

Cultural Hegemony and Oppression in Tamil Cinema: A Study on Select Tamil Movies

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Abstract

Discrimination, subordination, and oppression affect almost 201 million Dalits in India. In most cases, the discriminatory practices become a social obligation. This paper aims to analyze the subtle influence of the oppressed class in sustaining caste discrimination in society, with reference to select Tamil movies, *Asuran*, *Jai Bhim*, and *Maamannan*. The paper also explores how the concept of hegemony operates within a social structure where the dominant class disseminates their ideas successfully, and the Dalits conceive them as traditional practices. Through the lived experience of various characters in the movies, the article comments on various key concepts of hegemony, including ideological control, war of position, and the contributions of political and civil societies in oppression and resistance. Hegemony allows the ruling class to exert power over the marginalized by gaining their consent rather than relying solely on coercion. This makes oppression seem natural and unquestioned. It often normalizes oppression as the dominant groups use their values, rules, and traditions to present the unequal power relation as seeming acceptable and beneficial to all.

Keywords: Cultural hegemony, caste oppression, Dalit identity, Tamil cinema, Antonio Gramsci, subaltern representation.

Introduction

The Tamil movie industry, popularly known as Kollywood, is best known for its diverse range of genres, ranging from commercial movies to socially relevant films. The industry produces movies that cater to entertainment purposes and also reflect the poignant reality through social dramas. This paper aims to analyze how the marginalised contribute to their own oppression, by studying the themes, technical

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aspects, symbols and motifs employed in select Tamil movies such as *Asuran*, *Jai Bhim* and *Maamannan*, through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. This study adopts a qualitative textual and thematic analysis of select Tamil films through the theoretical lens of Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony.

Vetrimaaran, T.J.Gnanavel, and Mari Selvaraj, directors of *Asuran*, *Jai Bhim* and *Maamannan*, respectively, have proved their brilliance in portraying the issues of socially backward classes and their struggle to attain freedom. Their movies blend social realism and commercial aspects in cinema. Vetrimaaran's *Polladhavan*, *Aadukalam*, *Asuran*; Gnanavel's *Jai Bhim*; Mari Selvaraj's *Maamannan*, *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*, are the best examples. All these films are deeply rooted in social realism, and they meet the criteria for commercial movies as well. The struggles of the oppressed classes and discrimination on the basis of caste and class are depicted authentically in the select movies.

Asuran is an action drama in Tamil, directed by Vetrimaaran and produced by Kalaipuli S. Thanu. The movie stars Dhanush, Manju Warriar, Pasupathy, Ken Karunas, and Teejay Arunasalam. It is based on the novel *Vekkai* by Indian writer, Poomani. The film was a commercial success at the box office and also won two awards at the 67th National Film Awards—Best Feature Film in Tamil and Best Actor. The movie highlights the aspects of Panchami land, the assigned land that was distributed for Dalits in Tamil Nadu during British rule.

Jai Bhim is a Tamil legal drama, directed by T. J. Gnanavel and produced by Jyothika and Suriya under the banner of 2D Entertainment. The film stars Suriya, Lijomol Jose, and Manikandan, with Rajisha Vijayan, Prakash Raj, Guru Somasundaram, and Rao Ramesh in supporting roles. The movie talks about police bias and state violence against a marginalized community. It is based on a real-life incident in Tamil Nadu in the twentieth century. The tragic experiences of the tribals, Parvathy and Rajakannu became the thread for *Jai Bhim*.

The Tamil movie *Maamannan* is a political drama released in 2023, written and directed by Mari Selvaraj. The film stars Vadivelu as the title character, along with Fahadh Faasil, Keerthy Suresh, and Udhayanidhi Stalin. The movie revolves around the life and career of Maamannan, a Dalit man, and his son Athiveeran, who guides his father to overcome his oppressed mindset and reclaim his rights in social and political realms.

The analysis of *Asuran*, *Jai Bhim*, and *Maamannan* reveals the vital role of the oppressor and the oppressed in cultivating certain practices in society that later become an integral part of the social tradition. The politics behind the tradition of kneeling, standing and sitting in front of the upper class can be traced in the movies respectively. *Asuran* depicts how Dalits are oppressed in the background of an agrarian society, whereas *Maamannan* deals with the issues confronted by the lower-class representatives in the political sphere. The movie discusses how the titular character, being a Dalit, is oppressed in terms of his identity as a Dalit labourer. The analysis of these movies highlights the role of consent in encouraging evil practices in society. Similarly, *Jai Bhim* exposes how the social and political system encourages oppression through the portrayal of the tribal community and their problems in the movie.

Narratives of Caste and Identity

Caste is a complex social phenomenon characterized by its historical fluidity, adaptability, and resilience regardless of changing social, economic, and political conditions. The marginalized, especially the Dalits, face oppression at multiple levels. Their very existence is marked by fear, anxiety, humiliation, alienation, and identity crisis. The Dalits inherit the feeling of inferiority right from their birth, as caste becomes the principal factor determining their identity in society. The marginalization they experience politically, socially, and culturally emerges from the belief that the upper classes are superior and authoritative. They set certain rules and customs, which later became the unwritten laws for the people in general and the Dalits in particular. As the marginalized hardly engage in any ideological battles with the upper class, their dominant ideologies become stronger and the standardized. Gramsci emphasizes 'war of position', which means a long-term struggle to build cultural and ideological influence within society and thus challenge the dominant order until it loses legitimacy. The silence is the unwritten consent granted by the lower classes in fixing the authority of the upper class.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, linguist, and founder of the Italian Communist Party, interpreted hegemony as a mixture of consent and coercion. According to him, hegemony means political leadership based on the consent of the oppressed, a consent that is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the worldview of the ruling class. Gramsci opines that hegemony makes the political, cultural, and moral values of the dominant group widely dispersed in society, which are accepted as their own by the subordinate class.

The caste system is maintained not merely by coercion but also through consent. Consent is created and recreated by the hegemony of the ruling elite in society. For instance, the act of kneeling and standing before an upper-caste man, irrespective of his age, is a cultural practice that advocates the superiority of a particular caste in society. Sivasamy from *Asuran*, Rajakannu from *Jai Bhim* and Maamannan from the movie *Maamannan* explicitly showcase how the cycle of caste oppression is strengthened through tradition and cultural practices. People from the tribal community are not allowed to sit in front of the upper caste. Rajakannu and his friends simply followed society's ways without any sort of resistance. It is clear from their body language that they are willing to exit from the official's cabin the moment they see an upper-class man approaching the cabin. Sivasamy falls at the feet of upper caste men, including upper caste children, to seek penance. Maamannan never sits before the upper caste leaders and always remains standing, signifying obedience. The movies vividly depict scenes of everyday indignities, but the oppressed classes accept these acts of exploitation without expressing any discomfort. They never question the unjust acts of the upper class, landlords, and authorities towards them.

In *Asuran*, the protagonist, Sivasamy, is depicted as a poor, alcoholic, lower-class farmer who confines himself to the ways and rules of the upper-class landlords. He follows the laws of society and hardly questions the discrimination and humiliation coerced upon them. Even when his wife, Pachaiyamma and his children, Murugan and Chidambaram, react to oppression, Sivasamy chooses to be silent. This silence gradually turns out to be the unacknowledged consent of the proletariat and acts as a key element in the discourse of power relations.

In the movie, the character Maamannan remains a puppet in the hands of the privileged political leaders. Even though he becomes a leader and Member of the Legislative Council, his identity remains that of a Dalit. He was never able to break that, especially because of his submissive attitude. He regards all positive aspects of his life as the charity of the upper-class leaders and thus keeps an attitude of obedience towards them. This 'consent' of Maamannan to exploit and oppress him emerges from the conditioning of the society. Though the common people have high regard for his political activities, in his personal sphere, Maamannan confronts oppression, discrimination, and humiliation from fellow politicians who belong to the privileged class. He brings harmony in his relations with the upper-class leaders and fellow politicians by simply obeying them, even if they act against his ideologies. Thus, he conforms to the rules of society and hardly makes any attempts to bring in a change.

The privileged class uses a mixture of coercion and consent as its weapon to tame the Dalits. Rathnavel says, "Your father never sits down. It has always been like that, no matter who tells him to sit. He won't sit in our house" (Selvaraj, 2023, 1:5:57). This episode reveals how the concept of coercion and consent works. It is an age-old practice in society to keep the lower caste standing when members from the upper caste are present. Through their ways and practices, the dominant class cultivates fear in the minds of the oppressed. This fear is inherited by generations that prevents the oppressed class from rising up.

Land emerges as the core conflict in *Asuran*. The movie talks about two types of land: the land owned by the Dalits and the land possessed by Narasimhan, the landlord, and his men. When Pachaiyamma decided not to give her land to Narasimhan, she had to pay for her son, Murugan's life as the price for the disobedience. The police refuse to register the case as a murder and deny them justice. Even though Pachaiyamma tries her best not to part with the land, she is forced to give it to Narasimhan's men in order to save her younger son, Chidambaram. This highlights the effects of coerced consent. Narasimhan's men use the existing power structures, including the police and panchayat, to persuade Pachaiyamma. The support they get from the power structures helps the upper class to frame stories that, in turn, aid in the oppression of the Dalit.

The violence the upper class employs is subtle, and it finally leads to coerced consent. The dominant class not only silences Pachaiyamma but also strengthens the existing fear in the minds of the oppressed. This fear helps the privileged class to maintain their system and rules without being questioned. It is out of fear that Sivasamy fell at the feet of upper-class people in the village, hoping he could save Murugan from Narasimhan's wrath by surrendering his own dignity. Sivasamy says, "If something were to happen to our boy, what would we do with the respect?" (Vetrimaan, 2019, 30:29).

Erasure of identity and dignity are results of such exploitation. The society regards the existence of oppressed classes as insignificant. In the movie, Maamannan reveals how people regarded him as inferior by referring to him as 'Mannu'. The upper-caste people never addressed him by his name. Maamannan says, "I believed that the little authority I had was not what I deserved. It was some charity bestowed upon me. I have spent my whole life standing before those who were seated. That's my fault" (Selvaraj, 2023, 1:15:47). The confidence and strength in Athiveeran's eyes often meet with the fear, confusion, and helplessness in the eyes of his father. Maamannan hardly attempts

to sit in front of Rathnavel, as he is aware of the consequences, and tries to convince Athiveeran to keep quiet. Rathnavel opines that it is a tradition of the society that it will not permit a lower caste to sit before an upper caste. But these norms are set by the privileged upper caste itself. Here, the system is maintained not merely by coercion but also through consent. The passive nature and silence of the oppressed contribute to oppression in many ways. The existing structures of oppression were maintained because the majority were willing to follow it without any concern.

The oppressed castes willingly follow such traditions to safeguard themselves from punishments for disobeying the dominant class. They hardly realize how their consent is manipulated to portray marginalization as something benefitting society. When the oppressed remain silent, the narratives of the dominant class get circulated and later appear as truth. For instance, in *Asuran*, Narasimhan frames Murugan's and Chidambaram's acts of resistance as arrogance and attempts of theft, respectively. In Chidambaram's case, they portray his retaliation against caste oppression as an attempt of theft and murder. These stories spread by the upper class became truth, and later, in order to save his son, Sivasamy had to face legal actions for the fabricated theft done by Chidambaram. In *Maamannan*, the upper caste people stoned Dalit children to death for entering the temple's well premises, which they considered as polluting, and framed the murder as a case of accidental death by wall collapse.

When a theft occurs in an upper-class family, Rajakannu becomes the prime suspect only because of his identity as an Irula. It was the upper-class family who sought his help to hunt the snake that entered their house, and this incident resulted in his entry to the crime scene. Though Rajakannu was loyal and remained obedient towards them, followed their rules and traditions without hesitation, and even refused to take the offered money for his service, but when the theft occurred, the family suspected him. They hardly regarded his behaviour and character, rather his identity as a backward class, a tribal, an 'Irulan', became the determining factor. His identity made the family conclude that Rajakannu is the culprit. Even the police confirm him as the culprit without a proper investigation or any evidence. The people who faced oppression knew the truth behind these stories, but they hardly challenged the oppressor and kept silent, as their revelation may invite further consequences. At this point, the ideological battle becomes significant. Without engaging in the exchange of ideas, the oppressed cannot come out of the discrimination they face.

Only the character Sengini undergoes a transformation in the movie *Jai Bhim*. She remains passive in the initial scenes of the movie, but later realizes the exploitation and decides to resist oppression through the legal system. When she makes her thumb impression to file a case in court against the police, she attempts to break from the system of oppression. The police framed a fake case against Rajakannu and tortured him to death. Later, the police dispose his body secretly, reported him as missing, and made false statements. These narratives, made by those in power, became the truth. But Sengini stands strong and seeks help to reveal the truth about her husband. Though coercion continues to threaten and persuade her, Sengini could resist those threats. The court supports her, which instills courage and confidence in her. The police, who are the real culprits in Rajakannu's murder, resort to violence to deter Sengini from seeking legal aid. They torture her both physically and mentally. Some of the officials urge her to settle the case by offering a huge amount as compensation. Since Sengini

has overcome the fear of the upper class, the coercion fails to produce the desired result.

Similarly, Rathnavel shows consideration towards Athiveeran not because of due respect, but he is aware of the fact that the educated Athiveeran is capable of leading an ideological battle. That's why he asks Athiveeran to sit in front of him while Maamannan had to remain standing. Athiveeran sharpens Maamannan's voice. When the upper caste people limit him from entering into his own constituency, Athiveeran encourages Maamannan to use social media as a platform to communicate with people and make sure that his voice is heard in society. This reflects the possibility of change if the oppressed get equipped to challenge the ways of the dominant, ideologically. Caste oppression is cyclical, and the violence repeats across generations. Sivasamy's family had faced caste discrimination; later, Sivasamy faced oppression, and now his sons have to face the same discrimination. In *Asuran*, Sivasamy's faith in education, as a powerful tool to break the cycle of oppression, also supports the significance of counter narratives to deconstruct the framed stories and fake allegations against them.

There are several social, cultural, economic and political causes that lead to Dalit oppression, but all of them reflect the same psychology where one group of people believes themselves to be superior over others. The attitudes of the oppressed and oppressors play a significant role in the process. In almost every scene of oppression, the attitude and methods of the oppressors remain the same. They use coercion to prevent the exploited society from rising up and changing the system that makes them suffer.

The identity of a Dalit itself makes them vulnerable to exploitation and marginalisation. The directors of the movies employ various symbols to reveal the social hierarchy and attitude of the dominant group towards Dalits. The opening scene of *Asuran* itself reveals the darkness in the lives of lower-class people and vividly represents the extent to which they are exploited by the privileged class. One striking example is the use of the lamb in the opening sequence. A police officer, during night patrolling, attempts to capture a lamb, confident that no one will notice its absence until much later. The scene metaphorically parallels the lived condition of marginalized communities, whose suffering remains invisible until it is too late. The lamb becomes a visual metaphor for the exploited lower castes. Similarly, Chidambaram's pet dogs, particularly the one killed by an electric trap while protecting the field, reflect the vulnerability of marginalized groups. Just as the pet dog is destroyed by forces set up by Narasimhan, individuals from subordinate classes, who serve or depend on the powerful, are also at risk of being crushed when power dynamics shift. This shift can be seen in the relationship between young Sivasamy and his master, Viswanathan. In the beginning, the master remained friendly towards Sivasamy not because of any genuine affection, but it helped Viswanathan to exploit Sivasamy in multiple ways. Sivasamy was also blinded by the masked performance of the master and he even disregarded his brother's efforts to uplift the Dalit and free them from slavery. When Sivasamy reacts against and questions the inhumane practice and humiliation faced by his lover from the master's kin, Vishwanathan reveals his true nature. Then Sivasamy understands that the wall between his upper caste master and him was never broken.

Maari Selvaraj brilliantly employs symbols to represent caste discrimination in *Maamannan*. In the opening scene, he demonstrates power politics through the image

of 'dogs' and 'pigs. These animals serve as vehicles for storytelling and become central to the narrative. Various scenes are incorporated in the movie to depict how dogs become symbols of the upper class to manifest pride and dignity. The director portrays a complex relationship between the master Rathnavel and his pack of haunting dogs. The dogs are always loyal to their master, but the connection is not built on love and care; rather, Rathnavel uses 'fear' as a tool to make them obey his instructions. The dogs are given rigorous training, and they lack any identity other than Rathnavel's mastery. This is similar to the condition of the protagonist in the movie. These layered uses of animal imagery are a cinematic technique of symbolic representation that enriches the socio-political commentary.

Another important aspect is the use of a property to explore the theme of oppression. Chappal becomes a symbol of hegemony in *Asuran*. The social custom hardly allowed a lower caste to wear a chappal, as they were supposed to be barefoot. When Maariyamma wears a pair of chappal in the public sphere, she is brutally beaten up and humiliated by the upper caste men. Only when his love, Maariyamma, is forced to walk through the streets and market, holding footwear on her head, does Sivasamy realize caste oppression and its strong roots. Till then, Sivasamy believed that he was dear to his upper-caste landlord, Vishwanathan, but when he questions this unjust treatment towards her, Sivasamy is also harassed and shamed by his master for his Dalit identity. Vishwanathan says, "I showed you kindness, and you've forgotten your place? He beat up your fiancée and you hit my family member in front of everyone! Is it the same thing?" (Vetrimaaran, 2019,1:35:42). Thus, footwear reveals the rigid structure and discriminating aspects in society. In *Maamannan*, the car becomes a recurring emblem of inherited superiority. When Maamannan sits before Rathnavel, the latter's discomfort is immediately juxtaposed with a scene of him in his father's old car, recalling the inherited arrogance of caste privilege. The car thus becomes both a literal and figurative vehicle of hegemony, its engine powered by generational entitlement.

The moral tension between law and lived experience also threatens the marginalised from addressing the issue legally. Their resistance becomes even more suffocating, where the pain feels unending and systematic, not accidental. The delay in delivering justice makes Sengini's suffering multidimensional. She has to resist the oppression, challenge the existing system and hegemony, face legal procedures, though illiterate, and battle poverty, as there are hardly any means of income to support her family, as she is pregnant and cannot do physical labour. But she proves that only the response of the oppressed to discrimination and exploitation can bring in a difference. In Sengini's case, coerced consent does not work because coercion failed to create a sense of fear. This shows how Sengini becomes resilient when she withdraws her consent. Gnanavel presents Sengini's character to demonstrate how change is brought about when one's consent is taken back. Her character gains momentum when she renders her support to resist the oppression. Though society's attitude towards her remains hostile, Sengini breaks the shell, and her actions inspire the rest of the community to realize the exploitation. Sengini derives strength only when she realizes how important her 'consent' is in oppressing her life.

Conclusion

The study explores the representation of caste dynamics and the concept of hegemony in select Tamil movies *Asuran*, *Maamannan*, and *Jai Bhim*. Through the analysis of these films, we gain a deeper understanding of the struggles of the Dalits. The movies vividly portray the lived experiences of the Dalits and backward classes, highlighting the pervasive fear, helplessness, and oppression they confront in a social sphere. The characters Sivasamy, Maamannan, and Rajakannu, despite their distinct societal roles, share a common identity as Dalit, which subjects them to systemic discrimination and marginalization. This shared identity underscores the persistent caste-based prejudices that permeate various aspects of society, from agrarian and political spheres to everyday working environments.

The paper attempts to analyze how the identity of an individual shapes his/her experiences, including the nature of the threats and exploitation he /she faces. The agrarian society of Sivasamy, the working conditions faced by Rajakannu and the political landscape navigated by Maamannan, are all depicted as equally oppressive due to entrenched caste biases. These narratives emphasize the continuity of caste-based oppression across different societal contexts. Moreover, the study reveals how the concept of hegemony, as articulated by Antonio Gramsci, operates through a blend of consent and coercion in these films. Initially, the characters conform to societal norms, driven by internalized inferiority and fear. This fear favors the dominant class to create narratives and disseminate them in society. Later, they become part of tradition and cultural practices.

The article studies the significant role of the oppressed in oppression. When they cease to question and challenge the existing system and practices constructed by the dominant power structures in society, they inadvertently consent to their own oppression. Through the narratives of Sivasamy, Sengini, Maamannan, and Athiveeran, the article reflects on the positive change brought when the oppressed break the silence. It also highlights the contributions of the corrupt systems of civil society in transforming the practices of the elite class as dominant, beneficial, and seemingly natural. However, the study reveals how the stories depict a trajectory of resistance against oppression as well. In *Asuran*, Sivasamy's use of violence as a tool of resistance illustrates the desperate measures taken to seek justice when peaceful means fail. Rajakannu's refusal to falsely confess in *Jai Bhim* represents a form of resistance that is brutally suppressed by coercive means. Similarly, Maamannan's efforts to enact social changes are met with opposition from the privileged classes, demonstrating the coercive aspect of hegemony.

The different ways in which Sivasamy, Sengini, and Maamannan challenge hegemony reveal the importance of ideological battle to destabilize the dominant power structure. Sivasamy's victory was momentary because he resorted to violent actions rather than questioning the upper class ideologically. Sengini's legal battle and Maamannan's political struggle are gradual, but they vividly reveal the discriminatory nature and hypocrisy of the dominant class to the public. They show how the political society, such as the state and police, supports and contributes to hegemony.

The characters, Chandru and Athiveeran, use media and their educational background as powerful tools to disseminate alternative ideas in society, which in turn helps in the liberation of Sengini and Maamannan, respectively. Thus, the article also comments on Gramsci's idea that the war of position is more important in modern

society. Furthermore, when these films are considered in a linear progression, they collectively narrate a story of gradual liberation. While Sivasamy's resistance in *Asuran* results in partial defeat, *Jai Bhim* shows a more successful resistance through Sengini's determined legal battle, which challenges societal norms. *Maamannan* continues this narrative of resistance and incremental progress towards equality, highlighting the evolving struggle for justice and liberation among the Dalits. In conclusion, the films *Asuran*, *Maamannan*, and *Jai Bhim* not only depict the harsh realities faced by Dalits but also serve as powerful commentaries on the persistence of caste-based discrimination and the mechanisms of hegemony. These movies underscore the need for continued resistance against systemic inequalities and inspire a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggle for social justice among the marginalized community. The findings of this study affirm the relevance of Gramsci's theory of hegemony in understanding the dynamics of caste oppression and the transformative potential of resistance in the pursuit of liberation.

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