



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

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### POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL FEMININITY OF PA. RANJITH'S 'NATCHATHIRAM NAGARGIRATHU' MOVIE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

**KEY WORDS:** Pa. Ranjith, Anti Caste, Ambedkar, Femininity, Film

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#### ABSTRACT

Caste remains a deeply entrenched and complex concern in Tamil Nadu and Film plays a major artistic countenance, interrogating casteism at different times. In that regard, Pa. Ranjith's film *Natchathiram Nagargirathu*, released in 2022, grants a very significant political issue. In Tamil Nadu, social justice or anti-caste films are mostly male centric. Amidst that, Pa. Ranjith's *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* movie discusses the pivotal role of caste annihilation distinctively through the female character 'Rene'. A core element of Rene's femininity is her political ideology, infused with Ambedkarite principles, which shapes her as an advocate for social justice. Ambedkar has said that the Indian caste system is a system of graded inequality. That graded inequality has always placed women at a lower position in society. In this context, the Dalit female character in Ranjith's film re-interprets current issues in Tamil Nadu, such as honor killing and political correctness. This study adopts Thematic analysis through Anti - caste lenses and interrogates the limitations of anti-caste movements and the shortcomings of Dravidian reformist agendas in achieving genuine equality, particularly among intermediate castes.

#### INTRODUCTION

Pa. Ranjith's film *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* was released in 2022 in the Tamil language. Compared to his earlier films, it attained only a moderate commercial success. To understand the politics articulated in *Natchathiram Nagargirathu*, it is essential to examine the historical traditions of Tamil cinema, which provide the cultural and intellectual backdrop for the film.

Tamil cinema possesses a rich and distinguished heritage. Between the 1920s and the late 1930s, the theatrical world in Tamil Nadu flourished, giving rise to celebrated actors such as T. K. Shanmugam, Pammal Sambandha Mudaliar, M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar, and M. K. Radha, who were widely recognized as stage superstars. Tamils have historically demonstrated a profound appreciation for the classical triad of literature (iyal), music (isai), and drama (natakam), which formed the foundation of theatrical expression in the region and reflects a broader cultural pattern.

Early theatrical productions were largely centered on the Indian freedom struggle, although mythological narratives remained a prominent part of the repertoire. Stories drawn from epics such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and devotional tales like *Bhakta Prahlada* were frequently staged. A major reason for this ideological tendency in the theatrical sphere was the rise of the Indian National Congress. Most playwrights and dialogue writers of that time were aligned with the ideological framework of the Congress party. This trend resonated across the Indian subcontinent.

Concurrently, Tamil Nadu witnessed the emergence of a powerful counter-current in the form of the Self-Respect Movement, led by E. V. Ramasamy. Its central principles included the eradication of caste, the abolition of women's subjugation, the rejection of superstition, and the establishment of social justice for all.

It was during this period that theatre underwent a new phase of transformation. While those in the opposing ideological camp propagated mythological themes and patriotism through their plays, proponents of the Self-Respect Movement staged rationalist propaganda dramas. When one side extolled the greatness of Rama from the *Ramayana*, the other countered by emphasizing the greatness of Ravana. When Sita was foregrounded by one group, the other highlighted Kannagi, the central character of the Tamil epic

*Silappathikaram*. Thus, the theatrical world prior to the emergence of cinema was marked by such ideological contestations.

#### A New Phase in Tamil Cinema

By the 1940s, Tamil films emerged as an extension of theatrical traditions often featuring extensive musical compositions. Early cinema stars included M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar, K. B. Sundarambal, Ranjan, and P. U. Chinnappa while, directors like Ellis R. Dungan, a foreign filmmaker, and S. S. Vasan of *Ananda Vikatan*, a prominent figures in the industry during this period became influential in shaping cinematic practices.

Most films of this era often revolved around royal narratives—stories of kings and queens. The dialogues delivered by characters were heavily Sanskritised, and pure Tamil had little to no presence in cinematic expression.

#### Progressive Tamil cinema

The next significant transformation in Tamil cinema were also shaped by the proponents of the Dravidian movement. The arrival of figures such as C. N. Annadurai, N. S. Krishnan, M. R. Radha, the duo Krishnan-Panju, M. Karunanidhi, and M. G. Ramachandran gradually foregrounded Tamil identity brought significant transformation to Tamil films.

Themes that celebrates dynasties highlights the glory of the Chera, Chola, and Pandya, as well as iconic cultural figures like Kannagi from the *Silappathikaram*, were foregrounded in films. These narratives repeatedly emphasized that Tamils possessed a proud and valorous past. Simultaneously, cinema also began to move beyond royal and mythological themes increasingly engaging with contemporary social issues.

Films such as *Velaikkari* (1949), *Parasakthi* (1952), and *Ratha Kanneer* (1954) directly addressed pressing social problems, while simultaneously promoting rationalist thought, the eradication of superstition, and progressive political ideas. These films not only wielded significant ideological influence but also achieved remarkable commercial success. Notably, *Parasakthi* premiered at the Madurai Thangam Theatre, which was renowned as one of the largest cinema halls in Asia, demonstrating the widespread appeal of socially conscious Tamil cinema.

#### The New Wave in Tamil Cinema

The emergence of a "new wave" in Tamil cinema signaled a major departure from the earlier dominance of theatrical styles and overtly ideological narratives. Beginning in the late 1970s and gaining momentum through the 1980s and beyond, this phase introduced a more realistic, nuanced, and technically sophisticated approach to filmmaking, emphasizing both narrative depth and aesthetic innovation.

Key filmmakers such as K. Balachander, Balu Mahendra, and Bharathiraja played pivotal roles in redefining cinematic language. Their works moved away from studio-bound productions, embracing natural locations, ambient lighting, and intimate storytelling. Bharathiraja, in particular, foregrounded rural landscapes and village life to the forefront, breaking the prevailing convention of urban or royal settings. Balu Mahendra contributed a distinctive visual aesthetic, influenced by global cinema, while K. Balachander explored complex human relationships and social issues with remarkable depth.

This period also witnessed the rise of new generation of actors including Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth who embodied more relatable and grounded characters. Unlike earlier heroic portrayals, these performances often reflected flawed, ordinary individuals navigating negotiating the complexities of social realities.

Thematically, the new wave expanded the scope of Tamil cinema, addressing issues such as caste, gender relations, individual identity, and emotional subjectivity with greater subtlety. Films became less didactic and more exploratory, encouraging audiences to engage with layered narratives rather than receiving overt ideological messaging.

Technological advancements and exposure to international cinema further shaped this transformation. Cinematography, editing, and sound design improved significantly, contributing to a more immersive cinematic experience.

In essence, the new wave in Tamil cinema represented a profound shift from theatricality and political propaganda toward realism, aesthetic innovation, and socially conscious storytelling. This phase laid the foundation for contemporary Tamil filmmaking, providing both the narrative and stylistic frameworks that enable films like *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu* to explore nuanced political and gendered themes.

### Review of Literature

The intersection of cinema, caste, and politics in India has been a sustained focus of scholarly inquiry. Tamil cinema, in particular, has evolved as a significant cultural site where ideological struggles, identity formations, and social transformations are articulated. The present study, which examines *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu* through an Ambedkarite framework, draws upon four major strands of literature: (1) caste and Indian society, (2) Ambedkarite thought, (3) Tamil cinema and Dravidian politics, and (4) contemporary political cinema and representation.

### Caste, Endogamy, and Social Structure

Academic engagements with caste in India provide a crucial basis for examining the politics of intimacy and representation in cinema. B. R. Ambedkar (1936/2007), in *Annihilation of Caste*, conceptualizes caste as a system sustained through endogamy and mechanisms of social closure, arguing that the regulation of marriage and sexuality is fundamental to its continuity. This perspective is extended by scholars such as Dumont (1970), who conceptualizes caste as a hierarchical order structured around ideas of purity and pollution, and Guru (2009), who interrogates the endurance of caste within modern democratic institutions.

Rege (2006) expands the discourse by foregrounding the

intersection of caste and gender, arguing that caste is reproduced through the regulation of women's bodies and choices. These insights are crucial in analyzing how love and relationships in cinema are embedded within caste structures, rather than existing as neutral or universal experiences.

### Ambedkarite Thought and Cultural Politics

Ambedkarite scholarship offers a critical lens for the analysis of cultural texts. Omvedt (2004) situates Ambedkar's thought within a broader emancipatory tradition, underlining his commitment to social democracy and cultural transformation. Teltumbde (2010) further contends that caste continues to operate in implicit and structural forms even in modern India, thereby requiring sustained critical engagement.

Paik (2014) introduces the concept of a Dalit feminist standpoint, which challenges dominant epistemologies and centers marginalized voices. This framework is particularly significant for analyzing and understanding how contemporary cinema seeks to rearticulate narratives concerning caste, gender, and sexuality.

Ambedkar's emphasis on liberty, equality, and fraternity serves as a normative basis for reimagining social relations, including those depicted in cinema. As reflected in the analytical framework of this study, the governance of intimacy and the politics of love remain central to critiques of caste.

### Tamil Cinema, Dravidian Movement, and Ideology

The interplay between Tamil cinema and Dravidian politics has been widely examined. Hardgrave (1973) identifies cinema as a significant medium for the dissemination of Dravidian ideology, particularly through figures such as C. N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi. Pandian (1992) further analyses how cinema contributed to the construction of Tamil identity by emphasizing linguistic pride and anti-Brahminical discourse.

Prasad (2014) situates Indian cinema within a broader ideological context, suggesting that films operate as spaces where dominant and subaltern discourses are negotiated. Within Tamil context, this negotiation is evident in the shift from mythological and royal these to narratives addressing social issues such as caste and inequality.

The historical trajectory outlined in the current study—from theatrical traditions to Dravidian political cinema and subsequently to new wave realism—aligns with these scholarly perspectives, illustrating the ways in which cinema has continually responded to changing ideological contexts.

### New Wave Cinema and Realism

The advent of new wave cinema in Tamil Nadu signaled a transition towards realism and more layered forms of nuanced storytelling. Scholars such as Baskaran (2009) observe that filmmakers like K. Balachander and Balu Mahendra introduced psychological complexity and social realism, moving away from explicitly didactic modes of narration. This phase also saw the incorporation of marginalized voices and themes, including caste and gender, albeit in a more subtle manner. The transition to realism created the conditions for contemporary filmmakers to engage more directly with political themes.

### Contemporary Political Cinema and Representation

Recent scholarship has highlighted the emergence of explicitly political cinema in Tamil Nadu, particularly in relation to the filmmakers such as Pa. Ranjith. Geetha and Rajadurai (2011) argue that Dalit politics has increasingly found articulation within cultural forms, including cinema. The films of Pa. Ranjith are frequently interpreted within this broader movement, foregrounding caste identity, resistance, and alternative aesthetics.

Rajamohan Gandhi (2016) and Hugo Gorringer (2005) underscore the continued significance of caste in shaping both social and political realities, a concern that is reflected in contemporary cinematic narratives. In this context, *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu* extends Ambedkarite critique in to the realms of love, sexuality, and affect domains that have historically received limited attention within caste discourse.

### Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research methodology to examine *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu* within the broader socio-political and cinematic traditions of Tamil cinema. Grounded in Ambedkarite theoretical perspectives, the research investigates how the film constructs and interrogates themes of caste, love, gender, and sexuality. The methodological framework draws upon the the historical evolution of Tamil cinema and the analytical structure developed in preceding sections, situating the analysis at the intersection of film studies, social critique and cultural politics.

### Synthesis and Research Gap

Although existing literature has extensively examined caste, Ambedkarite thought, and Tamil cinema, a relative gap in analyzing love and intimacy as explicitly political categories within cinema. While most studies emphasize representation, identity, or ideology, but fewer engage with how affective relationships themselves become sites of caste reproduction and resistance.

This study addresses this gap by integrating:

- Ambedkar's theory of endogamy
- Tamil cinema's ideological evolution
- Contemporary political filmmaking

As indicated in the analytical framework developed earlier, *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu* offers a unique lens to examine how love operates within and against caste structures, thereby contributing to both film studies and caste scholarship.

### Act I – Formation of Space: Assertion and Counter-Publics

The opening act situates the narrative within a progressive theatre troupe, functioning as a counter-public sphere. Through an Ambedkarite lens, this space represents an alternative social domain autonomous from Brahminical hegemony. Ambedkar consistently emphasized the necessity of separate spaces for oppressed communities to articulate their experiences and challenge dominant ideologies.

Characters are introduced not merely as individuals but as embodiments of ideological positions. Rene exemplifies a radical, inclusive politics reflecting Ambedkar's vision of social democracy, whereas Arjun reflects entrenched caste-conditioned notions of love and morality.

Importantly, the act foregrounds the idea that love is not an abstract, universal category but is mediated by caste structures. This aligns with Ambedkar's argument in *Annihilation of Caste* that caste survives through the regulation of marriage and intimacy.

In this sense, the theatrical space emerges as a counter-hegemonic site that enables alternative cultural expression while simultaneously revealing the persistence of structural constraints.

### Act II – Ideological Conflict: Love as a Site of Caste Reproduction

The second act intensifies ideological confrontation within the troupe. What appears as a debate over artistic representation gradually reveals deeper conflicts regarding caste, sexuality, and the politics of desire.

Ambedkar identified endogamy as the “essence of caste”,

linking the preservation of caste to control over women's sexuality and regulating marriage. In this context, Arjun's insistence on a “pure” and normative form of love can be interpreted as an extension of caste endogamy, even when if unarticulated.

In contrast, Rene's perspective destabilizes these boundaries by advocating for a form of love that is, Inter-caste, Queer-inclusive and Politically conscious.

The troupe's fragmentation mirrors the broader social realities, where even progressive spaces remain influenced by caste and gender hierarchies. This reflects Ambedkar's critique that reformist or nationalist frameworks often fail to dismantle structurally.

Thus, Act II demonstrates that love is a politically regulated institution, illustrating how caste reproduces itself through intimate relationships—an idea central to Ambedkarite sociology.

### Act III – Deconstruction: Critique of Romantic Idealism and Liberalism

The third act marks a shift toward critical deconstruction, as earlier assumptions about love, progressiveness, and political commitment begin to unravel. Characters are compelled into moments of self-reflection, and underlying ideological contradictions become increasingly visible.

From an Ambedkarite standpoint, this phase can be read as a critique of liberal notions of equality that do not adequately engage with structural inequality. Ambedkar was deeply critical of reformist approaches that addressed symptoms rather than the systemic foundations of caste. In a similar vein, the film exposes the limitations of “apolitical” love, the contradictions within progressive spaces, and the persistence of caste even within ostensibly radical circles.

Arjun's perspective is revealed to be exclusionary, yet the critique does not stop there; the progressive collective itself is shown to harbor internal inconsistencies and blind spots. This reinforces Ambedkar's insistence that meaningful social transformation requires structural change rather than mere shifts in individual attitudes.

Accordingly, this act performs a sustained critique of liberal humanism by exposing its inability to dismantle entrenched caste hierarchies.

### Act IV – Reimagination: Towards Ambedkarite Ethics of Love

The final act moves away from resolution in a conventional narrative sense and instead offers a rearticulation of love as a political, negotiated, and inclusive practice. This redefinition resonates strongly with Ambedkar's vision of a society grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity.

For Ambedkar, fraternity was not limited to emotional solidarity but constituted a foundational social ethic capable of transcending caste divisions. The film's emphasis on plurality and coexistence may thus be interpreted as an attempt to imagine such a form of fraternity within the domain of intimate relationships.

The theatrical performance within the narrative acquires symbolic significance in this context. It functions not merely as artistic expression but as a collective act of reimagining and reconstructing social relations. Love, therefore, is reframed as an ethical and political practice grounded in mutual recognition and equality, rather than as a private or purely emotional experience. Thus, Act IV articulates an Ambedkarite ethics of love, where relationships are free from caste constraints and reconstituted through equality and mutual recognition.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu* reconfigures Tamil cinema by positioning love as a deeply political and caste-mediated construct rather than a universal emotion. Drawing upon *B. R. Ambedkar's* theoretical insights, the analysis reveals how the film interrogates endogamy, exposes the persistence of caste within intimate relationships, and critiques both conservative and liberal frameworks that fail to dismantle structural inequality.

By situating the film within the historical trajectory of Tamil cinema and its ideological transformations, the study illustrates how contemporary political cinema extends Ambedkarite critique into the affective domain of love, gender, and sexuality. Ultimately, the film proposes an alternative ethical framework grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of cinema as a site of social and ideological transformation.

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