

An Analysis on Labbar Pandhu – The Rise of Anti-Caste Storytelling

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Abstract - Tamil Cinema is one of the oldest and most influential regional film industries in India. It is known for its strong storytelling, social themes, and technological innovation. Over the decades, it has produced legendary actors such as M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), Sivaji Ganesan, Rajinikanth, and Kamal Haasan. The main objective of the study is to examine Labbar Pandhu incorporates local cricket culture as a metaphor for caste discrimination and framework representation of caste and inter-caste dynamics in the movie Labbar Pandhu. The study explores the qualitative methodology. The Tamil Movie Labbar Pandhu is chosen for the content analysis to prove the objectives. The study concludes that film's strength lies in its everyday realism, and its success lies in making caste visible to non-Dalit audiences through reliability rather than confrontation. Tamil Nadu Government ban on the term colony and epistemic shifts in how caste is perceived.

Index Terms - Tamil Cinema, Storytelling, Caste Discrimination, Inter-Caste, Gender Equality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. —
Annihilation of Caste

“Cinema is a mirror that can reflect the face of society.”
Satyajit Ray, Indian filmmaker

Caste, a deeply entrenched system of social hierarchy and discrimination, has long shaped Indian society and its cultural expressions. India is a country where the caste system has created a graded inequality, a hierarchy based on birth, which determines a person's social status and opportunities. Ambedkar, B. R. (1945). The Caste system is linked to the Varna system described in Hindu scriptures, which classified society into four main groups Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (laborers).

The genesis of Indian cinema dates back to 1896, with the screening of the Lumière Brothers' films in Bombay (now Mumbai). The first Indian-produced film, Raja Harishchandra (1913), directed by Dadasaheb Phalke, is considered the pioneer of Indian silent cinema. Early films primarily drew on mythological, historical, and religious themes, reflecting the cultural and moral ethos of the time (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). The 1940s to 1960s are often referred to as the 'Golden Age' of Indian cinema. Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Guru Dutt, and Bimal Roy introduced realism and nuanced storytelling that depicted social issues such as poverty, inequality, and caste discrimination with greater sensitivity. Ray's Pather Panchali (1955) is a landmark film that brought international recognition to Indian cinema, portraying rural life with humanistic depth (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004).

Bimal Roy's Sujata (1959, Hindi) explores Dalit identity and inter-caste love, challenging caste norms in early Indian cinema. Bhalji Pendharkar's *Sambhaji* (1961, Marathi) portrays caste and the historical resistance against social oppression. Shyam Benegal's *Samar* (1999, Hindi) examines the exploitation of Dalits through a powerful meta-narrative that critiques caste and cinema itself. Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013, Marathi) poignantly captures the struggles of a Dalit youth facing caste-based humiliation and social exclusion. Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* (2016, Marathi) powerfully portrays inter-caste romance and the brutal reality of honor killings in rural India. Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018, Tamil) highlights Dalit assertion and exposes the harsh realities of caste-based violence in contemporary society. T. J. Gnanavel's *Jai Bhim* (2021, Tamil) exposes legal injustice and systemic oppression faced by the Irular tribal community through a compelling courtroom drama. **Madras** (2014) – Pa. Ranjith explores politics, caste, and urban slum life in North Chennai.

Labbar Pandhu (2024), a Tamil sports comedy-drama directed by debutant Thamilarasn Pachamuthu, offers a delightful, feel-good cinematic experience that seamlessly intertwines themes of local cricket culture, inter-caste marriage, caste politics, feminism, love, and humor. The film maintains a balanced narrative approach without overemphasizing any single element, portrays a mother-in-law and family who celebrate a Dalit woman as their daughter-in-law, positioning the film as a point of connection even for non-

Dalit audiences. The contemporary Tamil cinema has increasingly taken a direct approach in addressing social issues also exposing the caste-based discrimination prevalent in rural areas. This evolving role of cinema highlights its capacity to shape cultural perceptions and drive societal change through nuanced discussions, as argued by Dwyer (2015), who observes that contemporary films increasingly address marginalized voices and social justice. In this context, many Tamil films challenge traditional hero-centric narratives by foregrounding moral complexities and social justice themes. *Lubber Pandhu* (2024) thus stands as a refreshing addition to Tamil cinema's evolving perspective. using humor and sports as a lens to critique deep-seated prejudices while fostering inclusivity

Cinema has long served as a powerful cultural weapon. Between the 1960s and 1980s, filmmakers such as Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, and Satyajit Ray emerged as key figures in what can be termed a "New Wave" movement in Indian cinema Films. often portray everyday life, complex characters, and social realities without melodrama or exaggeration. Many of Tamil cinemas address caste discrimination, gender issues, economic struggles, and women's empowerment rural - urban divides. A generation of young directors like Pa. Ranjith *Kaala* (2018), *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), *Vetrimaaran Aadukalam* (2011), *Visaranai* (2015), *Vada Chennai* (2018), Mari Selvaraj *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), Raju Murugan *Joker* (2016), *Gypsy* (2020) Lenin Bharathi Meku Thodarchi Malai" (2019) has been influential.

Pa. Ranjith is a key figure in Tamil New Wave Cinema, known for centering Dalit identity, caste politics, and social justice. His films break conventional norms, redefining mainstream narratives through a political and cultural lens. In an interview of Pa. Ranjith said that the movie *Kabali* depicts; that Sports should be a space for equality. When Dalits are excluded, it exposes India's hypocrisy about meritocracy. In recent case of caste-based discrimination against a Dalit kabaddi player in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, exposes the systemic exclusion of marginalized communities in Indian sports. Social Exclusion as Caste Control Deshpande & Palshikar (2022) argue that "team bonding" often reinforces caste boundaries.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine *Labber Pandhu* incorporates local cricket culture as a metaphor for caste discrimination
- To analyze the framework representation of caste and inter-caste dynamics in the Tamil film *Labber Pandhu*
- To investigate the *Labber Pandhu* film integrates the perspective of Dalit voices within mainstream entertainment.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Pandian (2016) Dravidian cinema emerged as a socio-political movement that utilized the medium of film to challenge Brahminical dominance and caste oppression (Hardgrave, 1973). In alignment with Nelson's description of satire as one of the "most realist" genres, Dravidian films ground their narratives in the lived realities of marginalized communities, highlighting caste discrimination through compelling storytelling and pointed dialogues (Pandian, 2016). The study concludes that early Dravidian dialogue writers like C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi strategically employed melodrama and satire to critique caste hierarchies while mobilizing mass political consciousness.

Baskar and Rajendran (2011) critically explore Indian cinema as a space of ideological construction and contestation, focusing on issues of caste, identity, and regional politics. They argue that Indian cinema has historically portrayed the nation through dominant caste and class perspectives, primarily centering on upper-caste, urban, male protagonists. Through close textual analysis, they demonstrate how films like *Kabali* (2016) and *Karnan* (2021) subvert traditional narrative structures by centering Dalit resistance and cultural memory. Their work also examines how regional cinema negotiates with national film discourses, revealing tensions between dominant Bollywood representations and counter-narratives emerging from Tamil, Marathi, and other regional cinemas.

Yengde (2019), in his influential work *Caste Matters* (2019), brings a powerful intersectional lens to the discourse on caste, media, and cultural representation. He critiques the systemic exclusion of Dalit's voices in mainstream Indian media and calls for Ambedkarite self-representation across cultural spaces, including cinema. His work provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding Dalit cinema not only as a form of political resistance but also as an aesthetic practice that centers liberation, dignity, and representational justice. He challenges the Brahminical hegemony in cultural production and redefines cinema as a site of radical assertion and emancipator storytelling.

Teltumbde (2010) The Persistence of Caste (2010) critically examines caste as a deeply rooted structural system that sustains inequality in Indian society and cinema. He highlights how mainstream films often reinforce caste hierarchies by marginalizing or stereotyping Dalit experiences, thus normalizing dominant caste ideologies. Emphasizes the need for autonomous cultural production that challenges Brahminical frameworks and reclaims narrative agency for oppressed communities.

Kumar (2022) T. J. Gnanavel's *Jai Bhim* (2021) brings to light the legal and systemic oppression faced by the Irular tribal community, a marginalized group often overlooked in mainstream discourse. The courtroom drama exposes the deep-rooted injustices in the legal system and society's failure to protect vulnerable communities. It highlights the intersectionality of caste and tribal identity, broadening the scope of caste discourse in Indian cinema

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research method. The qualitative method employs on the content analysis on the movie *Labber Pandhu* directed by Thamilarasn Pachamuthu. The study details the portrayals of caste and gender equality. The main aspect of the movie is dealt with scene-by-scene on visualizing the concepts provoking structure. The movie analysis focuses on the Caste discrimination, inter-caste marriage system highlighting its authoritative nature.

IV. ANALYSIS

Anbu, the protagonist, is a young Dalit man and a local village street cricketer. Karuppaiah's inverts the Jolly Friend cricket team caption, inverts anpu to play local tournament. Venkadesh casteist, one of the player's Jolly friend team. Venkatesh asks Anbu, Are you the son of that colony teacher, right? Anbu firmly corrects him, replying, that *I'm the teacher's son*. Venkatesh tells his friends, first, they come to the ground, and next they'll come to our homes, reflecting a discriminatory and demeaning attitude toward Dalit. The film examines how caste-based cultural humiliation and mockery are embedded in everyday conversations and captured through openly captured through the scene. The term colony here is not neutral; it is culturally coded to signify Dalit settlements, and its usage becomes a micro-aggression that reinforces social boundaries. Now, The Tamil Nadu government (2025) has banned the use of the term colony in official documents, declaring it "a term of apartheid" that perpetuates caste-based segregation. G.O (Ms) No. 125, TN Social Welfare Dept (2025).

That opening scene of *Yasodhai* immediately challenges traditional gender roles in rural Tamil Nadu by depicting the driving a tractor. That opening breaking the 'Ideal Housewife' and challenges traditional gender roles in rural Tamil Nadu. By showing *Yasodhai* as a tractor driver, the film subverts these stereotypes, presenting her as an independent, capable woman. The voiceover reveals that *Yasodhai* and *Gethu* (her husband) had a love marriage during their school studies, defying caste norms there are inter-caste couples. *Yasodhai* belong to SC caste and *gethu* belong with inter mediate caste. This reflects the persistence of caste-based endogamy in rural Tamil Nadu, despite legal and social reforms. Tamil cinema has increasingly addressed caste and gender issues through realistic narratives. *Yasodhai* effectively establishes the film's themes of gender defiance, inter-caste marriage, and rural socio-political resistance.

In *Anbu's* T-shirt printing shop, a customer requests Anbu his caste name to be printed along with his Name on the t-shirt. The title *Veeran* (hero) for a village festival. This incident highlights a common practice in rural Tamil Nadu, where T-shirts displaying caste identities are frequently worn during public events and festivals. Caste continues to function as a public symbol in Tamil Nadu, particularly in rural festivals, where caste flags, banners, and attire reinforce social hierarchies. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data indicates that 85% of rural respondents openly display caste markers in social events weddings, festivals, often through clothing like customized T-shirts. The incident at Anbu's shop reflects how deeply caste identities are rooted in rural Tamil Nadu's culture. While some view these displays as a celebration of heritage, this kind of activity lead to trigger violence class between difference castes. This trend underscores the ongoing struggle between caste pride and social unity in the region.

In a scene, Anbu arrives at the birthday celebration of Karuppaiah's the captain of the Jolly Friends team daughter. Upon seeing Anbu, Venkatesh immediately leaves the house. Unable to tolerate Anbu's presence due to his Dalit caste status. Venkatesh's abrupt exit reflects untouchability in practice, where dominant castes avoid social interactions with oppressed castes, even in informal settings. In the scene, Venkatesh storms out of Karuppaiah's house the moment he sees Anbu visceral reaction to Anbu's Dalit caste identity, exposing the unspoken apartheid in Tamil Nadu's social spaces

The scene where Jolly Friends Cricket team puts up a 20th anniversary banner featuring Anbu, protagonist highlights the persistence of caste discrimination in sports spaces. Venkatesh, one of the players in a Jolly friend team, cannot tolerate seeing Anbu's photo on the banner and demands its removal exposing how even celebratory moments become sites of caste-based exclusion. At insistence Venkatesh *Jolly Friends* team compelled to paint Anbu's see the in the banner Durga, daughter of gethu and yasothai and lover of anpu Durga's grandmother questions Anbu's family about their caste background during marriage talks, Durga's mother intervened suddenly and told anpu family that not to take it wrongly *and We* have Durga's parents have no concerns about caste, religion and economically status. The grandmother embodies traditional caste surveillance in matrimonial alliances (Jeffrey et al., 2008). The director employs the grandmother as a metaphor for residual caste structures (Williams, 1977) Prioritizing the daughter's choice over caste compliance challenges Mandelbaum's (1970) theory of marriage as a caste-reproductive institution. The parents' stance reflects what Ambedkar termed "the revolution of the mind" necessary for caste annihilation The director's framing suggests inter-caste marriages as not just personal acts but epistemological breaks with traditional social ordering, making this scene vital for understanding contemporary rural modernity.

Durga has told father that anpu his ours immediately her grandmother think he belongs her caste Durga's replayed to grandmother that anbu is not her caste and referees as cricketer only because anpu Durga father gethu are cricketer. Durga's symbols of progressive younger of younger generations challenging the caste system vehemently. This aligns with research on Tamil Nadu's youth increasingly breaking caste barriers through inter-caste love marriages. Meanwhile, Gethu's mother embodies a conservative casteist mentality, illustrating how women often serve as enforcers of caste traditions within families. In contrast, Yasodha's character highlights the struggles of Dalit women facing caste oppression even within their own households. The film thus portrays intergenerational tensions, where younger women reject caste norms while older women reinforce them, reflecting broader sociological shifts in Tamil society.

In the scene were conversation between Karuppaiah told Kaththadi, that he I consider Anbu, as part of his team. And He's like a brother to him. Kaththadi aggressively replied him not to call him as a brother instead of call him like a brother. In the scene Kaththadi in emotionally state say Karuppaiah "you're belong to the group they claimed they have never seen any person caste but same Group proudly says we have so many SC friends. This shows real picture of today society ware many people are hypocrite in team of caste .This dialogue exposes the Caste Cognitive Dissonance prevalent in Tamil Nadu's socio-economic structure. It highlights the hypocrisy of upper-caste individuals who claim friendship with Dalits while denying caste identity (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Karuppaiah, Captain Karuppaiah wants to include Anbu in the Jolly Friends team, but due to Venkatesh's caste-based opposition, he is unable to do so and even asks Karuppaiah to leave the team. At that moment, Anbu tells Karuppaiah, castes like Venkatesh enforce caste boundaries strictly to assert their social status. The formation of Anbu's new team represents a form of resistance against the caste system. It reflects Dr. Ambedkar's principles of the Self-Respect Movement. Karuppaiah's situation losing his leadership position for crossing caste boundaries reveals the complex challenges of social transformation. While progress may be visible in public spaces, caste discrimination continues in private social settings like sports teams Karuppaiah's character embodies caste-transcendent leadership and gender-equitable values, reflecting evolving social dynamics in rural, The proliferation of 'bridge characters' in recent Tamil cinema. Karuppaiah prioritizes meritocracy, consistently advocating for skill-based opportunities.

The character articulates a vision of caste-harmonious village life where Dalits and non-Dalits coexist equally. When someone opposes his team for including Dalits, Karuppaiah responds, they are all our people.

The scene where Gethu's mother eats at a Dalit house hold breaks a fundamental aspect of caste-based oppression known as the food hierarchy. Before the 2000s, Tamil films rarely showed dominant caste characters accepting food from Dalits. This scene reflects Tamil cinema's "third wave of caste discourse" where caste norms are challenged through everyday acts like sharing food.

Cricket serves as a metaphor for entrenched social hierarchies, where both caste and gender oppression intersect. Anbu's decision to include Karuppaiah's daughter in his newly formed team challenges traditional gender roles in a male-dominated space. However, the backlash from his male friends exposes the persistence of patriarchal norms. Simultaneously, the dialogue between Anbu, Venkatesh, and Kaaththadi uncovers how caste-based exclusion is rationalized; with Anbu's retort Then is this male arrogance? revealing the layered nature of discrimination. This scene exemplifies how *Labber Pandhu* uses everyday interactions to critique and unravel entrenched systems of oppression.

In the climax, Anbu's team reaches the finals. Determined to defeat Anbu's team at any caste, Venkatesh brings in several outstation players. Among them are Dalit players as well. Some of the casteist locals object to their inclusion, but Venkatesh refuses to listen his only goal is to defeat Anbu. So, he includes players from the colony Dalit settlements in his team. These players perform well. In the final scene, it appears as though Anbu gives up, allowing Venkatesh's team to win. At that moment, Anbu tells Karuppaiah, Now Venkatesh's team includes many colony players. By now, Venkatesh must have realized that to win, what truly matters is talent,

V. CONCLUSION

Labbar Pandhu marks a significant, if cautious, step in mainstreaming anti-caste storytelling. The film's strength lies in its everyday realism its success lies in making caste visible to non-Dalit audiences through reliability rather than confrontation TN government ban on the term colony and epistemic shifts in how caste is perceived, the word *colony* operates as a linguistic weapon here, echoing Ambedkar's vision of annihilation through collective self-respect. Labbar Pandhu argues that social transformation requires both structural changes.

VI. REFERENCE

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