



Dalit Voice in Film: Exploring Regional Narratives

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Abstract:

The increasing visibility of Dalit perspectives in regional Indian cinema signals a decisive transformation in how caste is imagined and represented on screen (“Debate: The Return of the Dalit in the New Cinema of South India”). For much of its history, Indian cinema—particularly mainstream Hindi cinema—either marginalized Dalit characters or reduced them to stereotypes framed through an upper-caste perspective (Homegrown). In recent decades, however, several regional film industries have emerged as crucial spaces for articulating Dalit experiences, political consciousness, and cultural self-assertion (The Print). This paper examines how Tamil, Marathi, Telugu, and Malayalam cinemas have contributed to this shift by foregrounding Dalit protagonists and centering narratives of resistance rather than victimhood. Through a comparative analysis of key films and filmmakers, the study argues that regional cinema has become a powerful cultural site where caste is no longer hidden or neutralized but openly confronted (“Dalits in South Indian Films”). By combining realism, symbolism, and political memory, these films challenge dominant cinematic traditions and reconfigure the relationship between cinema, caste, and social justice in contemporary India.

Introduction:

Cinema in India functions not merely as entertainment but as a cultural institution that shapes social imagination and collective memory. Given India’s deeply stratified social structure, cinematic representations often reflect existing hierarchies related to caste, class, gender, and colour (IJS DR). For decades, Dalit communities remained either invisible within mainstream narratives or were portrayed through reductive and patronizing lenses (Homegrown). Hindi cinema, in particular, frequently avoided addressing caste directly, opting instead for narratives of moral reform, class harmony, or individual redemption (“Regional Cinema Manages to Do What Hindi Cinema Avoids”).

In contrast, regional cinemas have increasingly engaged with caste as a lived and political reality (The Print). Filmmakers working

in Tamil, Marathi, Telugu, and Malayalam industries have challenged cinematic silences by placing Dalit characters at the center of their narratives (“Dalits in South Indian Films”). Rather than depicting Dalits as passive sufferers, these films present them as historical agents negotiating power, dignity, and resistance (“Pariyerum Perumal: On the Caste Reality of South Tamil Nadu”). This paper explores how regional cinema has contributed to the emergence of Dalit voices on screen and examines the narrative strategies through which caste is made visible and meaningful.

Conceptual Framework: Caste, Cinema, and Representation:

Unlike Western racial hierarchies, social discrimination in India is structured through caste, an inherited system that regulates access to

resources, labour, space, and dignity (IJRAW). Colourism operates alongside caste, reinforcing hierarchies by associating fair skin with beauty, power, and virtue, while darker skin is linked to inferiority and marginality (“Dalits in South Indian Films”). Cinema has historically reinforced these associations through casting practices, visual codes, and narrative conventions (Homegrown).

Representation, however, is not merely a matter of visibility. It involves questions of perspective, agency, and narrative control (“Debate: The Return of the Dalit in the New Cinema of South India”). Films that portray Dalit life through an upper-caste gaze often reproduce power imbalances even when they appear socially progressive (“Dalits in South Indian Films”). In contrast, narratives that emerge from Dalit subjectivities challenge dominant frameworks by redefining heroism, community, and resistance (Quest Journals).

Tamil Cinema: Political Assertion and Cultural Memory:

Tamil cinema has played a leading role in foregrounding caste as a central political concern (The Print). In the last decade, filmmakers such as Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj have reshaped cinematic language by explicitly situating Dalit identity within histories of land dispossession, social humiliation, and organized resistance (“Dalit Life, Tamil Cinema and Masculinity”). Their films reject the notion of caste neutrality and instead treat caste as a structuring force in everyday life (“Kaala: A Bahujan Grammar for Cinema”).

Pa. Ranjith’s works, including *Kabali*, *Kaala*, and *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu*, transform popular cinema by aligning mass appeal with anti-caste politics (“How Pa. Ranjith’s *Kaala* Changes the Way We Imagine the City”). Even when working with superstar

figures, Ranjith reframes heroism as collective struggle rather than individual dominance (“Dalits in South Indian Films”). Similarly, Mari Selvaraj’s films such as *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Karnan* depict the violence of caste through intimate, character-driven narratives that foreground Dalit youth navigating education, authority, and self-respect (“Pariyerum Perumal: On the Caste Reality of South Tamil Nadu”).

Symbolism plays a crucial role in these films. Objects such as water sources, village boundaries, and clothing function as markers of exclusion and resistance (“Dalit Life, Tamil Cinema and Masculinity”). Music, dialect, and folk traditions further anchor these narratives in Dalit cultural history, connecting cinematic storytelling with broader political movements inspired by Ambedkarite thought (Quest Journals).

Marathi Cinema: Everyday Caste and Lived Experience:

In Maharashtra, Marathi cinema has developed a distinct approach to caste by focusing on the everyday experiences of Dalit communities (IJS DR). Director Nagraj Manjule’s films stand out for their refusal to romanticize suffering or offer simplistic resolutions (Homegrown). Instead, they depict caste as an ordinary yet deeply violent presence shaping aspirations, relationships, and self-worth (“Dalits in South Indian Films”).

Fandry presents caste discrimination through the perspective of a Dalit adolescent whose dreams are repeatedly thwarted by social prejudice (IJRAW). The film’s emotional power lies in its restraint, portraying humiliation not as spectacle but as a normalized condition (Homegrown). *Sairat* extends this critique by addressing inter-caste love and the brutal consequences of transgressing social boundaries (“Regional Cinema Manages to Do What Hindi

Cinema Avoids”). Both films foreground Dalit subjectivity without relying on savior figures (“Debate: The Return of the Dalit in the New Cinema of South India”).

Telugu Cinema: Emerging Voices of Resistance:

Compared to Tamil and Marathi industries, Telugu cinema has been slower to engage with caste directly (“Why *Palasa 1978* Is an Important Telugu Film Documenting Dalit Resistance”). For decades, dominant narratives claimed caste blindness while systematically excluding Dalit perspectives (*The Wire*). Recent independent films, however, signal a shift toward more explicit engagement (“Why *Palasa 1978* Is an Important Telugu Film Documenting Dalit Resistance”).

Palasa 1978 represents a significant intervention by situating Dalit resistance within historical memory and political ideology (*The News Minute*). By referencing real caste atrocities and Ambedkarite slogans, the film links individual struggle with collective awakening (“Why *Palasa 1978* Is an Important Telugu Film Documenting Dalit Resistance”). Although such films remain exceptions, they indicate a growing space for Dalit narratives in Telugu cinema (IJS DR).

Malayalam Cinema: Limited Engagement and Gradual Change:

Malayalam cinema has historically been hesitant in addressing caste directly (*Quest Journals*). While class and religion have been frequent themes, caste has often remained peripheral (“Dalits in South Indian Films”). Films such as *Kammattipaadam* and *Ee.Ma.Yau* mark a gradual shift by depicting Dalit communities through land loss, ritual exclusion, and social vulnerability (*Quest Journals*).

However, these narratives often stop short of overt political assertion, reflecting a transitional stage rather than a full embrace of Dalit-centered storytelling (“Debate: The Return of the Dalit in the New Cinema of South India”).

Regional Cinema versus Hindi Cinema:

A comparative view highlights a sharp contrast between regional cinemas and mainstream Hindi cinema (“Regional Cinema Manages to Do What Hindi Cinema Avoids”). Bollywood has largely avoided centering Dalit protagonists, often framing caste through elite moral dilemmas or savior narratives (*Homegrown*). Dalit characters, when present, rarely function as agents of transformation (“Dalits in South Indian Films”).

Regional cinemas, by contrast, foreground Dalit perspectives and embed caste within everyday life (*The Print*). Films such as *Karnan* and *Fandry* narrate injustice from within Dalit communities rather than through external reformers (“Pariyerum Perumal: On the Caste Reality of South Tamil Nadu”).

Cinema, Community, and Political Identity:

Regional Dalit films are closely connected to broader movements of cultural and political assertion (*Quest Journals*). References to Ambedkar, Dalit Panthers, and local resistance histories appear through dialogue, imagery, and music (“Dalit Life, Tamil Cinema and Masculinity”). Filmmakers often extend their work beyond cinema into festivals, public discourse, and activism (“Debate: The Return of the Dalit in the New Cinema of South India”).

These films thus operate as cultural interventions, reclaiming space, history, and voice (“Dalits in South Indian Films”).

Conclusion:

The emergence of Dalit-centered narratives in regional Indian cinema represents a significant shift in the politics of representation (“Debate: The Return of the Dalit in the New Cinema of South India”). Tamil, Marathi, Telugu, and Malayalam films increasingly challenge cinematic silences by making caste central rather than peripheral (The Print). Through realism, symbolism, and political memory, these films transform cinema into a site of resistance and reimagination (“Dalit Life, Tamil Cinema and Masculinity”).

By amplifying Dalit voices, regional cinema reshapes cultural understanding of caste and opens new possibilities for justice-oriented storytelling in Indian film culture (Quest Journals).

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