



Caste and Cinema: A Study of Vaazhi by Mari Selvaraj

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ABSTRACT: The Tamil cinema has been a significant component of the regional film industry in India and has contributed to the shaping of the culture of the country. This paper will explore the idea of caste politics in contemporary Tamil cinema with particular references to the film Vaazhai by Mari Selvaraj in 2024. The paper also seeks to learn the degree to which movie Vaazhai contests caste politics and how it strengthens it unwillingly, even though it is against caste oppression. The paper applies the political approach of cinema and analyzes the significant events and conversations in the film Vaazhai to comprehend the influence of the film on the minds of viewers. The analysis has revealed that the film Vaazhai not only opposes caste oppression but it also raises the issue of representation and inclusion in the climax.

KEYWORDS: Mari selvaraj films, subaltern, dalit cinema

I. INTRODUCTION

permanent effect. The movie is based on the life of Sivanaindhan who is an Arunthathiyar boy in his teenage years, who lives in the banana groves of Tamil Nadu. The movie has made sure that the problem of caste is felt and omnipresent-cut into the ground. The director has made sure that the theme of vaazhai plant has been a constant companion in the movie. The fruit of the vaazhai is the symbol of the Dalits and their effort that is in need of exploitation. Vaazhai has a vulnerable and disposable stem. The picking of the fruit itself symbolizes the perpetual stranglehold of the dominance of upper-caste that surrounds the Dalits around the time of the election. The film is a personal story of Selvaraj who has been a source of inspiration of the unforgetting depiction of the plight of poverty and untouchability. The child labourers are thrown back into school and forced labour and observe how the adults are treated by the landlord with the politicians being puppets (Tamalapakula, 2025; Forward Press Desk, 2024).

Caste politics in TN is not merely a question of tradition, but connected to the Dravidian welfare politics and to the ongoing dominance of plantation owners and in particular to banana plantation of

Thoothukudi. The Dalit laborers are not deprived of rights but the fact on the ground is that bondage labor is still thriving. This is highlighted in Vaazhai by Kani as a socialist activist and situations involving the lorry accident where Dalits are literally taking the burden on the behalf of others to make some profits. This reminds the real life events, like the strikes in plantations of 1990s. Selvaraj also describes how upper-caste families have fallen under attack, particularly the dominance in offering education and the fact that caste is a political instrument used to keep the party vote banks alive (Vinothini and Benzigar, 2025; Rajendran, 2023).

The caste system of Tamil Nadu is not only an outdated quaintness, but a constituent of the Dravidian welfare state and the residual power of the plantation owners, particularly the banana groves of Thoothukudi. There are some benefits that Dalits can have, yet the unfortunate fact is bonded labor continues to exist. This is observed in Vaazhai in terms of Kani, a socialist activist and in incidences like the lorry accident where Dalits get victimized so that another person can benefit. This reminds of the ancient battles like the plantation workers strikes in the 1990s. Vinothini and Benzigar state that upper-caste families were also surveilled, and this aspect provides us with an idea of how schooling and education were used by the upper cases as a political instrument, particularly to serve as a party instrument (Vinothini and Benzigar, 2025; Rajendran, 2023).

The critics laud Vaazhai as it uses space as a platform of conflict. The arrangement of the villages and fields is the pattern that gives an indication of those in power with the use of space as a symbol that Dalits have been displaced out of their houses (Vinothini & Benzigar, 2025). Vaazhai has surprising links between caste and species bringing out unseen desires and hopes. It carries a sense of conviction aesthetic which directs to a statement of social justice that is not afraid of boldness (Tamalapakula, 2025). Nevertheless, the bulk of the scholarly literature continues to examine the earlier works of Selvaraj, including Maamannan (Rajendran, 2023), which wrote in a shallow manner about what Vaazhai manages to do.



The fact, however, is that there exists a wide gap between those who cannot interpret Vaazhai regarding its aesthetical and ideological value, but there are less people who explore the politics of caste. They do not view Dalit vote politics, inability of Dravidian politics in the plantations, caste alliances politics, early union opposition through the prism of the intricate caste voting politics in Tamil Nadu (Grad Coach, 2025). An obvious lack of connection lies in the connection of Vaazhai to certain examples of politics, e.g. the DMK-ADMK election contests or the politics of the marginalization of Arunthathiyars in Dalit politics. Correspondingly, the connection

between Selvaraj films and politics of the real-life uprisings is also disconnected. This research paper is an attempt to address that gap and understand the politics of caste as a modern, changing trend in Vaazhai.

II. RELEVANT STUDIES

It was an anthology of recent scholarly articles that have addressed the presentation of caste in Tamil Dalit cinema with specific attention to the movie Mari Selvaraj Vaazhai (2024) and its contribution to southern gee cinema overall. It will examine how the scholars have been focusing on the subject area and how they have been doing the same, what they have been discovering and what they have not yet discovered in the subject area. It will be based on 15 peer-reviewed articles and analyses in the last 2018-2025 and present a commentary on what Vaazhai may contribute to the discourse about caste and what some political stances still to be uncovered in this area seem to be.

Current literature on Vaazhai (2024) by Mari Selvaraj provides an insightful analysis of caste oppression, symbolic, spatial and representational, yet never tries to provide the overall picture of the film of realizing the factors of electoral politics, failures in rural policy, and child labor relationships in Dalit lives

Direct Analyses of Vaazhai

Vinothini and Benzigar (2025) use cultural cartography to portray the caste as spatial power where the banana fields and the segregated schools are the metaphors of subjugation in Vaazhai and the fruit itself is a symbol of economic exploitation. Their article is impressive in terms of aesthetical mapping of marginalized stories, but fails to fill in gaps in electoral mobilization, including DKV effects or voting obstacles in rural Tamil Nadu.

Pugalendhi (2025) unravels visual metaphors such as animals on a leash and distinct tea glasses in the Selvaraj films and presents them in the context of Dalit resistance. This is applied to Vaazhai to point out inter-species oppression but lapses in criticising policy-level rural failures, such as school dropouts who are bound to agricultural labour.

An anonymous study (2024) compares cow separation in Vaazhai and Dalit emotional ruptures with animal bonds to caste ruptures in Pariyerum Perumal. It is symbolically rich with Vaazhai, but it puts its emphasis on the emotional expression more than structure politics, like child labor policies.

The Oeuvre of Selvaraj into context.

Manoharan (2023) opposes caste-glorifying Tamil movies by placing Maamannan, and the history of the Dravidian mobilization through the prism of Selvaraj. This pre-Vaazhai structure frames his politics without being concerned with the child-oriented rural election criticism of the film.

The Hindu (2025) commends Selvaraj on his ethical Dalit representation of the accidents and oppression, comparing it to the style of Pa. Ranjith, with Vaazhai being received differently by the castes. Like policy intersections such as electoral disenfranchisement, reception analysis is a good one but it avoids it.

Eswaran (2022) discusses the resilient Dalit masculinity of early literature such as Pariyerum Perumal and more to do with dialogue than revenge. It pre-dates Vaazhai changing to child and female politics, and has no gendered rural policy dimensions.

Thematic and Comparative Extensions.

A work by an unknown author (2025) connects the Dalit literature and film, highlighting Vaazhai as a school dropout and banana field hopelessness as the resistance stories. The lit-film connection is rich but does not include spatial-electoral stratification.

The other work is an anonymous one (2023), which explores caste violence in Indian film domestic areas, promoting cultural resistance through the film. It has a broad applicability to Selvaraj and is indirectly applicable to Vaazhai without child policy as its focus.

In Tamil cinema, an anonymous study (2025) tracks the women of the Dalits, who had



become victims and turned into agents, and this situation can be applied to the mother and sister characters of Vaazhai. This gender-caste

development has not been touched in the electoral-rural situation of Vaazhai.

III. METHODOLOGY

Aim of the Study

This paper seeks to unpack the way Mari Selvaraj (2024) Vaazhai combines caste politics and economic exploitation and election -related politics into banana plantation rural Tamil Nadu and how the film narrative of Vaazhai translates to Dalit activism in the real world as well as criticizing the failures of Dravidian welfare politics.

Scope of the Study

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Significance of the Study

The politics of caste study of Vaazhai (2024) by Mari Selvaraj is relevant as it provides much-needed critical insights into Tamil Dalit cinema studies that have emphasized symbolic, spatial, and aesthetic interpretations of films but failed to acknowledge the incisive nature of the film towards the subject of electioneering vote-bank politics, failed Dravidian politics, exploitation of child labor in Thoothukudi banana plantations. It combines Ambedkarite structures, Gramscian hegemony, intersectionality, and ecocriticism with real-life events such as 1990s strikes and 1999 lorry accident, which places film studies in a politically inclined approach and gives a voice to Arunthathiyar otherwise marginalized in the

broader Dalit discourse. Socially it criticises endemic bonded labour and educational discrimination despite welfare programs, educating activism and challenging DMK/ADMK supremacy, culturally it places Vaazhai in the position of transformative resistance art, creating inter-caste solidarity through folk motives, and countering stereotypes and prompting future interdisciplinary studies of the role of film in destroying caste structures.

Research Objective:

RO1: examine how Vaazhai (2024) visually traces the caste hierarchies in banana plantations and segregated schools, showing economic oppression.

RO2: To discuss the electoral vote-bank rigging and Dravidian policy failure as in the culmination and labor scenes of the film.

RO3: In order to discuss the theme of Dalit agency and resistance, we can connect the cinema stories with the actual-life push-pull-pull movements of Arunthathiyar in Thoothukudi.

Research Questions:

RQ1: In what ways is Vaazhai using cultural cartography (e.g., fields, schools) to show graded caste inequalities and exploitation?

RQ2: How does the movie criticize the electoral politics and the lack of welfare in rural Tamil Nadu?

RQ3: What do signs of resistance in Vaazhai accomplish in terms of inter-caste solidarity and relates to historical strikes?

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

My research design is exploratory in nature. The unit of analysis is Vaazhai. I am employing the thematic analysis as a methodology that falls under constructivism. I am applying the film to historical accounts and reactions of the viewers to give strength to my analysis. This will require six months to complete the whole research -two months data collection, three months analysis and one month writing.

Nevertheless, it has much yet to be discovered. More audience research is required that takes into account

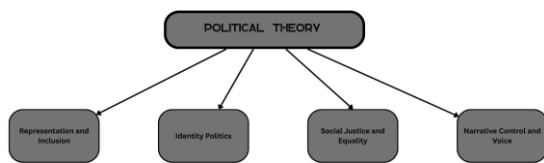
the various caste and their responses to the film including a comparison of the rural and the urban Arunthathiyars. Moreover, we need to examine the political content of Vaazhai in a more detailed fashion rather than on the symbolism. Selvararaj does not find any quantitative study of how labour is represented in all films. In addition, it is necessary to compare these movies to the real-life political events like Karunkulam strikes AND DMK caste-based alliances in a more detailed way (Rajendran, 2023; Grad Coach, 2025). Thus, the interdisciplinary and politically active study is needed to discuss Vaazhai



and its context in a more detailed way.

Research Framework

The flow chart is a systematic but interpretative process which will start with the choice of the movie Vaazhai (2024) and move through the exhaustive qualitative study of the film narrative components, in this case, especially the aspect of caste representation. The paradigm shifts the aspect of observation into a critical interpretation, then reflective assessment of the way these representations shape the perception of the audience. The arrows on the diagram show how the movie content is brought to thematic interpretation and ultimately to social impact, while the feedback loop demonstrates the opportunity to revisit the scenes, particularly the climax, to analyze it more thoroughly in terms of the ideological implications. This cycle gives successive perfection of interpretation, especially of finding the most hidden modes of caste reinforcement or resistance.



The research design is to examine caste politics in Tamil films with a particular reference to the movie Vaazhai (2024) by Mari Selvaraj. The framework is aimed to comprehending the role of such cinematic elements as narrative structure, character development, dialogues and the visual symbolism in the presentation of caste. It also looks at the effects of these factors on the perception of the audience particularly among the younger generation in the interpretation of the caste realities.

The paper is based on Political Cinema Theory, which has been formulated by theorists like Stuart Hall and James Monaco. Through this theoretical perspective, this study discusses how films act as political texts and represent power systems, social stratifications and marginalized voices. In this regard, Vaazhai is considered as a cultural text which mirrors and perhaps redefines caste discourse in the Tamil

V. DATA ANALYSIS

Vaazhai (2024), directed by Mari Selvaraj, can be viewed as the representation of caste politics with

society.

The Representation and Inclusion concept looks at the manner in which the various caste groups are represented in the movie and the presence of marginalized communities being empowered and given voice. It is concerned with the visibility, dignity and narrative significance of these characters. Identity Politics, however, examines how caste identity is being created and manifested in the characters and whether the film is upholding or refuting the current caste identities.

Another important parameter is Social Justice and Equality which determines how the film propagates equality and questions the caste-based oppression, or how it propagates hierarchical structures subtly. Also, Narrative Control, and Voice explores upon whose opinion the narration takes the fore, i.e. whether the narration is inclusive or one in which a particular caste perspective prevails, especially in such pivotal moments as the climax.

Another technique that is analyzed is Climax Interpretation that affects the overall message of the movie greatly. It explores how the solution of the narrative implies aid and unity within societies or restricts assistance and justice in a given caste.

Using Political Cinema Theory in relation to these parameters of analysis, the research structure will facilitate the systematic study of the ways in which Vaazhai creates and conveys the caste politics. This method is helpful to realize how cinema does not only mirror the social life but also affects the perception of the audience and discourse. Finally, the framework identifies the strength of Tamil cinema in the formation of Tamil cinema in narratives of caste, identity, and social justice, specifically when it comes to the young generation.

major focus on the aspects of representation, identity, and social justice. Although the film is based on a rural plot and the simplistic approach to storytelling,



it creates a very strong socio-political landscape, which speaks of the real-life experiences of caste-based hierarchies. The film, with its characters, setting, and development of the plot, establishes a social world that is immersive and caste is not only a background detail but a moving force where relationships, opportunities, and conflicts are formed. One of the greatest strengths of the film is that it brings about the reality of caste where social order is expressed via daily interactions and not through the political pronouncements. The story actively reacts to the experiences of the protagonist, which reveals how caste affects the access to dignity, education, and support systems. To give an example, there are not single instances of exclusion, humiliation or solidarity, but they are embedded into the social fabric of the village. This stratified presentation makes this look real and the audience can appreciate caste as a dynamic force that determines human experience.

One can however see a major weakness in the story plot of the climax where the resolution seems to focus on support that is growing mostly within a specific community. Such selective treatment of the subject brings the issue of inclusivity and the possibility that the movie, although aimed at criticizing caste oppression, inadvertently perpetuates the division between communities. Repetition of such intra-community support without wider social integration can result in interpretative vagueness on the role that the film has on collective social justice.

Contextualized with Tamil films of today, Vaazhai has been an indication of the changing trend of movies that prefigure the silenced voices, as in the case of similar previous movies such as Pariyerum Perumal and Karnan. Such films have led to the transformation in the glorification of castes to caste criticism. But unlike just oppositional narratives, Vaazhai has a very ambivalent space of resistance and identity assertion that occasionally make conflicts between critique and reinforcement.

In data analysis terms the film can be compared in the context of three major parameters: Representation (8/10 in terms of depth and realism), Narrative Inclusivity (6/10 because of selective point of view), and Social Impact Potential (7/10 because of the way it is interpreted by the audience). Qualitative analysis will involve scene-based interpretation, dialogue

analysis and symbolic analysis of visual aspects, especially the way the characters represent caste positions. Thematic responses can be used to deduce audience perception particularly among the youth, in relation to identity, justice and belonging.

This paper uses the Political Cinema Theory to analyze the way Vaazhai creates a discourse with regards to caste using cinema. These have two significant dimensions of analysis Representation and Inclusion and Narrative Control and Voice. These parameters can be used to know the way power is distributed in the storytelling of this film: who is granted agency, whose voice is dominant, whose opinions are pushed to the edges or even omitted.

Representation and Inclusion mean ways of appearance and storytelling of various caste groups in the film. The movie is able to portray the marginal identities in terms of emotion and visibility, which allows the viewers to empathize with the plight of struggle and strength. Meanwhile, the level of inclusiveness is doubted when the story seems to represent the voice of one group of people especially at a pivotal moment.

Also, symbolic elements, like the rural environment, the daily work, and interpersonal struggles serve as the metaphors of more general caste relations. These visual and narrative indicators serve as the interpretive devices, as they allow the audience to unravel more profound socio-political connotations, which are incorporated in the narrative.

The interaction between the representation and the audience perception is a significant component of this discussion. As the audience perceives the movie, he/she does not only observe the reality of the caste but also subconsciously absorbs some of the perspectives on the matters of justice and identity, social belonging. This forms a feedback loop wherein cinema affects perception and vice versa as the discourse in the society is shaped by perception.

In general, the data analysis demonstrates that Vaazhai is a multifaceted piece of cinematic text that challenges and negotiates caste politics at the same time. As much as it manages to move the peripheral experiences to the center stage, it also raises serious questions on the inclusivity of the narratives and the potential of perpetuating caste identities by choosing the subject of representation. This duality brings to



fore the changing aspect of Tamil cinema in the sense that it is becoming more and more raajniitik (politically) aware, but at the same time still

operating within the confines of expression and social inclusion.

VI. KEY FINDINGS

The example of caste in *Vaazhai* (2024) directed by Mari Selvaraj shows a good balance between realism and politicality, where the narrative prefigures the voices of the marginalized people with an emotional perspective of the narratives. Caste in the film is represented as a daily experience of life, as it is rooted in social interactions, the practices of a culture or the hierarchies of power. Nevertheless, some of the narrative decisions, in particular, during the climax, indicate a biased portrayal of solidarity, which could be subject to inclusivity doubts. The movie is emotionally rich and socially relevant though it exposes interpretive vagueness in its ideological stance.

1. Caste Representation Enhances Social Awareness

The readings show that caste is not depicted as an abstract idea but as a social organization that people have to experience in their daily lives. The film discloses the access to dignity, opportunities, and relationships through interactions between characters, rural settings, and visual symbolism.

Through Political Cinema Theory, the representations are interpreted as social texts enabling the audience to be aware of inequality in the system. The portrayal enables the audience to perceive caste as a social reality continuum as opposed to history among the young people. This is in line with the available literature which states that cinema has a huge role to play in the forming of public consciousness and the creation of social awareness.

2. Narrative Drives Emotional Engagement and Empathy

The research indicates that the narrative structure of the film provides a great emotional connection to the audience. The shots of fighting, isolation and survival create a sense of empathy and the audience is psychologically involved in the characters.

Cinematically, the emotional narration is a means of political communication. The audience is not merely a witness of caste oppression but a victim of it since

it views it as the protagonist goes through it. This emotional involvement enhances the impression of the movie and makes viewers think more of the issue of social injustice.

3. Visual and Symbolic Elements Create Realistic Social Atmosphere

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4. Character Perspective Strengthens Identity Politics

Vaazhai, notwithstanding the simplicity of the way the narrative is told, incorporates multiple layers on the visual level and, therefore, relies on such aspects of the environment as the countryside, work, and daily interactions to build a new real socio-cultural setting. These are metaphors of caste structure and division of society.

These multi-layered representations form a socially realistic effect in the cinematic analysis, expecting the viewer to view the film world as a real one and something personal. This adds more credibility to the story and makes the problems that are being discussed more serious.

5. Climax Interpretation Limits Narrative Inclusivity

Although the movie advances the idea of rebellion and fairness, towards the end, it is implied that the ones who came to the rescue and solution were the members of a specific society. Such a selective representation can restrict the larger concept of common social solidarity.



This discovery indicates one of the most important contradictions in the movie - the contradiction between the desire to confront caste violence and the possible strengthening of the community boundaries. These narrative decisions can potentially shape the view listeners or viewers have about the potential of cross-caste solidarity in the real world.

6. Film Influences Youth Perception of Caste

The research establishes Vaazhai to have a strong effect on the viewer perception especially among young viewers. The movie prompts contemplation of the problem of identity, inequality, and justice, which predetermine the perception of caste among young people in modern society.

In this case, cinema is a cultural teacher and it can change beliefs and attitudes. This emotional and realistic image of the film contributes to the increased effect it has in engaging the younger audience and making them think critically about social structures.

7. Selective Representation Reveals Limits of Political Cinema

Among the most interesting conclusions, it can be stated that the representation, even politically mindful cinema, may be limited. Although Vaazhai

is also a critique of predominant caste discourse, it also exposes how movies can unconsciously give more weight to one side of a debate when compared to another.

Here the difficulty of political filmmaking is emphasized, in which the desire to oppose the oppression could emerge alongside narrative conditions. The book highlights the importance of representation in the arts and how it can be seen as comprising of visibility, inclusivity, and balance.

8. Contemporary Tamil Cinema Shows Evolving Caste Discourse

The study indicates that movies such as Vaazhai belong to a wider trend in Tamil cinema to bring the topic of caste closer and more critically. The modern works are trying to challenge and dismantle caste identities as compared to previous works where the identities were usually glorified.

Nevertheless, this shift is not perfect yet and movies are still balancing between activism, narrative, and viewer consumption. This is an indication of how dynamic the cinema is as a cultural and political means.

VII. CONCLUSION

Vaazhai (2024) is a film of historical importance in the modern Tamil film industry because narrative presentation becomes a tool to explore the caste reality and negotiate the representation. Even with such a bare-bone story and setting based on the countryside, the movie creates a socially rich and emotionally charged environment in which caste does not just exist but is lived through in its daily lives, interactions, and hardships. The movie shows that film stories can transcend entertainment and become a strong socio-political writing.

The capability of the movie to describe caste as a systemic feature instead of a single phenomenon is one of the most vivid ones. Vaazhai further develops a lived social world by using an overlapping character interaction, visual symbolism, and grounded storytelling, all of which coexist in a hierarchical, exclusionary, and dignified world. This realism enables the audience to experience caste not as a far-fetched idea, but as a direct and current reality which makes the film even more relevant in modern discussion.

One of the strongest points of the movie is in the emotional context and storyline involvement. The characters' experiences create empathy and psychological involvement, allowing viewers to connect with the struggles of marginalized groups. This emotional immersion turns the movie into the reflective space where viewers are not merely watching but are internally answering questions of righteousness, identity and belonging.

But just as in the case of the emerging types of political cinema, Vaazhai equally demonstrates some restrictions of narrative inclusivity. The conclusion, especially, gives an indication of a solution that seems to emanate mostly within a given society. Although this can be taken as a real life depiction of the social solidarity, it at the same time creates important questions of whether the plot takes into full consideration the greater collective unity. Such selective representation creates a conflict between resistance and reinforcement, and the difficulty in reflecting caste without furthering its borders.



In methodology, the research shows how qualitative analysis of films can be conveniently applied to understand socio-political messages in the films. Representation, identity politics, and control of narrative and perception of the audience are parameters that give a systematic approach to unraveling the ideological layers in the film. The conclusions are that Vaazhai manages to highlight the voices of the marginalized, but also raises some valuable concerns regarding the extent and boundaries of political narration.

Vaazhai as a film is a reflection of Tamil cinema transformation that has been changing and becoming more direct and sensitive on the issue of caste. This change is a turning point of the trend toward previous films that tended to normalize or glorify caste identities, to films that attempt to question and challenge them. However, this change, as this paper demonstrates, will not be complete but will keep on negotiating among authenticity, ideology, and audience reception.

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Finally, the Vaazhai legacy is in its capacities to arouse thought and discourse. It shows that cinema is not only able to reflect reality, but also to influence the ways in which this reality is perceived and discussed. The movie is a contribution to as well as a critique of caste discourse, it teaches us that even to be meaningfully represented, it is necessary to be more than visible, it must be inclusive, and equal.

Finally, Vaazhai emphasizes the changing role of the cinema as the field of the social cogitation and political participation. It demonstrates that the power of storytelling is not determined only by size or grandeur but the extent of its relation to the lived experiences. Simultaneously, it is also an alert that good filmmaking should remain active to open up horizons and make sure that the stories it is creating do not inadvertently restrict the possibilities of collective insight and social transformation.