

# Revolution on Screen: The Politics of Caste and Resistance in PA. Ranjith's Cinematic Narratives

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## Introduction

### Background & Context: Overview of Caste and Cinema in Indian Film History

Indian cinema, particularly the mainstream Bollywood and South Indian film industries, has long been dominated by upper-caste narratives that either erase or misrepresent Dalit experiences. Historically, caste oppression has been either invisibilized or depicted through stereotypical tropes, reinforcing societal hierarchies rather than challenging them. Early films often portrayed Dalit characters as submissive, passive victims or as objects of pity rather than agents of resistance. In contrast, movies influenced by socialist and leftist ideologies in the 1970s and 1980s briefly addressed caste struggles yet often failed to center Dalit voices. Tamil cinema, in particular, has a complex relationship with caste representation—while some filmmakers attempted progressive portrayals, the dominance of hero-centric narratives often upheld caste privilege. Against this backdrop, Pa. Ranjith's films emerge as a radical departure, explicitly foregrounding caste oppression, Dalit identity, and resistance.

### Relevance of Pa. Ranjith: His Unique Position as a Filmmaker Addressing Caste Oppression and Resistance

Pa. Ranjith is one of the few contemporary Indian filmmakers who unapologetically centers Dalit narratives in mainstream cinema. His films, such as *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), *Kaala* (2018), and *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021), use the cinematic medium to articulate Ambedkarite thought and subaltern resistance. Unlike many predecessors, Ranjith does not depict Dalits as mere victims but as active agents challenging hegemonic structures. His visual style, storytelling techniques, and symbolism—such as the recurring use of blue (associated with Dalit assertion and Ambedkarite ideology)—contribute to a distinct anti-caste aesthetic. Through his films, he creates a space for Dalit voices in popular culture, shifting the focus from upper-caste saviours to self-representation.

### Research Objectives: Analyzing How Ranjith's Films Depict Caste Politics and Subaltern Resistance

This study aims to explore how Pa. Ranjith employs cinema as a political tool to challenge caste hierarchies. The primary objectives are:

1. To examine the caste representation in Ranjith's films and how they contrast with traditional portrayals.

2. To analyze how his narratives foreground Dalit identity, self-respect, and resistance.
3. To investigate the impact of his films on Tamil cinema and broader socio-political discourse.

### **Methodology: Film Analysis, Textual Reading, and Socio-Political Critique**

This research adopts a multi-disciplinary approach:

- **Film Analysis:** Studying Ranjith's visual techniques, character construction, and storytelling methods.
- **Textual Reading:** Examining dialogues, symbols, and metaphors that reinforce anti-caste narratives.
- **Socio-Political Critique:** Placing Ranjith's work within the larger discourse of Dalit resistance, Ambedkarite philosophy, and caste politics in India.

### **Dalit Studies & Film Theory: The Influence of Ambedkarite Thought on Ranjith's Films**

Dalit studies provide a crucial lens to understand Pa. Ranjith's cinematic narratives, as his films are deeply rooted in Ambedkarite ideology. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy of social justice, self-respect, and annihilation of caste resonates throughout Ranjith's films. Unlike mainstream Indian cinema, which either ignores caste or portrays Dalit characters through a victimhood lens, Ranjith foregrounds them as powerful agents of change. His films embody Ambedkarite principles by depicting Dalit assertion, dignity, and resistance to Brahminical hegemony. The use of blue (symbolizing Dalit consciousness), references to Ambedkar's writings, and narratives centred on reclaiming spaces all reinforce this ideological framework. His work challenges upper-caste narratives in cinema by reimagining Dalit representation from a position of power rather than subjugation.

### **Subaltern Studies: The Role of Marginalized Voices in Cinematic Narratives**

Subaltern studies, which explore the histories and voices of marginalized communities, offer another critical perspective in analyzing Ranjith's films. Traditionally, subaltern voices in Indian cinema have been mediated through dominant-caste perspectives, limiting their agency. Ranjith, however, disrupts this trend by allowing Dalit characters to speak for themselves. In films like *Kaala* and *Kabali*, the protagonists are not passive subjects but leaders who challenge caste oppression and systemic inequality. His storytelling shifts the power dynamic, presenting Dalits not as victims but as active participants in shaping their destiny. Ranjith's cinema contributes to the larger discourse on subaltern empowerment and representation in media by focusing on their struggles, aspirations, and cultural identity.

### **Postcolonial Film Criticism: Examining Representation and Resistance Through Visual Storytelling**

Postcolonial film criticism helps analyze how Ranjith's films resist dominant ideologies and colonial legacies of caste oppression. Postcolonial scholars argue that cinema often perpetuates hegemonic narratives, marginalizing lower-caste and indigenous identities. Ranjith subverts these conventions by reclaiming cinematic space for Dalits, using visual storytelling to challenge caste-based exclusions. His films deconstruct the hero-worship tradition of Tamil cinema, replacing upper-caste saviours with Dalit protagonists who lead their communities. Furthermore, he reimagines urban and rural landscapes, portraying slums and working-class neighbourhoods not as sites of despair but of cultural vibrancy and

resistance. By blending postcolonial critique with anti-caste discourse, Ranjith's films offer a revolutionary cinematic language that reshapes Indian film narratives.

### **Caste and Visual Politics in Pa. Ranjith's Cinema**

#### **Breaking Stereotypes: How Ranjith Redefines Dalit Identity in Mainstream Cinema**

Mainstream Indian cinema has historically depicted Dalits in two limited ways: as either helpless victims or as subservient characters within upper-caste narratives. Pa. Ranjith challenges these stereotypes by presenting Dalit characters as self-reliant, politically conscious, and empowered. His protagonists, such as Kabali (*Kabali*, 2016) and Kaala (*Kaala*, 2018), are not passive sufferers but leaders who organize their communities to resist systemic oppression. Unlike earlier representations where Dalits sought validation from upper castes, Ranjith's characters assert their identity with confidence, refusing to conform to the Brahminical gaze. His films celebrate Dalit pride by embracing Ambedkarite ideology, questioning the caste system, and showcasing characters who reclaim their dignity and cultural heritage.

#### **Spatial Representation: Marginalization vs. Assertion through Mise-en-Scene and Setting**

Space plays a critical role in Ranjith's visual storytelling. His films contrast spaces of oppression with those of resistance, using mise-en-scene to highlight caste dynamics. In *Madras* (2014), the political wall in a North Chennai neighborhood becomes a metaphor for power struggles and Dalit assertion. Similarly, in *Kaala*, Dharavi—a historically marginalized slum—becomes a symbol of Dalit resilience and self-governance. By portraying slums and working-class neighborhoods not as spaces of despair but as sites of cultural vibrancy, Ranjith disrupts the mainstream tendency to associate Dalit existence with suffering alone. He transforms these spaces into arenas of political struggle, where marginalized communities reclaim their right to belong.

#### **Symbolism & Metaphors: The Use of Ambedkarite Symbols, Blue Color Palettes, and Recurring Motifs**

Ranjith's films are rich with Ambedkarite symbolism. The color blue, associated with Dalit consciousness and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, is a recurring visual motif—seen in costumes, flags, and even set designs. His characters often reference Ambedkar's teachings directly, reinforcing anti-caste ideologies. The imagery of the lion, a symbol of power in Buddhist and Dalit iconography, frequently appears in his films, representing strength and resistance. By embedding these symbols in his narratives, Ranjith ensures that his cinema is not just about Dalit representation but also about actively asserting Dalit pride and defiance against caste oppression.

### **Resistance and Subaltern Assertion in Pa. Ranjith's Cinema**

#### **Characterization: Portrayal of Dalit Protagonists as Agents of Resistance**

Pa. Ranjith's films break away from the conventional portrayal of Dalits as passive sufferers by crafting protagonists who actively challenge systemic oppression. His lead characters—whether it is Anbu in *Madras* (2014), Kabali in *Kabali* (2016), or Kaala in *Kaala* (2018)—are not helpless victims but fierce leaders, revolutionaries, and community organizers. They refuse to conform to the dominant caste order and instead assert their dignity through political action, intellectual discourse, and direct confrontation. Unlike mainstream Tamil cinema's dominant-caste heroes who single-handedly "uplift" the oppressed,

Ranjith's protagonists derive their strength from collective resistance, emphasizing community empowerment over individual heroism.

### **Dialogue & Narrative: Political Messaging and Anti-Caste Rhetoric in *Madras*, *Kabali*, and *Kaala***

Ranjith's films employ powerful dialogues that directly challenge caste hierarchies and Brahminical dominance. In *Kabali*, Rajinikanth's character explicitly refers to historical oppression and the struggles of Tamil-speaking Dalits in Malaysia, making caste-based discrimination a global issue. *Kaala* presents an even stronger assertion of Dalit resistance, where land becomes a metaphor for self-determination. *Kaala*'s speeches about land rights and dignity mirror real-life Ambedkarite struggles. Similarly, in *Madras*, the political wall dispute becomes an allegory for caste assertion, showing how public spaces are contested between the marginalized and dominant caste groups. Ranjith's narratives do not just represent Dalits but also actively critique the socio-political structures that sustain caste oppression.

### **Music & Art: The Role of Hip-Hop, Folk Music, and Mural Art in Reclaiming Identity**

Music and visual art play a significant role in Ranjith's cinematic resistance. His films incorporate Dalit folk traditions, hip-hop, and protest music as forms of cultural assertion. In *Kaala*, the use of *Gaana* music—an art form rooted in Dalit working-class culture—acts as a medium for subaltern storytelling. *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021) further explores cultural resistance by showcasing boxing as a means of reclaiming identity. Ranjith also incorporates murals and street art, often featuring Ambedkar, Buddha, and symbols of Dalit pride, reinforcing visual resistance against caste hierarchies. Through these artistic expressions, his films celebrate Dalit identity and push back against cultural erasure.

### **Impact & Reception**

#### **Audience & Cultural Impact: Reception among Dalit Communities and Mainstream Audiences**

Pa. Ranjith's films have had a profound impact on Dalit communities, who see his cinema as a rare and powerful assertion of their identity in mainstream Indian film. His works resonate deeply with Dalit viewers because they portray their struggles, culture, and resistance with dignity and authenticity. The use of Ambedkarite symbolism, the foregrounding of subaltern narratives, and the celebration of Dalit assertion have contributed to a cultural awakening, especially among younger generations. His films have also found a space in mainstream Tamil cinema, gaining commercial success and prompting broader discussions on caste in public discourse. However, while many progressive viewers appreciate Ranjith's bold anti-caste stance, his films have sometimes polarized audiences, particularly those from privileged caste backgrounds who are unaccustomed to seeing caste power structures openly challenged in popular cinema.

#### **Criticism & Controversy: Backlash from Dominant Caste Perspectives**

Ranjith's explicit critique of caste hegemony has drawn significant criticism, especially from dominant caste groups uncomfortable with his unapologetic political messaging. His films disrupt traditional Tamil cinema, which has often either ignored caste or subtly reinforced caste hierarchies through its storytelling and character dynamics. Backlash against *Kabali* and *Kaala* was particularly strong, with some critics arguing that his overtly political narratives overshadow entertainment. Others accused Ranjith of promoting "divisive politics" by centering Dalit experiences. Additionally, certain mainstream

media outlets have downplayed his contributions, highlighting the tension between upper-caste gatekeeping in the industry and Ranjith's radical storytelling.

### **Influence on Contemporary Filmmaking: Ranjith's Contribution to Anti-Caste Discourse in Indian Cinema**

Pa. Ranjith's impact on Indian cinema extends beyond his films—he has paved the way for a new wave of filmmakers addressing caste injustice. His success has encouraged more Dalit artists to enter the industry and tell their own stories. The rise of independent and alternative cinema focusing on Dalit perspectives, such as Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), owes much to the space Ranjith has carved out. His works have also influenced mainstream Tamil and Hindi cinema, pushing filmmakers to engage with caste discourse more explicitly. Through his production house *Neelam Productions*, he continues to mentor emerging Dalit artists, ensuring that anti-caste narratives gain a stronger foothold in Indian cinema.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Summary of Findings: Key Takeaways from the Study**

This study has explored how Pa. Ranjith's cinema serves as a radical platform for anti-caste assertion, subaltern resistance, and the redefinition of Dalit identity in Indian cinema. Unlike mainstream Tamil and Bollywood films, which either invisibilize caste or reinforce dominant caste hegemony, Ranjith's narratives explicitly challenge caste structures and celebrate Dalit pride. Through his characterization of strong, politically aware protagonists, his symbolic use of Ambedkarite imagery, and his reimagining of marginalized spaces as sites of resistance, Ranjith has reshaped the way caste is represented on screen. His films, including *Madras*, *Kabali*, *Kaala*, and *Sarpatta Parambarai*, offer a new cinematic language—one that foregrounds the struggles and aspirations of Dalit communities while resisting Brahminical narratives. Despite facing criticism from dominant caste groups, his work has had a lasting cultural impact, inspiring both audiences and emerging filmmakers to engage with caste discourse more openly.

#### **Future Research Directions: Scope for Further Exploration in Dalit Cinema**

While this study has examined Ranjith's contribution to anti-caste cinema, there remains significant scope for further research. Future studies could explore:

- The reception of Ranjith's films in different social and regional contexts.
- A comparative analysis of Ranjith's work with other Dalit filmmakers like Mari Selvaraj.
- The role of women in Ranjith's cinema and how gender intersects with caste in his narratives.
- The influence of Dalit literature and theater on his storytelling techniques.
- The global impact of Ranjith's films and their potential contribution to transnational anti-caste discourse.

### **Final Thoughts: The Significance of Ranjith's Films in Shaping a New Cinematic Consciousness**



Pa. Ranjith's cinema marks a transformative moment in Indian film history. He has challenged long-standing biases in the industry by using cinema as a tool for political resistance and cultural reclamation. His films are not just entertainment; they are acts of defiance, offering a counter-narrative to dominant caste-controlled storytelling. Ranjith has opened doors for a new generation of filmmakers to continue the fight for social justice on screen by amplifying Dalit voices and normalizing anti-caste discourse in mainstream cinema. His work stands as a powerful reminder that cinema is not just a reflection of society but also a force capable of shaping its future.

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