periya Thevar, is a local headman who faces great animosity from his brother as well as his nephew, Maya. Sakthi does not want to be part of this feud, but wants to relocate to Chennai, open restaurants there and marry his girlfriend. The conservative Periya Thevar resents his ideas. Sakthi's bungling, without an understanding of local problems, leads to violence and counter-violence. He asks his aide Isakki, of the same Thevar caste or a sub-caste, to open a contested temple, and this leads to Maya's henchmen cutting off Isakki's arm. Periya Thevar dies after being insulted by Maya in public, and Sakthi sheds his modern clothes and takes his father's place. Owing to a miscalculation, he becomes obligated to marry a village belle from the same caste, and forgo his first love for family honour. The conflict between the law-abiding Sakthi and the criminally violent Maya ends in a bloody fight, culminating with Sakthi accidentally decapitating Maya. A remorseful Sakthi surrenders to the police, and urges his fellow villagers to focus on agriculture and education.

One of the film's most praised scenes shows a conversation between father and son, where the son wants to leave the village, the family, the "barbarism" of his caste, and instead move to the city. Periyar Thevar tells him he is part of this "barbarism" too, and goes on a homily about his caste, how for ages they have known nothing but combat, how they were among the first to enlist in Subhas Chandra Bose's nationalist army, and so on. If at all change is to come, he adds, it will come slowly. The son and father stand in for tensions between the urban and rural, modernity and tradition, individual and community, change and continuity.

In another scene, Maya gets aggressive and challenges Sakthi – he will kill him, he says, and if he does not, he is not a true Thevar. Sakthi replies that it is more important to be a human being than a Thevar.

When, in the end, Sakthi is forced to kill, he immediately repents. This could even be read as *sakthi* (or power) killing the *maya* (or illusion) of pride and prejudice.

A reasonable interpretation could be that this is the story of an intractable family feud, all within the same caste, that ends in disaster. But this is not how caste pride sees it – and there is plenty for it to feed upon. The hero is definitely not anti-caste. Take, for instance, the scene when Periya Thevar disparages Sakthi’s girlfriend because she is Telugu, and Sakthi tries to convince his father that she is from a caste of a similar rank to theirs.

The problems of *Thevar Magan* could be boiled down to a single song from it, “*Potri paadadi penne, Thevar kaaladi manne*” – Sing the praises, O girl, of the sand under Thevar’s feet. This song, with powerful lyrics by Vaali and set to highly emotive music by Ilaiyaraaja, extols the virtues and traditions of the Thevars, praising them as the *mannar inam* – the race of kings. It is difficult to disencumber the film of this song. There are three variations of it that play at crucial points, and the film would be incomplete without them. And in all three versions, the refrain praising the Thevars is prominent. And this song did not stop in the cinemas but had an unsavoury social impact beyond them – just like the film, as Selvaraj rightly pointed out.

The scholar Rajan Krishnan, in an essay in the volume *Tamil Cinema*, notes, “Though made with the good intention of problematizing the Thevar subculture of violence, the film appears to have led to reification of martial qualities and the caste pride of the Thevars.”

Krishnan also observes that *Potri paadadi penne* is used in all Thevar functions. Even more disturbing is that the song has caused trouble on plenty of such occasions. Thevars have forced non-Thevars, especially Dalits, to sing it, and the song has, by itself, provoked caste clashes in south Tamil Nadu, as documented by the scholars Karthikeyan

Damodaran and Hugo Gorringe in their essay “Madurai Formula Films”.

## King of kings

*Maamannan* seems to be meant as a challenge to the mannan inam of Thevar Magan – except that the two are hard to compare. The film’s title character is played by the veteran actor Vadivelu, who also played Isakki in *Thevar Magan*. Selvaraj said this was a deliberate choice, a response to the portrayal of Vadivelu’s character in the other film. This is incongruent, not least because Isakki, as mentioned above, belongs to the Thevar caste cluster in south Tamil Nadu, while Maamannan is a political leader of the Arunthathiyars, a Scheduled Caste community in the state’s north-west. There is also nothing in common in the story arcs of the two films. *Thevar Magan* is about a personal feud gone haywire, and while there can be political readings of the film, in itself it is not a film on politics. *Maamannan*, Selvaraj’s most ambitious film yet, is explicitly a work on electoral politics and caste.



**Directors are bolder in showing Dalit assertion on screen and endorsing a politics of resistance, caste is confronted and hierarchies are challenged. But this welcome change has not appeared in isolation.**



Selvaraj’s comments on *Maamannan* are better understood in light of his concerns in his earlier films. His first two films were concerned with the Devendra Kula Vellalars, a cluster of Scheduled Castes predominantly involved in agriculture, in the south. *Pariyerum Perumal*, Selvaraj’s debut, tells the story of Pariyan, a law student from a Scheduled Caste background, and his friendship with Jothi, an



ostensibly Thevar girl, who is portrayed as being completely oblivious to caste. The relationship infuriates her family and they try to hurt Pariyan, to the point of attempting murder. In the end, however, Pariyan and Jothi's father have a conversation as equals.

*Karnan*, which followed, is a retelling of events in Kodiyankulam in 1995, when police in the south of Tamil Nadu ransacked the wholly Scheduled Caste village. The film shows the villagers as being vocal in their demands for bus service to their area, and when this is refused they protest violently and destroy buses on the roads. This leads to confrontations with the police. A cruel police officer named Kannabiran – a Tamil name for the deity Krishna – is defeated and killed by the film's hero, Karnan. This is an inversion of the Mahabharata, where Krishna exhorts Arjuna to kill Karna when the latter is in a vulnerable moment. Karna is beheaded in the Mahabharata; Kannabiran is beheaded by Karnan. The film refuses docility and resignation to fate. Instead, through numerous songs and sequences, it seeks to establish Karnan and his community as warriors confronting those who seek to dominate them. In her paper "Constructing a Caste in the Past", the scholar Tori Gross notes how many Devendras disavow the Dalit identity and fashion themselves as a militant and martial community, often modelling themselves on the Thevars. Gross observes that narratives of conflict with the Thevars shape the Devendrar identity. Selvaraj's *Karnan* could be inspired by such narratives.



A theatrical poster for the 2021 film *Karnan*, a retelling of events in Kodyankulam in 1995, when police ransacked a Scheduled Caste village in Tamil Nadu. If the new wave of Tamil anti-caste films aim for better conversations, we should expect realistic portraits of the plurality of positions, interests and conflicts surrounding caste. Photo: V Creations / Wikimedia Commons

*Maamannan*, Selvaraj's third film, deals with a different region, a different demographic, and a different way of approaching caste. It would be politically and sociologically incorrect to assume that the Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu are homogenous, in real or reel life. Apart from the Devendrars, two other numerically prominent Scheduled Caste communities in Tamil Nadu are the Paraiyars, largely located in the north of the state, and the Arunthathiyars, located mostly in the north-west. The Arunthathiyars are among the most oppressed communities even among the Dalits, and they face severe hurdles to social, economic or political progress. *Maamannan* deals with this group, and does a decent job of it, with references to Arunthathiyar

heroes like Potti Pagadai, Ondiveeran and Veerayi to show that the community has its share of history of resistance to oppression.



**The path for the new wave of anti-caste films was set by such forerunners. But the new filmmakers also had to confront caste-glorifying films of the past.**



One painful flashback sequence shows Maamannan's son Athiveeran and his friends being pelted with stones for bathing in a public pond. Athiveeran – played by Udhayanidhi Stalin, the son of M K Stalin, the current chief minister of Tamil Nadu and head of the state's ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) – barely escapes with his life, but his friends are not so lucky. Maamannan, then a party cadre, appeals to Sundaram, his senior in the party, to take action against the perpetrators. But Sundaram, likely from the Gounder caste, refuses – the caste group the perpetrators belong to has high numbers in the region, and the party might lose votes if it antagonises them.

The party is named Samathuva Samooganeedhi Makkal Kazhagam (SSMK) – literally, People's Party for Equality and Social Justice – and is modelled after the DMK. Tamil Nadu's Dravidian parties, including the DMK, swear by equality and social justice, but many from the oppressed castes allege that the benefits of decades of Dravidian rule have not been equally distributed. *Maamannan* pursues this line of critique – but it also strongly suggests that there is room for improvement and inclusion in Dravidian politics.

In the film's present, an older Maamannan is a legislator from the SSMK. The grownup Athiveeran does not have the patience of his father, and prefers to confront casteists. Rathnavel, the son of Sundaram

and a party strongman, is willing to treat Athiveeran with some respect but expects Maamannan to show deference to him. A defiant Athiveeran compels his father to sit in front of Rathnavel, and the latter takes this as an affront. A scuffle ensues, and this spills over into a larger conflict between the two sides. The rest of the film focuses on how the protagonists overcome their adversary.

The standard fare in Tamil cinema is to caricature politicians as cunning, corrupt, inefficient. Selvaraj presents a more mature understanding of electoral politics. After being physically beaten by Athiveeran, Rathnavel rushes to the head of the SSMK, who is also the chief minister, wanting to get Maamannan thrown out. Maamannan represents a reserved constituency, where only Dalit candidates can be fielded for election, and Rathnavel wishes to field a candidate who will be subservient to him. The chief minister refuses, despite Rathnavel's threat to join another party and take the votes of his caste group with him. This shows how, despite having reserved constituencies for Dalits, the fact that parties have to rely on votes from numerous castes, including dominant ones, makes it difficult for elected Dalit representatives to foreground Dalit interests. Still, the chief minister abides by his commitment to equality and social justice, and tells Rathnavel off. Prominent on his desk is a bust of the Dravidian and anti-caste icon E V Ramasamy, more popularly known as Periyar.



**The film 'Maamannan' unpacks not just casteism in society, but also the difficulties involved in the politics of proportional and effective representation of the oppressed castes.**



The chief minister is a lot more amicable when he meets Maamannan. The leader of the SSMK is shown as a man of lofty ideals, but fully aware that there is a long way to go before these ideals are realised in society, and that there are powerful forces within his own party, like Rathnavel, who stand in the way. The parallels to the DMK are obvious, and even with whatever critique of the party there is, it is no secret where Selvaraj's sympathies fall – the casting of Udhayanidhi Stalin is the clearest give-away.

Maamannan's electoral victory, despite ploys by Rathnavel, is possible because young people from different communities, including the dominant castes, campaign for him, defying diktats from their own caste leaders and organisations. Maamannan could have contested independently or joined a Dalit party, or Athiveeran could have pursued an extreme line of action, like the hero in *Karnan*. They do none of these things, but still come out on top. Selvaraj appears to convey here that caste cannot be confronted effectively by a few against the many, and its political and social power can only be challenged when the many come together against it.

Key to Maamannan's victory are the efforts of Athiveeran and also Leela, a communist activist who is also the younger man's love interest. Leela requires special mention as she is the strongest woman character in any of Selvaraj's films so far. The female lead in *Pariyerum Perumal* was nauseatingly naive. In *Karnan*, the women rely on the hero for protection – before the climactic battle, the women of his village literally fall at his feet. In contrast, Leela, likely from the same caste as Rathnavel, is highly conscious of the social subjugation of the oppressed castes and gives principled solidarity to Athiveeran.

## **Living ghosts**

There is a sense of change: directors are bolder in showing Dalit assertion on screen and endorsing a politics of resistance, caste is confronted and hierarchies are challenged. But this welcome change has not appeared in isolation. As Karl Marx put it, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” A similar observation can be made on cinema. There is much that is new in contemporary anti-caste films, but the roads they have travelled were laid earlier.

Take the song “*Ondru engal jaathiye*” from the 1964 film *Panakkara Kudumbam*, which features MG Ramachandran – MGR, the most popular star in Tamil cinema history. MGR’s character and his sister sing that there is but one caste, justice is universal, and the working classes all belong to a single fraternity. Or “*Kannukku kulamedhu*” from the 1964 film *Karnan*, starring the iconic Sivaji Ganesan. The title character’s wife sings to him of how the birth-based caste distinctions of high and low are false.

Neither of these popular commercial films focussed on politics or caste. *Panakkara Kudumbam* is a family drama, and *Karnan* a mythological film. But there was, clearly, an idea to insert an anti-caste position into them. There are dozens of such examples from the films of the 1950s and 1960s. A rudimentary notion that caste is bad was already being promoted by films and stars affiliated to the Dravidian movement. This was a time when the DMK, which swore by a broad idea of social justice, was gaining strength. Critics identify key examples of Dravidian cinema in films like A S A Sami’s *Velaikkari*, with a screenplay by C N Annadurai, the DMK leader and later first Dravidian chief minister of Tamil Nadu, and also Krishnan-Panju’s *Parasakthi*, with a screenplay by M Karunanidhi, Annadurai’s successor and eventually a five-time chief minister. Pa Ranjith, who has been central in the current wave of anti-caste cinema, has acknowledged *Parasakthi* as an inspiration.



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Many films starring MGR, who would later found the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and also become a three-time chief minister, saw the actor playing marginalised figures, speaking out against caste and stressing Dravidian-Tamil pride. In one sequence in *Mannathi Mannan*, one of MGR's most successful films, the hero delivers a monologue condemning caste and extolling equality, that too while a prisoner in the court of a Chola king. And the people at court are shown agreeing with the prisoner rather than the monarch. In *Padagotti*, MGR plays a hero from the fisher community and brings down a powerful zamindar.

Even directors not directly engaged with the Dravidian movement, of leftist or liberal persuasions, took some positions against caste. S Balachander's 1970 film *Nadu Iravil*, Tamil cinema's finest whodunnit, has a minor but significant anti-caste element. R Narayanan's pro-communist *Sivappu Malli* and K Balachander's social drama *Unnal Mudiyum Thambi*, both from the 1980s, also took a stand against caste. Some of Balachander's films were bold for their time in tackling prejudice within the Brahmin community.

The path for the new wave of anti-caste films was set by such forerunners. But the new filmmakers also had to confront caste-glorifying films of the past.

The early 1990s in particular were a time when such films were a hit. Along with *Thevar Magan*, *Chinna Gounder*, *Yejamaan* and *Naataamai* scored big at the box office. These last three movies were about Gounders, a socially and politically dominant caste in north-western Tamil Nadu. The political context in which these films were released is also telling. Between 1991 and 1996, Tamil Nadu saw the first regime of J Jayalalithaa, the AIADMK supremo who succeeded MGR. The AIADMK has a considerable support base among both Gounders and Thevars, and these communities increased their political influence in this time. It was also a period when progressive activists were hounded by the police for supposed connections to Tamil militants, and when the chief minister openly displayed her religious and superstitious sentiments. Quite a few assumed that this was the end of Dravidian politics, or at least of the relevance of its progressive ideology. Even after the DMK returned to power under Karunanidhi in 1996, the success of caste films like *Suryavamsam* continued.

In addition, the 1990s were also the time when economic liberalisation entered India in a big way. With this unleashing of neoliberalism and globalisation, there was a reaction across India among communities that felt their ideas of belonging and tradition were under threat. The success of films such as these, glorifying rural castes, could be read as part of this reaction.





A theatrical poster for Mannathi Mannan, starring M G Ramachandran. Before his rise as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, MGR, as he was popularly known, portrayed marginalised figures in many of his films, speaking out against caste and stressing Dravidian-Tamil pride. Photo: Natesh Art Pictures / Wikimedia Commons

But, skipping over these contexts, some critics read these films as glorifying the intermediate castes – officially classified in Tamil Nadu as the Backward Classes – and sidelining Dalits. This overlooks the specificity of the caste films that dominated this era: First, the overwhelming majority of these caste films were about Thevars and Gounders. The Vanniyars, an intermediate caste and numerically the largest caste in Tamil Nadu, also got a film about their community with *Marumalarchi*, but it faced opposition from the Vandaiyars, a powerful subgroup of the Kallars, a Thevar subcaste. Such cases show that the intermediate castes are not politically homogeneous, but are often in conflict and competition with each other. Second, of the 252 Backward Class communities in Tamil Nadu, very few have found representation in film apart from the numerically or politically dominant ones.

More importantly, while these films glorifying Thevars and Gounders have been subject to much criticism, and rightly so, critics rarely discuss the strong caste element in other films from the same period – like S Shankar’s *Gentleman*, which shows Brahmins as highly moral citizens unjustly victimised by corrupt forces in Tamil Nadu. *Anniyan*, a later Shankar release, is about a Brahmin vigilante who, inspired by the Garuda Purana, an ancient text of Hindu scripture, kills “undesirables” in society. The commonplace understanding of a casteist film takes in Thevar films and Gounder films, but not Brahmin films – reflecting a tendency across India to apply caste analysis to the politics and culture of all groups except the elite castes.





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Even with the Dravidian movement's purported anti-Brahmin sentiments, it is rare to find a Tamil film challenging Brahmin privilege. In Pa Ranjith's *Natchathiram Nagargirathu*, released in 2022, there is a scene where a character called Arjun, ostensibly from a Most Backward Caste, makes an obnoxious comment against inter-caste relationships. Immediately, the drama troupe he is part of vociferously challenges his casteist views, and rightly so. One member of the troupe remarks that "brahminical ideology" is responsible for all this. To this, an agitated Brahmin character asks how it is that Brahmins are responsible for all of this, and says it is the middle castes who take up knives and kill people. No one is able to respond to him. Surely, just one character could have asked him the caste of the man who shot M K Gandhi dead, or of the men who gang-raped Bilkis Bano during the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat in 2002, who were defended by their supporters for having good *sanskaar*, or values. Perhaps Ranjith was trying to show how it is easy to call out casteism from the intermediate castes but much more difficult to confront casteism from the dominant castes – or perhaps he too succumbed to this difficulty.

The caste-glorification films of the 1990s were successful because, quite apart from the changing political and economic contexts of Tamil Nadu, progressive forces did not have hegemony over the culture industry. The Dravidian parties, once in power, rarely intervened in cinema to broadcast their ideas, nor did they nurture directors to

produce Dravidian works of any quality. One could say that after the MGR era, commercially successful and impactful Dravidian cinema largely ended. In their place, besides the caste films, nationalistic films like Mani Ratnam's *Roja* and Shankar's *Indian* were superhits. Meanwhile *Dravidan*, released in 1989, was such a flop that even Dravidian sympathisers have likely never heard of it.

And there were also some Tamil films in the 1990s that took a positive approach to the resistance of the oppressed castes. T Nagarajan's *Aravindhan* showed resistance to landlords and corrupt politicians by communists and oppressed castes, and recreated on film the 1968 massacre of Dalits in Kilvenmani as well as the subsequent assassination of its chief architect, Gopalakrishna Naidu. Vincent Selva's *Iraniyan* was loosely based on the life of Vattakudi Iraniyan, a communist radical from the Thanjavur district shot dead by police in 1950. While the real-life Iraniyan was from the Agamudaiyar-Thevar caste, in the film he is shown as an oppressed-caste man who challenges a dominant-caste landlord and uproots his power. Less explicitly confrontational was Fazil's drama *Kilipetchu Ketkava*, which on first viewing can appear a simple romance. In it, a poor teacher from the *kiltheru*, or lower street, and a local bigshot from the *meltheru*, or upper street, vie for the hand of the same woman. When they face each other in a public sport to determine who will get to marry her, the underdog hero wears blue – often a symbol of Dalit identity. The hero wins her hand, but the villain, in his attempt to kill the hero, kills the heroine. What was until then a light-hearted story ends with death and violence owing to caste pride.

The early years of this century also saw films against caste. *Kovilpatti Veeralakshmi* showed a village in south Tamil Nadu populated by an oppressed caste. The villagers face casteism from the dominant castes and also from the police, who commit atrocities with impunity. Fed up with this, a saviour rises and hits back at the oppressors, responding to

violence with violence. This might sound much like the plot of Selvaraj's *Karnan*, but there is a key difference. Here, the saviour is the fiery Veeralakshmi, an oppressed-caste woman.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the Iraniyans and Veeralakshmis from the turn of the century paved the way for the anti-caste leads of the current wave.

### **Conversation or conflict?**

Few would associate the action-masala director Hari with caste understanding, but one film of his has an interesting angle on caste in southern Tamil Nadu. *Ayya*, from 2005, is about the conflict between two influential families, one from the Nadar and the other from the Thevar community. The Thevar villain sees the two main Nadar characters as enemies, especially since one of them killed his father, an oppressive landlord. He tries to cause trouble for them, but in the end one of them, who was not involved in the killing, succeeds in reforming the villain without raising a weapon against him.

The film is significant because it captures the century-long conflict between the two communities, and also shows that caste conflict in the south of Tamil Nadu is not restricted to the Thevars and Devendrars. Thevars historically saw themselves as superior to Nadars and considered them ritually impure. The Nadars, through astute community organisation with a focus on education and economic growth, made rapid social progress in the 20th century. It is no exaggeration to say that the rise of the Nadars greatly curbed the dominance of the Thevars. *Ayya* shows the Nadars as having arrived as the equals and friends of Thevars. But then, two years later, Hari released *Vel*, which unabashedly celebrated Thevar pride.



**The standard fare in Tamil cinema is to caricature politicians as cunning, corrupt, inefficient. Selvaraj presents a more mature understanding of electoral politics.**



The new wave of anti-caste filmmakers have more clarity on where they stand on caste. Balaji Sakthivel's social-realist *Kaadhal* was a powerful statement against caste-based "honour killings", and was successful despite featuring relatively less-known actors. A good amount of the credit for the recent interest in anti-caste cinema has to go to directors like Pa Ranjith and Vetrimaaran, mainly because they showed that it is possible to make commercially successful films with megastars featured openly as Dalits. In *Kabali* and *Kaala*, both starring Rajinikanth, Ranjith used the stock character of the "do-gooder don" to deliver his message of Dalit assertion. Vetrimaaran's *Asuran* starred Dhanush in the role of an ageing father trying to protect his family and property from predatory landlords. The film was noted for its aestheticisation of violence – one song explicitly called for a bloodbath to cleanse the land. Arun Matheswaran's *Saani Kaayidham*, chronicling the travails of a policewoman from an oppressed caste, was Tarantino-esque in its portrayal of retaliatory violence.



An official release poster for the 2022 film *Saani Kaayidham*, chronicling the travails of a policewoman from an oppressed caste. A new wave of anti-caste filmmakers like Arun Matheswaran are challenging the Tamil film industry's old ways, showing Dalit assertion and endorsing a politics of resistance. Photo: Amazon Prime Video / Wikimedia Commons

In *Asuran*, Dhanush's character hacks down dozens of casteist villagers. In Selvaraj's *Karnan*, which also starred Dhanush, his character single-handedly attacks a battalion of policemen, seizes a police officer who was brutal to the village elders, and deliberately beheads him. This cannot be compared to Sakthi in *Thevar Magan* accidentally killing the villain. A more apt comparison would be with the 2017 release *Muthuramalingam*, where the Thevar hero chops off the hand of a policeman who disrespected his father.

Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* indicated the possibility of conversation. *Karnan* and *Asuran* ruled it out in favour of conflict. The recent *Kazhuvethi Moorkkan*, which shows the nexus of caste, politics and state institutions, also has its share of violence, but advocates friendship between Devendrars and Thevars. In one monologue, the

protagonist chides the Thevars for their casteism, saying that their chauvinistic pride will only draw them further backwards.



**Even with the Dravidian movement's purported anti-Brahmin sentiments, it is rare to find a Tamil film challenging Brahmin privilege.**



But why should communities like the Devendrars attempt to converse with or extend friendship to those “above” them on the caste ladder if those communities refuse to reciprocate? And if violence is the only way to empower oneself in the face of the oppression of those “above”, then how will the newly empowered look at those considered “below” them? There are no easy answers to these questions, but these are questions being posed by the weakest sections within both the intermediate castes and the Dalits in Tamil Nadu, who lack fair representation and recognition in reel and real life.

A few recent films addressed the issues of such communities. Leena Manimekalai's *Maadathy*, an internationally acclaimed art film, is a sensitive feminist portrayal of a young girl from the Puthirai Vannar community, one of the most oppressed Dalit castes. T J Gnanavel's *Jai Bhim* shows police atrocities against a Scheduled Tribe and a lawyer's struggle to get them justice, and is based on the real-life story of the lawyer and judge K Chandru. A Kamaraj's *Nenjuku Needhi* is an adaptation of the Hindi feature *Article 15*, which featured a crusading policeman investigating a gruesome caste-based crime, and exceeds the original in its attention to the social details of caste stratification. The victims of the crime here are from the Arunthathiyar caste. *Jai Bhim* and *Nenjuku Needhi* express faith in the legal process to bring casteists

to book. In *Maadathy*, in the absence of justice, the unjust casteist community is blinded by a curse.

Cinema is not a reproduction of reality. It is a portrayal of desire, of fantasy, of what we want reality to be. *Thevar Magan* is not a realistic portrayal of how Thevars really are, nor is *Karnan* a reliable portrait of how Devendrars really are. These films sell to their particular audiences because they capture some element of how these communities like to imagine themselves. They sell to broader audiences because of their craft, their stories, and because even those not belonging to the protagonist communities see a bit of their desires in the protagonists or some other interesting characters. And there are social impacts which happen beyond a director's intentions – like how Rathnavel's character is now being celebrated by caste groups on social media.

Caste cinema did not make caste society, and what we see as anti-caste cinema will not unmake it. Once, patriotic films were considered cool. Later, it was anti-corruption films. Anti-caste films are the new rage. The caste films of the past succeeded with simple story arcs and simple conflicts, and anti-caste films have shown they can also be commercially successful with simple, binary narratives. But if they aim for better conversations on caste, we should expect them to capture at least some of the plurality of positions, interests, conflicts and cooperations that define society.

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