தமிழ்மணம் சர்வதேசத் தமிழ் ஆய்விதழ்
Tamilmanam International Research Journal of Tamil Studies
An Internationally Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Monthly Journal
eISSN: 3049-0723 pISSN: 3107-7781
Vol. 6 Special Issue: 02 December 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63300/tm060225

Contesting Caste Hierarchy through Subaltern Fury: Tamil Political Cinema and the Pyroclastic Flow of Pent-up Anger.

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Abstract:

Caste stratification is a key characteristic of Indian society, reinforced by the ideological control that elitist Hindus exercise over Dalits. This control exploits two types of fear: the fear of divine wrath (fear of the unknown) that keeps lower castes in subordination to avoid supposed divine fury, and the fear of real-world repercussions (fear of the known), such as physical or material punishment for defying the social order. Together, these fears historically suppress resistance among Dalits. Indian cinema, deeply intertwined with the matrix of caste relations, frequently addresses caste dynamics in various ways. Due to its overt ideological underpinnings, cinema often negotiates the intricate implications of caste relations, ultimately reinforcing the longstanding hegemonic caste hierarchy. However, a counter movement in Tamil cinema spearheaded by directors like Pa Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj, and Vetrimaaran challenges this narrative. Films such as Asuran, Karnan, and Mamannan use an aesthetic of violence to articulate and validate the suppressed rage of the Dalit community, thus attacking the rigid caste structures. This paper examines how these films visually and narratively express the pent-up anger of the Dalits, contributing to a transformative cinematic and social discourse.

Keywords: *Fear for the unknown, fear for the known, Aesthetics of violence, divine fury, subaltern fury, ant-caste aesthetics*

Introduction

The stratification of Indian polity into castes and sub-castes has been hazardous to the social mobility of the lower caste people. Caste has always been a decisive factor in India as it is crucial to determine the relative social position of an individual in the entire social dynamics. The caste-based stratification ennobles the people in the upper strata to wield their power almost unquestionably over the less privileged whereas castes in the lower rung of the social strata accept their predicament as a given without much resistance. The deeply rooted hegemony in Indian society has become so ingrained in the social psyche that any endeavour to change the existing status quo is consistently met with formidable resistance.

As a result, the inhuman system of caste hierarchy is viewed as sacrosanct and passed over from generation to generation for centuries. Social scientists hold the view that the complex ordering of society into caste categories had emerged as a corollary to the Varna system which was prevalent during the Vedic period. The Varnashrama Dharma consisted of four Varnas based on the social responsibilities bestowed upon each category. However, a large chunk of the population was excluded from the Chathurvarna system because of the notion of pollution associated with their bodies. They were the "Untouchables" or Dalits whose presence in the social mainstream was largely controlled by certain quasi-religious norms. The upper-caste Hindus denied the untouchables a life with dignity and pride by administering scriptural norms characterized by explicit Brahmanical bias. Early on, Dalits were assigned tasks that were considered socially repulsive and stigmatizing. "Dalits are relegated to the most manual of tasks, as manual scavengers, removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers,

street sweepers and cobblers"(Narula 1999) because of their perceivably low origin. Because of their social position and social roles as scavengers and gravediggers, Dalits' bodies have always been treated as objects of social derision, sovereign rage and inhuman torture.

To ascertain the visible imbalance in the distribution of agency among social categories, the dominant caste devised a unique strategy to combine the fear of the unknown and the fear of the known through spiritual discourses and material tortures. The dominant castes succeeded in maintaining the status quo by generating various discourses that enable them to sustain their social authority. The most important among them are the scriptures and religious texts like Vedas, Puranas, Smritis, and many others that legitimize the caste hierarchy as a strictly divine order. For example, the Bhagavad Gita sermonises, 'According to the three modes of material nature and the work ascribed to them, the four divisions of human society were created by Me. And, although I am the creator of this system, you should know that I am yet the non-doer, being unchangeable' (BG 4.13 - Vanisource). As a result, Dalits have to live lives of abject suffering and social exclusion as an inevitable divine predicament. They were manoeuvred to believe that any attempt to change the system would bring about the wrath of God and insurmountable calamities. Thus, a carefully crafted ontological fear has been perpetrated to thwart possible resistance from the deprived classes. Though the fear of the unknown is intangible and metaphysical, it defines each minute aspect of people's everyday lives. The fear of the wrath of God and the fear of being instrumental in dismantling the God-given scheme/order of the universe have continuously haunted the Dalits. Their servility to the divine system was ensured by propagating the fear of the unknown.

On the other hand, the fear of the known is tangible and visible. This fear arises from the economic structure characterized by an imbalance in material prosperity and a dichotomy in land ownership on the one hand and the right to administer material power over the bodies of Dalits by the dominant castes. Dalits were denied access to knowledge, land, and property, and the divide thus created has never been reconciled to this day. From the Vedic period to the capitalist era, due to historical reasons, economic prosperity has largely remained an undisputed privilege of the upper-caste people. Material wealth and knowledge capital have remained distant dreams for Dalits, who were pushed to the margins of the social structure. In addition to this, what makes the fear of the known more problematic is the unholy alliance between the elitist upper- caste and the ruling power, as well as the fear of the consequences of challenging that alliance materially. Spectacular violence unleashed by the dominant caste upon the less privileged castes serves as another known source of fear. In other words, various forms of 'material fear' have been generated by subjecting 'misbehaved' Dalits to inhuman tortures once they were found to 'vilify' the system. So the ubiquitous fear of the unknown and the localized fear of the known are putting pressure upon the subaltern class in a manner that renders meaningful resistance impossible. But, of late, to counter these two forms of fear, Dalits have recently developed a comprehensive methodology that creatively reconciled two diametrically opposite forms of resistance; one is to constantly assert constitutional values and moralities and the other is to resist physical violence using physical might that generates fear among the oppressors. This article seeks to unravel the cinematic engagements of this two-pronged approach by citing examples from three Tamil movies, *Mamannan,*

Karnan* and *Asuran.

Perhaps no other films have articulated a discourse on the idea of fear as intensely as *Mamannan*. The film takes on both the ontological fear engendered by theocratic prejudices and the fear of the known produced by physical tortures by the dominant caste. Through the character of Athiveeran (Udhayanidhi Stalin), the son of Mamannan (Vadivelu), the film philosophises the need to generate fear within the

oppressor to assert the identity of the oppressed. There are many occasions in the film where Athiveeran reminds the oppressed of the need for consciously exhibiting self-respect and fearlessness as a counter-offensive against oppressive caste regimes. Being a martial art trainer he knows the importance of physical prowess and mental strength to demoralise the opponent. On one occasion we found him instilling courage in a Dalit boy beaten up by a boy from a dominant caste by saying "It doesn't matter who wins. What matters is who is scared." He never spares any instance to retaliate against the violence perpetrated by the people of the dominant caste. When he found his father Mamannan, who is also a MLA, standing in front of Rathnavel (Fahad Fasil), while all others were comfortably seated, he forced his father to sit in a chair. Rathnavel, a ruthless Thevar leader, considered this as an offensive not only against his caste dominance but also against conventions and traditions. He felt it was an act of "dishonouring the pride of my father." This is clear evidence of how caste honour passes from one generation to another and stems from patriarchal notions and prejudices. His remarks to Athiveeran, "to have your father stand in front of me is his identity and to ask you to sit is my politics," shows how identity politics is manipulated to sustain the domination of a certain section of the society. Rathnavel's father Sundaram (Azhagam Perumal) did the same trick of using politics to subdue the anger of Dalits when three Dalit boys were stone-pelted to death while they were bathing in the temple pond. Sundaram, the then MLA, persuaded Mamannan to withdraw from blowing up the incident which might cost them a few seats in the coming election. But that compromise cost Mamannan the love and friendship of his son who left his house only to return after fifteen years.

Rathnavel on the other hand is an utterly unpredictable character with devious eyes and uncanny mannerisms. His looks, body language and dialogue encapsulate caste prejudices and patriarchal impulses. According to the Chief Minister Sindhanai Rajan (Lal), he is more brutish and aggressive than his father Sundaram. His political affiliation with the otherwise progressive Makkal Kachi is only a means to reinforce his social capital. When he was castigated by the CM for his unethical revenge against Athiveeran he lost no time to shift his loyalty to a rival party and supported the candidate who contested against Mamannan. He was even ready to fall at the feet of a Dalit leader to garner some valuable votes. But later he brutally killed the same leader in the same way he killed a dog that had failed in the dog race. For him, offering the MLA position to the Dalits is nothing more than a charity offered to them by the dominant caste. He often says, "Social justice is a charity from me." It is an indirect way of asserting that if conventions and traditions are subverted charity would also be stopped. Along with charity and conventions, Rathnavel also used fear to keep Dalits in eternal slavery. His remark to Athiveern "I did not want you to stop being afraid of me" clearly indicates how fear is instrumental in maintaining a social order that privileges a particular section over the rest. It is this fear that Athiveeran wants his fellow beings, including his father Mamannan, to expel from their psyche and display the courage to intimidate the oppressor. When he persuaded his father to sit in the vacant chair and when he encourageda Dalit boy to fight back, all he wanted to do was to undermine the ontological fear pervading the social hierarchy and produce a counter-fear among the oppressor.

The transformation that occurred in the attitude and body language of Mamannan is a vital aspect of the film's politics. The narrative revolves around his transformation from a timid and helpless Dalit leader to an outspoken Dalit MLA with agency. In the initial part of the movie, he appeared to be subservient to the social order with folded arms and an obsequious voice. But later on, we found him carrying a gun and speak with a clear and confident voice. His voice has become so powerful that he could even make the defiant Rathnavel silent when he attempted to threaten Mamannan and Athiveeran by creating an accident. It is in Mamannan's person that both democratic politics and the subaltern fury find a conducive space for a constructive reconciliation. He proclaimed himself as a person "transformed

by his son." Athiveeran's philosophy of producing counter-fear helps him acquire the audacity to stand upright against the oppressor and talk back to the elitist culture. But at the same time, a strong faith in constitutional democracy enables him to surpass the ontological fear nurtured by theocratic discourses. Here, political wisdom clothed in egalitarian principles acts as a counter-current against the hegemonic impulses ingrained in the theocratic wisdom. At the same time, the movie unequivocally asserts that the physical might and its concomitant material fear perpetrated by the dominant caste should also be contested by subaltern fury engendering fear within the oppressor.

Mari Selvaraj's film *Karnan* undertakes a penetrating critique of the societal stratification rooted in caste and class. The movie seeks to reconcile the caste/class binary by acknowledging the latter as an inevitable consequence of the former. The story revolves around the lives of the Dalits who reside in an extremely remote village called Podiyankunnu. The villagers live without basic amenities like schools and hospitals. They do not even have a bus stop in their village to access those institutions of modernity. People from other villages consider them unsophisticated miscreants residing in a wasteland. People from Podiyankunnu have to depend on the bus stop in the neighbouring village, Melur to catch buses. But the villagers of Melur treat them lowly which occasionally results in clashes and spates. The demographic composition in Melur is largely Thevars, who are hierarchically superior to the Pallars residing in Podiyankunnu. Thevars do not want Pallars to access education and other facilities fearing that that may ultimately snatch power from their hands. The subtle operation of the procedure of power that organises and arranges space to facilitate the preservation of the domination of a certain group of people is very much evident here. The fear of the divine order and the fear of physical torture from the dominant caste prevent the villagers from questioning this injustice. However, an angry young man from the village named Karnan (Dhanush) refuses to relent. His unwavering courage and intense longing for justice gained admiration of the villagers. Karnan's anger, a powerful force simmering beneath the surface, emerges as a subaltern counter-fury that instilled fear among the upper castes and administrative authorities. Ultimately, the subaltern fury forced them to yield to the collective demands of the villagers.

The villagers, who belong to the Dalit community, are being denied basic facilities essential for leading a decent life, solely because of their caste. Despite their vehement pleas, both politicians and bureaucrats have turned a deaf ear to their grievances. The administrative authorities, predominantly composed of upper-caste Hindus, seem unwilling to provide Dalits with essential amenities such as hospitals, schools, and even bus stops. A girl from Podiyankunnu once faced harassment from some outlaws in Melur village while waiting for a bus to go to her college. This traumatic incident forced her to abandon her dream of enrolling in college. The restriction on the mobility of Dalits is rooted in the fear that providing such amenities to them could undermine the existing caste hierarchy. The movie effectively captures their marginalized existence through the symbolic representation of the headless statue of the goddess in the village.

The opening song, resonating with a profound sense of urgency, is passionately sung by the people of Podiyankulam, bearing visible scars from brutal torture. It serves as a powerful call for Karnan's return to the village, seen by the residents as their potential saviour. The villagers view Karnan as an ideal figure, anticipating that his anger and bravery will be instrumental in dismantling the oppressive structures that govern their lives. The opening song sequence establishes a subterranean link with a later scene in which the police vandalise and raze Podiyankulam in retaliation against the villagers' courage in standing up to the police force. The police officer, infuriated by the villagers' audacity, is particularly angered by the names they bear. Despite belonging to the Dalit community, the villagers carry names inspired by Hindu mythological characters, a fact he deems as a flagrant violation of the

established social order. The following conversation in the police station between the Station House Officer and the elders from the village subtly captures this tacitly casteist prejudice:

> …..What is your name? Tell me, what is your name?
>
> Duryodanan, sir
>
> Duryodanan?Are you Duryodanan? 'You' are Duryodanan. What is your father's name?
>
> Madassamy, Sir
>
> Madassamy's son is Duryodanan now? You thought you could change your name one day and become king the next?

It was obvious that the elders from the village were brutally tortured by the police officer not because they had vandalized the bus but they had disturbed the sanctity of a social order perceived as divinely ordained by naming them after the Hindu mythological characters. The scriptures categorically dictate that Dalits should carry the names of the meanest organisms on earth. So naming Dalits based on Hindu mythological figures is an act of heresy akin to breaching the scriptural prohibitions that may attract divine wrath. It is this divine wrath that Karnan dares to counter by letting the pyroclastic flow of pent-up anger burst out unobstructed. In addition to facing the divine wrath, he also confronts the threat of physical torture, even if it costs them their lives. That is why he furiously erupts against his fellow villagers:

> 'What were we supposed to do? They have maimed our village and robbed us of our dignity. And you people are still afraid. What is the point of living like a vermin? How many generations must suffer here with you people? Aren't you ashamed to say that you will run away with your children? …..will you live your entire lives crouched? We can never go back to crouching.'

Karnan's unwavering stand, 'If somebody comes in my way I will hit him' propels the villagers to stand in unison with him. The bus demolition scene epitomises the powerful outburst of pent-up counter fury as it signifies the demolition of an age-old social structure. The appearance of all images like the falcon, rooster and donkey within this sequence attributes symbolic significance to it. Here, the antagonistic relationship between the prey and the predator is used to subtly foreground the conflictual relationship between different strata of society. Karnan's individual fury appeared to have transformed into a collective subaltern fury that could dismantle the structures of power. The line in the last invoking sequence 'It is your anger that awake the entire village' amply testifies to this.

Vetrimaran's *Asuran* boldly unmasks the unholy alliance between corrupt police and upper-caste landowners, which eventually proves catastrophic to both parties. The movie takes us through the conflicted relationship between two villages, Thekkoor and Vadakkoor. Though it initially seems to be a typical land issue, when a land-grabbing landowner named Narasimhan(AadukalamNaren) from the North village starts taking over the farmlands in the South, where a predominantly Dalit community lives, the actual provocation behind the conflict is undoubtedly the conspicuous fearlessness displayed by Dalits against dominant caste atrocities. Narasimhan and his Madras Company required three acres of land possessed by Sivasaami to start a cement factory to which Sivasaami (Dhanush) and his family responded in the negative. Narasimhan electrified the fences surrounding his property creating hardships for the inhabitants of Thekkoor who had to find alternative routes to navigate around it. The conflict between the two parties escalated significantly when Narasimhan's brother struck Sivasaami's wife

Pachaiyamma (ManjuWarrier) when she resisted their attempt to siphon water from the well. In return, Velmurugan (TeejayArunasalam) attacked Narasimhan's son Rajesh Narasimhan (BalaHasan) which eventually led to his incarceration. To release Velmurugan from jail, as per the terms of reconciliation, Sivasaami had to prostrate before each member of the upper-caste community. Knowing this shameful incident Velmurugan slapped Narasimhan on his face by using his slippers. Infuriated beyond measure by this act Narasimhanbrutally assassinated Velmurugan, decapitating him and abandoning the remaining part of his body in the field.

What inflamed the fury of Narasimhan was not the pain of the strike but the pain of being struck by a Dalit who, according to him, "have always stood before [them] with folded arms". The upper-caste Vadakkoorans could not tolerate the vanishing age-old fear that Dalits bore in their collective unconscious. For Narasimhan, any sign of fearlessness should be met with violent retaliation to maintain fear. His angry remarks to his son who was beaten up by Velmurugan, "If you have slaughtered him [Velmurugan] then and there I would have been proud to deal with that" clearly indicate the glorification of caste pride by eliminating lower-caste resistance. The construction, preservation and perpetuation of fear have always been the strategy employed by the upper-caste people to maintain their social superiority. WhatVelmurugan's uncle, Murugesan (Pashupathy) tried to assert was the absence of fear, when he proudly proclaimed that his "nephew has done something to show him [Narasimhan] that we are not afraid". The movie, *Asuran* boldly foregrounds the conflicting social dynamics arising from the assertiveness of Dalits on the one hand and the wounded pride of the upper-caste community on the other.

The flashback story also exposes how caste-based violence was legitimized and normalised by police and upper-caste people by objectifying the Dalit body as a site of sovereign fury. Subjecting the Dalit body to brutal torture is often considered natural while retaliation from them is treated as violence and law breaking. When Sivasaami's fiancé Mariyammal (AmmuMariyamma) wore a slipper gifted to her by Sivasaami, which the Dalits were not allowed to, Pandean (NiteeshVeera), the goon of the local landlord Viswanathan (A Vekatesh), beat her and forced her to walk along the street by carrying slippers on her head. The enraged Sivasaami had beaten Pandian with sandals and tied him up in the public vicinity. Contrary to Savasaami's expectations, Viswanathan, to whom he had been a loyal servant, reprimanded him by saying "He beat up your fiancé- you hit my family member- Is it the same thing?" With his honour tainted in front of the villagers, Pandean burnt down Sivasaami's village and set his fiancé ablaze, aided by Viswanathan's goons. The aggressive notion of caste pride prompted them to instil fear by using violence to subjugate Dalits whenever faced with resistance. Sivasaami's retaliatory fury shattered their hollow notion of caste honour as he beheaded Pandean,Viswanathan and his men, boldly asserting Dalit identity. The final fight scene between Sivasaami and Narasimhan's men once again underscores the significance of subaltern fury in countering the ontological and material fears perpetuated by dominant castes for ages.

A detailed examination of these films reveals striking similarities in narrative structure and the cinematic tropes employed. These movies vehemently confront the caste hierarchy by boldly authenticating subjectivity and self-respect to the previously marginalized caste category.These movies utilise structural, thematic, and technical experimentations while remaining within the ambit of popular genres. As Manju Edachira argues, "Contemporary Dalit presence in film-making and the employment of anti-caste aesthetics in cinema not only critique mainstream cinema but also affect the medium itself, through an affective expressive aesthetics that is at once political and poetic. Thus, anti-caste aesthetics in cinema takes inspiration from, yet goes beyond, the already available category of Dalit aesthetics" (2020: 47-48). What she tries to foreground is the employment of a unique aesthetic treatment that "not

only resists but also invites one to be part of its becoming. To put it differently, anti-caste aesthetics is an aspect of "becoming" in India. A becoming which is inevitable in the case of Dalits, where being itself is violated (2020: 49). By analysing the films of Pa Ranjith, Nagaraj Manjulan and Mari Selvaraj, Edachira identifies two important elements of anti-caste aesthetics such as exploring the possibility of the impossible and employing effective expressive aesthetics that enable them to enter the hegemonic popular and contest the oppressive normative. In addition to these, a closer look into these films will bring to the fore other crucial aspects of anti-caste aesthetics. The most significant among them is the inclusion of violence. These films emphasize the importance of violence as a means to counter the longstanding practice of torturing Dalits. The violence emanating from the volcanic eruption of subaltern fury attributes a new aesthetics to the cinematic expression that thematically and structurally enriches anti-caste aesthetics.

The films discussed above employ violence as a means to assert an emboldened Dalit self, countering both the fear of the unknown and the fear of the known. It is the creative potential of subaltern fury that dismantles the ossified, hegemonic structures of caste, preserved by theocratic discourses on one hand and administrative backing on the other. The state of Tamil Nadu is known for the caste violence perpetrated by the Thevar community against Pallrs, the Dalits, in connivance with the police and district administrative system. Statistics shows that:

> The number of incidents of crime against Dalits by others is in the range of 16000 to 18000 in the recent years, up from less than 10,000 per year before1976. But in the 1990's the rate has been witnessing a sudden spurt andincreased manifold, i.e. 55000 to 65000 crimes against Dalits per year. They include about 1600 of rapes per year. Crimes against Dailts and Adivasis were increased by as much as 89 percent between 1992 and 2004. However of thetotal of 1.67 lakhs cases of crimes against the SCs and STs framed between1955 and 2000, only 4,322 (or a paltry 2.6 percent) resulted in conviction (Singh and Mamta 1999)

Pallars had to bear the brunt of Thevars' fury as they gained relative freedom from the Thevars community following their economic independence. As observed by Smita Narula,

> Having benefited from the state's policy of reservation in education and from the income provided by relatives abroad, the Pallars have become much less dependent on Thevar employment and have begun to assert themselves in the political arena. The Thevars have responded to this threat to their hegemony with violence. Dalits, too have begun to fight back" (1999: 82).

She further adds:

> The nexus between Thevars, the police, and the district officials in the affected areas was repeatedly reflected in violent search and raid operations in Dalit villages, in the forced displacement of thousands of Dalit villagers often with the aid of district officials, and in the disproportionate number of Dalits arrested under prevention detention statutes during the clashes"(Narula 83).

Mamannan, *Karnan* and *Asuran* without exception try to foreground this nexus between bureaucracy and the upper caste community that makes things worse for the Dalits. However, as a last resort, we find Mamannan and Athiveeran (*Mamannan*), Sivasaamy (*Asuran*) and Karnan (*Karnan*) turned to violence letting the pyroclastic flow of pent-up anger destabilise the existing order. Hannah Arendt notices how Jean Paul Sartre in his preface to Fanon's *The Wreched of the Earth* celebrates the creative potential of

counter-violence when he says "It is through "mad fury" that the "wretched of the earth" can "become men"" (1970:12). Though she renounces much of Sartre's preoccupations with violence she agrees that violent resistance undermines the normal course of events in favour of the oppressed. Seamus Heaney too endorses the creative potential of violence in his Nobel lecture while recollecting the imprisonment of a friend, an Irish Republican Army activist, who was suspected to have involved in a murder:

> I remember, for example, shocking myself with a thought I had about that friend who was imprisoned in the seventies upon suspicion of having been involved with a political murder: I shocked myself by thinking that even if he were guilty, he might still perhaps be helping the future to be born, breaking the repressive forms and liberating new potential in the only way that worked, that is to say the violent way – which therefore became, by extension, the right way ('The Nobel Prize in Literature 1995')

Just in the same way,these films argue that the predictable trajectory of upper-caste violence needs to be both physically and epistemologically contested by unleashing the subaltern counter-fury to herald the birth of a new world where equality, social justice and dignity of life become accessible to each member of society. The films under scrutiny here acknowledge the productive potential of violence as a form of resistance.

Another trope frequently employed in films with anti-caste aesthetics is the meticulous and effective use of animal and bird imagery. These films overwhelmingly feature imageries of animals such as eagles, roosters, pigs, dogs, etc., serving both narrative and metaphorical purposes to highlight the realistic portrayal of Dalit lives and the antagonistic social structures that entrap them. Animals and birds are depicted as both prey and predators. For instance, dogs are portrayed as loyal and constant companions of Dalits in movies like *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Asuran*, *Karnan*, etc. Antony J. Sebastian rightly observes that "… dogs are integral to the community' daily activities, participating in hunting, bathing and other communal rituals, reflecting the community's inclination to instil human values among non-human species" (2024:63). Whereas in *Mamannan*, they appear as aggressive hunters, killing pigs of Athiveeran. In *Karnan*, the sight of the tethered donkey delivers a disquieting phenomenological experience to the audience, establishing a poignant connection with the plight of the distressed people of Podiyankulam. The liberation of the donkey by Karnan symbolises the liberation and psychological empowerment of the Dalits depicted in the film. In a pivotal scene, we witness the newly emancipated donkey, an eagle, and a pig sharing the frame as Karnan and his companions demolish a bus. The movie *Mamannan* uses the imagery of the pig in a variety of ways. As prey to Rathnavel's aggressive dogs, these animals highlight the debilitating experience of being Dalits in a hostile society. Simultaneously, the portrayal of pigs with wings, as painted by Athiveeran, symbolises the aspirations of Dalits, while the depiction of the furious pig in Athiveeran's painting emblemises the intensity of subaltern counter-fury. Through the incorporation of animal and bird imagery, filmmakers elevate the otherwise realistic aesthetics to a quasi-surreal plane, challenging bourgeois realism and presenting an anti-caste aesthetic perspective.

Conclusion

Traditional Tamil movies often highlight the valour of protagonists who protect the honour of their caste. In such narratives, the violent oppression of Dalits is portrayed as normal, while collective resistance from the weaker sections is often labelled as violence. Following Pandian, Karthikeyan and Gorringe argue the celebration of violent scenes in films like *ThevarMagan, Maravan, Kizhakku Cheemayile, PperiyaMaruthu*, etc., is due to their association with caste dominance. They notice that "the

central idiom (of these movies) is the commemoration of a particular dominant caste and its customs" (2017: para.35). The anti-caste Tamil movies aim to challenge this entrenched narrative prejudice by foregrounding the element of subaltern counter-fury, legitimizing a politically creative form of violence. The portrayal of assertive Dalit heroes with formidable strength and pent-up anger enables these film makers to stubbornly put across their political statements. Instead of fetishizing the violence on Dalits, by bringing subaltern counter-fury to the forefront, these films seek to subvert both the age-old theocratic fear and the fear of physical suppression on the one hand and the elitist aesthetics of popular film making. The careful use of bird and animal imagery, extensive application of folk scores, narrative implications of real-life incidents, and the imagination of a new cinematic language collectively contribute to an anti-caste aesthetic, even challenging the conventional idea of political filmmaking. Despite explicitly advocating for counter-violence, these movies also highlight the value of non-violence. For instance, in the case of *Karnan*, it was the civil society activist groups who played a pivotal role in supporting the people of Podiyankunnu when Karnan faced imprisonment for charges of murder and violence. In the movie *Asuran*, Sivasaami, before his incarceration, emphasized to his son Chidambaram the significance of education as a means to gain self-respect. Furthermore, *Mamannan* unequivocally highlights the relevance of electoral democracy as a crucial advocacy tool for the cause of Dalits. While these films passionately promote fury and violence as instruments of transformation, their ultimate goal is to envision an ethically motivated democratic society devoid of discrimination and, consequently, violence.

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Author Contribution Statement: NIL.
Author Acknowledgement: NIL.
Author Declaration:
I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.

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