A Study on Maamannan Movie and its Perceptions among College Students

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Although Tamil film has traditionally been used to highlight societal concerns, its stories frequently reveal underlying caste structures. Prominent Tamil filmmaker Mari Selvaraj has drawn notice and controversy for his anti-caste themes; his most recent film, Maamannan, has generated a lot of discussion. The film positions itself as a critique of caste injustice and highlights the significance of social justice. In contrast to previous Tamil films that quietly glorify caste pride without causing much public issue, Maamannan has drawn harsh criticism for supposedly spreading anti-caste views, especially on social media. This article investigates whether Maamannan's content actually promotes social justice or if it acts as a counternarrative by highlighting the caste pride of under-represented groups. Students participated in a focus group discussion to examine how they interpreted the movie's themes and takeaways. According to the survey, participants believed that Maamannan's philosophy was a significant societal issue deserving of cinematic attention. According to the research, movies like Maamannan have the potential to significantly increase public awareness and promote social change by provoking thought-provoking discussions about social justice and caste.

INTRODUCTION

*"I might have been singing the same song, But I will sing it as long as I live,
I shall rip out my gut, transform it into a lute, and make it into strings to echo in every
street,I will always keep seeking the ears that can hear the truth".*

Movies have always been a potent tool for influencing and reflecting social narratives. Caste has frequently been a major theme in Tamil films, either implicitly woven into narratives or overtly portrayed in the identities and personalities of the characters. Films that uphold caste hierarchy and celebrate caste pride have historically dominated the mainstream and hardly ever sparked meaningful public discussion. But a new generation of filmmakers has surfaced in recent years, questioning the established quo by tackling issues of social justice and equality. Because of his anti-caste stories, Mari Selvaraj has emerged as a major topic of conversation among these filmmakers.Mari Selvaraj is a director of the Tamil film industry. He has just one idea, and that is to voice out the marginalized people's pain that he keeps emphasizing in his movies. Still, some people believe that caste-based discrimination no longer occurs in cities and that such issues are confined to remote areas only. Even in the so-called remote areas, they say that caste-based discrimination was something that happened many decades ago, and now there is a friendly bond established among all the cast members in the village in the present scenario.

However, on December 29, 2022, caste discrimination affected a village named Irayur in Tamil Nadu's Pudukottai district. Human waste was found in a 10,000-litre water tank that was supplyingdrinking water to the Dalit community. A large amount of human waste was discovered dumped inside the water tank. So much so that the water had turned yellow without knowing that, for a week or so, the people had been drinking this water. The truth surfaced only after the children in the village became seriously ill. This incident demonstrates that individuals remain entrenched in their castes and often resist when individuals from lower castes surpass traditional norms.Coming from an oppressed community and having faced significant caste-based discrimination in his youth, Mari Selvaraj channels his pain into his art. In his debut film, "Pariyerum Perumal," Mari Selvaraj explores the challenges faced by a law college student named Kathir, who forges a friendship with a girl from a higher caste. The girl's relatives witness this interaction and proceedto shame Kathir. Also, Kathir finds it difficult to cope with his fellow classmates, who are also members of the upper community.

The film portrays the journey of a lower-caste boy grappling with the reasons behind his community's marginalization and enduring oppression, seeking answers and transformation. The same is the case in the movie Karnan," where the protagonist and his community fight for a bus stand. Just because they are from an oppressed community, they are denied a bus stop, and when they retaliate with violence, a police officer brings in his force and attacks them. So, whenever heportrays the hurdles put up by the upper caste men in his films, a section of upper caste people getsfurious and issues warnings through their caste associations to the theatres.

Maamannan Movie

There were also many controversies that happened during the release of the film Maamannan. It all began in the audio launch of the film "Maamannan", when Mari Selvaraj spoke, "When I watched Thevar Magan, the kind of pain and impact it had on me, both positive and negative, let me make Maamannan.

Figure 1:Maamannan Movie Poster

While it is celebrated for its film language, it also had a ripple effect on some audiences. It created a storm in my heart, and I didn't know how to take it. But I started wondering what if, in the world of Thevar Magan, besides Periya Thevar and Chinna Thevar, my father was there; this thought was the spark of Maamannan." Apart from this, there was a 13-year-old letter written to Kamal Haasan by Mari Selvaraj.

The letter talks about the pain that he underwent after the release of the Thevar Magan movie. Both of these incidents created controversy on social media, creating a dialogue in the society stating Mari Selvaraj making a movie against the Thevar community and Kamal Haasan.

Numerous caste associations issued warnings about the potential for societal violence arising from the movie and called for its ban. So, this paper aims to analyze the impact of the Maamannan movie on the audience and explore its portrayal of the oppressed community's struggles. Furthermore, the paper seeks to investigate whether the Maamannan movie authentically represents the pain of the oppressed community or if it tends to glorify the lower caste community and incite societal unrest.

1. Objectives of the study

1. To study the students' general perception of the movie Maamannan.
2. To study the student's perspective on using social justice as a theme in the movie Maamannan.
3. To analyze the student's perception of caste in today's contemporary society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cinema has historically been a recurring theme in Tamil cinema, often reinforcing dominant narratives or glorifying caste pride. However, contemporary filmmakers are using it to critique societal inequalities, particularly caste-based discrimination. This shift has opened new research avenues, exploring how films influence public discourse on sensitive social issues. This review reviews studies on caste representation in Indian cinema, focusing on Tamil films and audience reception, to understand how these films influence perceptions of caste and social justice. Cinema is one of the most powerful tools for engaging the young minds of society. People find cinema to be one of their leisure activities to escape from their day's tension. Cinema adds a great deal of entertainment and information to society. It plays a major role in reforming society from various feudal ideologies that have been practiced over many years. Indian society is stratified into different sections known as the "caste system" or "varna vyavastha.". The different sections have specific occupations: Brahmins, the priests; Kshatriyas, the warriors and landowners; Vaishyas, the farmers, merchants, and business people; and Sudras, the labourers, who are the outcasts and untouchables who perform cleaning jobs. The caste system throughout the years has influenced different spheres of people's lives, including art and culture (Berreman, 1960).

Acchut Kanya (1936) movie depicted the caste system and its realities under British India. It's a relationship between a young boy and a girl from two different communities. The plot revolves around how they are not able to cross their caste boundaries to get married. Bollywood has a very small number of films that talk about the Dalit issue (Singh & Azeez, 2021). The reason for the under-representation of these issues may be because of the smaller number of predominant directors and actors from the Dalit community (Kumar, 2014). Wankhede (2013) states that Bollywood concentrates mainly on entertainment value and does not care to present social issues in cinema. Theodore Baskaran (1996) quotes that "Tamil cinema has grown to become the most dominant influence in the cultural and political life in Tamil Nadu." Tamil heroes have a huge reach among the people, while heroines are merely used as a glamour tool in movies. The Thevars and Vanniyars are the two dominant groups that challenged Dravidian politics, which later led to an open celebration of their identities and

characters in the movies. After a very long time, the Tamil film industry started to acknowledge the Dalit struggles in the movies of Ranjith, namely Madras and Kabali (Damodaran & Gorringe 2010).

Srinivas and Kaali (1998) state that caste power lies only in two aspects: honour (maanam) and valour (veeram). Women in cinema have to protect their honour to protect their communities, and men have to show their valour to defend their communities. These were the two ideal philosophies to uphold the pride of their community, which was reflected in most of the movies that were released in the 1990s (Rajangam, 2008).

Films depict only certain sections of the dominant group where the hero is from, legitimise caste panchayats, and serve justice to the affected people (Anand 2005). This representation was carried to the major population of society through films that showcased the dominant section of the population and established dominance over the underprivileged (Damodaran & Gorringe 2010).Madha Yaanai Kootam (Herd of Angry Elephants, Vikram Sugumaran, 2013), has scenes with dialogue claiming that the Madurai Jail was designed by the British to control the intermediate communities, and it also has scenes where, when they get released from the prison, they will be greeted with gifts and celebrations.The commercial success of intermediate-caste films has made them immensely popular, influencing how other films are made. Even non-Thevar directors like Gangai Amaran's Enga Ooru Paatukaran (Our Village Bard, 1987) do not have any scenes portraying the pride of the cast, but still, the opening of the movie shows an homage to Muthuramalinga Thevar asserting power (Damodaran & Gorringe 2010).

Kamal Haasan's Thevar Magan movie was the first of its kind, with strong idioms of caste and greater glorification of caste-based practices (Karthikeyan 2011). The movie actually created a representation of Tamil cinema itself as a sickle-bearing culture among the people of Tamil Nadu(Krishnan, 2008). The use of silambam, a martial art with sticks and sickles, is considered a pride symbol and is associated with the dominant communities (Damodaran & Gorringe 2010).

During the promotion of the Thevar Magan movie, a 40-foot cutout of the hero with a big sword was installed. Severe objections were raised to the installation, which led to the removal of the sword for a short period; however, it was restored due to severe pressure from the top (Srinivas and Kaali 1998).Apart from Thevar Magan, there were movies such as Thevar Veetu Ponnu, Maravan, Kizhakku Cheemayile, Periya Marudhu, Pasumpon, Ponmana Chelvan, Taj Mahal, Maayi, Diwan, Kaadhal, Ghilli, Sanda Kozhi, Thimiru, Paruthi Veeran, Subramaniapuram, Goripalayam Saami, Maayandi Kudumbathar, Thittakudi, Milaga, Aadukalam, and Sundarapandian that had references to the use of sickles, blood, gore, and violence. Above all, the central idiom is the commemoration of a particular dominant caste and its customs (Damodaran & Gorringe 2010).

Actually, most of the cast-based films are set in the area of Madurai. Madurai is known for being the capital of the Pandyas in the 4th century BC. It is known for the famous Meenakshi Temple and is considered a land of knowledge production. Even the earlier Tamil films established Madurai as the epitome of knowledge in films. The caste discourse in films is mainly portrayed by the filmmakers, who come from Madurai and down south. Most of the films even feature bullfighting (Jallikattu), which is considered a traditional identity of masculinity, caste pride, and feudalism (Damodaran & Gorringe 2010).

Inference from Review

- Caste pride is a very common theme in Tamil films.
- Rare Dalit representation in Tamil films to be found.
- A very smaller number of Tamil directors are in fame from Dalit community.
- The real representation of the Down South Tamil people in films needs to be still explored.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed focus group discussions as the primary method of data collection. Focus groups are a qualitative research technique used to gather insights into participants' perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. In this method, a group of individuals is engaged in an interactive setting, allowing participants to freely discuss the topic and exchange views with one another. This dynamic interaction often generates deeper insights than one-on-one interviews, making it a powerful tool for evaluating ideas or testing new concepts.

For this study, a focus group comprising 15 respondents was conducted. The selection criteria for participants included the following: : Participants were between the age group of 17 and 20 years old., All respondents had watched films directed by Mari Selvaraj,ensuring familiarity with the themes and narrative style explored in his movies.

The focus group provided a platform to discuss the participants' perspectives on the themes and ideologies depicted in Maamannan, particularly its stance on caste and social justice. The interactive nature of the session encouraged rich discussions, enabling the collection of nuanced data relevant to the study's objectives.

Maamannan Movie and its General Impact

Maamannan, a Tamil film directed by Mari Selvaraj, is a powerful exploration of social justice, equality, caste politics, and the fight for the rights of marginalized communities. The film raises social awareness by exposing students to the broader implications of policies on marginalized groups and encouraging critical thinking about power dynamics. It also inspires self-empowerment through the characters fighting for their rights, motivating them to stand up for their rights and work towards social equity in their personal and professional lives.The film also promotes political and cultural insight by exposing students to the intersection of politics and social justice, encouraging them to engage with cultural and political narratives critically, enhancing their civic consciousness. It also encourages critical thinking by highlighting societal structures rooted in caste and class, prompting students to question and critique the statusquo.

Maamannan encourages creative kids to use their abilities to confront social concerns and produce meaningful content by examining social issues via film and fostering artistic appreciation and media literacy. Academic curricula can incorporate it, especially in media studies, political science, and social science.Maamannan is a powerful cinematic experience that challenges students to consider social standards, cultivate empathy, and work toward a more just and equitable society in addition to providing them with entertainment. Students' perceptions and interactions with the world around them might be greatly

impacted by the movie as a social learning tool.

Maamannan Movie Narrative Style

Maamannan is a captivating film that blends realistic storytelling with powerful symbolism to highlight deep-seated societal issues. Directed by Mari Selvaraj, the film employs a layered approach, blending intense emotions, gripping drama, and sharp social commentary. The narrative style includes linear storytelling with flashbacks, dual perspectives, social realism, symbolism, and metaphors.The story alternates between the perspectives of Maamannan, a senior politician from a marginalized caste, and his son, Athiveeran, who grapple with personal trauma and societal oppression. This portrayal of generational challenges in confronting systemic inequalities highlights the struggles of marginalized communities. The film's narrative is deeply rooted in social realism, presenting the harsh realities of caste-based oppression, inequality, and political power struggles in Indian society.Symbolism and metaphors are employed to emphasize themes, such as the relationship between humans and animals, which serves as a metaphor for power dynamics and resistance. Thecharacter-driven plot heavily focuses on the emotional journeys of the characters, reflecting two approaches to fighting oppression: peaceful negotiation and direct confrontation.

The narrative integrates cultural elements like traditional practices, folk songs, and rituals into the story, grounding it in the local Tamil context. It delves into caste politics and the exploitation of power in democratic systems, making it both personal and political.The emotional arcs of the characters are meticulously crafted, building tension as they confront internal and external conflicts. The climactic resolution is both satisfying and thought-provoking,leaving the audience with hope while urging them to question societal structures. Mari Selvaraj's use of vibrant visuals, AR Rahman's soundtrack, and symbolic imagery elevates the narrativestyle, making it a powerful visual and emotional experience.

Maamannan Movie and Students Perceptions

Students praised Maamannan as a film that effectively combats social injustice and caste prejudice.The film portrays repressed communities' struggles and promotes equality, fostering discussions on humanity and a caste-free society. They emphasized the importance of these movies in teaching and influencing attitudes towards a more inclusive future, particularly among younger generations, and promoting a more just society.The respondents felt that the stories of Mari Selvaraj have to be told to the society as they create awareness among the society. In a way, these stories promote the idea of equality among the people, allow them to accept that caste discrimination is still happening, and encourage them to act upon these issues. Respondents felt that Mari Selvaraj is not promoting any caste in his movies; instead, he just registers the pains of oppressed people in his films. The character's response to dominant community people is showcased as just a reaction to the action of those people, and it doesn't trigger any caste pride among the oppressed people in the scene.

Respondents felt that Mari Selvaraj movies would offend only those who have a casteist mindset, as their ideology is put up for discussion. Also, one major viewpoint emerged, stating that Mari Selvaraj is looking from a very small

perspective in terms of caste. Just because Mari Selvaraj was targeted by the dominant community, he should not come to the conclusion that all the higher communities have a casteist mindset. There are good and bad people from all sections of society, and he should stop generalizing his views on the so-called upper caste. However, a counterargument was also registered from the respondents that he is just showing the issues that are happening in society as they are and he is not adding any fiction to it, which creates great awareness among the general public.When asked about whether films can bring about a change in society, respondents felt that showing these issues in movies can bring about a minimal change in society. Respondents felt that casteist issues are currently not in the mindset of today's youth but instead exist only in the mindset of the previous generation. So, there may be a necessity for these movies for the previous generations toat least make them to think about these issues.

However, the movie Maamannan made a lot of respondents draw some inferences, like not to continue these vindictive actions against others. The fight in Maamannan showcased that mere violence shall not be a solution for any problem, and only solutions that come in line with politics shall be the ultimate solution that prevails the social justice in society. The film also promotes equality and respect for fellow human beings. The film has scenes that promote friendship, where the current generation is not bothered about their friend's caste and the team represented in the movie is just more into finding solutions to common problems.

Maamannan on Social Dynamics and Public Order

Before the film's release, many cast associations threatened the theatre owners not to screen this movie. Most people's opinions are that the film might trigger a violent clash between communities and disrupt society. Fortunately, most of the issues were limited to threats, and no such violent incidents were reported anywhere. Respondents were not able to recall any violent incidents occurring in any part of Tamil Nadu. One of the reasons for not having violence was voiced out by a respondent, who stated that since the lead actor is Udhayanidhi Stalin, who happens to be the sitting cabinet minister for the state and also happens to be the son of the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, this made them maintain law and order in the state. If this movie had been done with some other lead character, there might have been a chance for a clash among the people.

Caste Dialogue and Societal Awareness through Maamannan

All the respondents unanimously agreed that the movie Maamannan created a dialogue in society. It built a conversation among the people to speak about equality for fellow human beings and how caste is a hurdle to it. Respondents were very happy to welcome these kinds of movies in the future and agreed that caste is no longer a necessity in today's world. But still, all agreed that caste is still prevailing in this modern society in various forms. Interestingly, a respondent registered the perspective that caste is not diminishing but instead has evolved over the past few years. Even in today's scenario, most of the matrimonial websites have been very specifically designed to accommodate the various existing caste preferences. Even if people wanted to change caste, it always holds to them in some form, not leaving them.

Almost all the respondents were against the idea of caste, and all agreed that they had the intention of not passing caste ideas forward to the next generation. Films like these will definitely create more awareness in terms of changing the mindset

of the audience, which will uphold humanity as the prime crux of society.

CONCLUSION

It's important that social issues in movies be presented, as it creates awareness and engages dialogue in society. People's minds should always consider the concept of equality to grow together in today's scenario. The study found that Mari Selvaraj is trying to portray the pain of the oppressed people, and his stand on showing the dominant community is very carefully constructed in such a way that he is not doing any propaganda. It was very clear that the scenes in the movie Maamannan were structured in such a way that the primary characters were just reacting to the action created by the dominant community, and nowhere does Mari Selvaraj try to uplift the caste pride of the oppressed community. An eye for an eye can never be a solution for any problem; instead, the creation of an environment of dialogue can encourage people to come together to achieve a common goal. It's clear from the focus group discussion that respondents are not into caste anymore and are looking forward to establishing a caste-free society in the near future. Will society allow them to freely think and have a hassle-free journey in life?.

The study is limited to a very small group of students, so the perspectives cannot be generalized for a very large population. In the future, a larger group of samples will have to be studied to comeup with a generalized statement.

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