



GLOBALIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON CASTE IN INDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MOVIE PERIYERUM PERUMAL

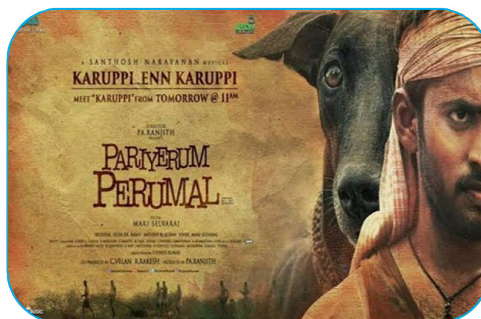
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ABSTRACT :

Caste discrimination has been rampant in India from time immemorial. Caste is such a multi-headed hydra that it has adapted to changing times, locale and situations. Onset of Globalization, liberalization and rapid industrialization was thought to deal an axe blow to caste and its operation. But all such expectations have fallen flat by the ever resilient monster called Caste. Cinema, highly aided by the process of globalization has been shying away from addressing about how caste operates in the modern India. PeriyerumPerumal is one such nuanced movie which takes the issue of caste head on. The paper examines how the movie analyses the way caste operates in the new emerging super power called modern India.



KEYWORDS : Caste discrimination , multi-headed hydra, Globalization, liberalization and rapid industrialization.

"Turn in any direction you like; caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster."

- B.R. Ambedkar

INTRODUCTION:

It is widely agreed that the monster called caste evolved through the Varna system and reached its maturity between 600 and 200 Before Common Era.(Wilson 278) Its laws were codified between 200 BCE and the second century CE in the Manusmriti, or the Laws of Manu, ascribed to the mythological ancient lawgiver, Manu, who is credited with the creation of the Hindu social code.(Buhler 886).Caste was also considered to be a relic of the Indian feudal system thought to vanish with the onset of globalization and capitalism. In 1853, the year railway was introduced in India, even Karl Marx prophesied that the new mechanized transportation system would catalyze the collapse of caste but the monster thrives hale and healthy post 1991 adjusting to the new reality of emerging super power called India. In the new global scenario caste has become more resilient and vicious on the contrary. Democracy on the other hand hasn't eradicated caste. It has only entrenched and modernized caste. Though Indian Constitution assures all people equal rights and freedom, the ideals and rights enshrined

in the Indian constitution is still a dream for many people in India. Ambedkar aptly said that Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realize that our people have yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic." (Das 175)

The word 'caste' (from the Latin *castus*) was loosely applied to the Hindu system of social stratification by the sixteenth-century Portuguese, India's first modern European colonizers. Since *casta* in Portuguese means 'pure' or 'chaste', the word connoted the Portuguese understanding of the phenomenon as being akin to race, species or lineage, as they thought the system was intended to preserve purity of blood. (Leonard 252) A more particularized view emerged with later European observers who became aware that, while systems of social division have existed throughout history across the world, the form prevalent in India was not to be found anywhere else. (Kolenda 10-11) Thus, Caste, as such, is a rigorous form of social stratification involving a mode of hierarchically arranged, closed endogamous strata, membership to which is ascribed by descent and between which contact is restricted and mobility impossible. (Jary 252)

Such being the condition, many of our artistic representations of society like literature, cinema, paintings, photography have hardly condemned such rampant presence of caste prejudice. Dalit literature is time and again ignored for being unidirectional always speaking about oppression and discrimination. Mainstream cinema has only glorified caste dominance. There seems to be a symbiotic relationship between cinema and caste. Cinema seems to authorize and naturalize caste in Indian context. In recent times, *Periyerum Perumal* stands as an aberration.

Pariyerum Perumal (God Who Mounts a Horse) is a hard hitting film which draws people of the society deeply steeped in casteist prejudices. It asks them to engage in a dialogue and to re-examine extreme forms of violence, incivility of barbaric magnitude. The movie takes us on a heart wrenching journey of a young man belonging to schedule caste who dreams of becoming a lawyer and be a spokesperson of dignity and human rights for his community just like his role model, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, an unparalleled revolutionary leader of modern India.

Debutant filmmaker Maria Selvaraj portrays in a nuanced way of what exactly happens to those with such aspirations in a deeply entrenched casteist society. The protagonist of the movie who hails from the marginalised community faces the hard realities of being in casteist society beyond his village. The modern day college supposed to be centers of knowledge, wisdom and rational thinking offers him no respite. On a day to day basis, the protagonist Pariyan, undergoes pangs and humiliation of being born in a lower caste exposed to a harsh world where everything is determined by the caste.

Over the years South Tamil Nadhu has been portrayed in Tamil Cinema and it has constructed an image of South of the state being dominated by Thevar Community. Time and again the films highlight their courage, valor and martial skills. With or without the knowledge of the director the movies have upheld and naturalized the caste dominance. They have even celebrated the same. Periyerum Perumal is thus a break away from the normal South Tamil Nadhu Cinema. The film clearly asserts that there is another South of a symbiotic relationship between caste politics and cinema, particularly through the naturalisation of intermediate caste markers and narratives largely found in the films of south Tamil Nadu.

Mari Selvaraj, the director deliberately tries to break that metonymic construction through his different frames of Tirunelveli town. The scenes are interspersed with statues of the Dravidian leaders but also of Kamaraj, Ambedkar and Muthuramalinga Thevar, and the corporation building named after V.O. Chidambaram Pillai in the background. This is important, because films on south Tamil Nadu mostly focus on the image of Muthuramalinga Thevar alone, either in the form of statues or portraits, thus marking it as a landscape of the Thevars. This is evident in the title sequences of films like *Karimedu Karuvayan* (1985) and *Subramaniapuram* (2008).

As every film industry has done, the lives of the poor, downtrodden and subaltern groups have largely been ignored or misrepresented or showcased in a way that justifies their place in the social order. Tamil cinema has been an arena to exercise and assert cultural hegemony. Mari Selvaraj's *Periyerum Perumal* dismantles the old distorted traditional/cultural representation and heralds a paradigm shift in the Tamil cinemas.

The central theme of the movie is Humiliation. Humiliation may be defined as the act of engaging consciously in degrading a person or group, a "process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honour or dignity." In the Indian context where caste based humiliation is socially and culturally sanctioned, humiliation is a day to day experience for the oppressed. Mind of the people which is aware of caste is the repository of humiliation. Thus making India the minefield of humiliation for the downtrodden and untouchables.

As a crucial feature of the casteist order, public humiliation of castes lower down the hierarchy – particularly Dalits – often invokes images of pillory, flogging (Una) and parading them naked (Khairlanji). Though such practices of public degradation and ridicule are banned by law, they are still prevalent in contemporary Indian society. Public humiliation within the caste context is all about the exercise and demonstration of power, here through their power the dominant castes exert force on others, shame and humiliate them to reinforce their claim to an elevated position of power. Shame and humiliation within the casteist social order has long been the means to exert social and political power.

Periyerum Perumal showcases the different forms of humiliation that the protagonist has to undergo because of his caste. The impossibility of love with a dominant, intermediate-caste girl who is deeply in love with him, the horrors of casteist dis(honour) killings, and classrooms as spaces of discrimination – all form part of the film's narrative. Like in most cases for the Dalits, classrooms as a space are not a space of equality but of varied forms of discrimination.

Pariyan joins the Tirunelveli Law College to fulfil his grandfather's wish for the community to have a spokesperson in the form of an advocate to voice their concerns. The Law College principal, while giving him admission, tells him not to participate in political activities within the college and concentrate on studies. Pariyan nods his head and tells the principal: "I will become a Dr." The principal responds that "this is a law college and you can't become a doctor here but an advocate," Pariyan replies: "I didn't refer to the medical doctor but DrAmbedkar." In a tone of appreciation, he asks him to go while asking his office assistant to note down his statement of "becoming like Ambedkar." When the assistant asks why, he tells him that over-enthusiastic guys like him will get caught in some trouble and that this note would serve as a reminder.

In another scene, an upper-caste English lecturer humiliates Pariyan after the latter is unable to comprehend teaching in the English language because of his basic educational training in Tamil. The lecturer humiliates him in front of the whole class as someone who entered the institute just because of the quota system. An angry Pariyan shouts at the lecturer and angrily takes the notebooks of all the other students and asks him to read what they have written. The lecturer sends him out and later looks at the notebooks of other students to find that they too did not understand a word and had just scribbled, thus highlighting how dubious the notion of merit is when referred to without understanding social conditions.

Later, midway through the film, after facing different forms of humiliation both within the classroom space and outside, Pariyan responds to pressure by transforming from a soft-spoken guy to an angry person. As a result, due to the handiwork of his antagonists, he has to face disciplinary action. The college has a new principal now who knows that Pariyan is being victimised because of caste prejudices. Instead of taking disciplinary action, he advises him about his own subjective experiences of discrimination as a son of a cobbler who ekes out a living on the streets mending footwear, and how, as a law student, he faced the worst of caste prejudices and still took it as a

challenge and rose to become a law college principal. He tells him how people who insulted him then are coming to him now with folded hands showing respect.

He asks Pariyan to do whatever he thinks is right, and a colleague intervenes and tells the principal that Pariyan, seeking revenge, might pick up a fight with those students who insulted him. The principal then responds, *"He's going to commit suicide anyway. Let him fight them before he does that; we can't do anything against those [dominant-caste] students, so why should we prevent him?"*

In the above-mentioned sequences, it is very important to note the symbols at work, the principal, who was in office during the time Pariyan joins the college carries a typical prejudiced mindset that we often see in our daily lives. As soon as Pariyan expresses his ambition to become "like DrAmbedkar," the principal foresees a potential troublemaker and expects disciplinary action in future. The principal has a portrait of Gandhi on his desk and carries this notion that the problem lies with the Dalits and perceives them as habitual offenders. On the other hand, in the scene where Pariyan expecting reprimand stands in front of the new principal, he has Ambedkar's portrait on his desk. As a Dalit who had a subjective experience of humiliation and knows how casteism is widespread, he forgoes punishment and advises him to overcome prejudice and leaves him free to do what he wishes to do.

These scenes show how higher educational institutions, which ought to provide space to cultivate critical minds, have become a space of casteist prejudice, of covert and overt forms of discriminatory practices. I bet most of us who watch these scenes can't suppress our thoughts harping back to how RohithVemula became a victim of such caste prejudices within the university space. You can pick any random scheduled caste student and ask them about caste discrimination in classrooms, and there will usually be a tale to tell. The perpetual psychological fear of being discriminated against and humiliated based on their identity is a lived experience that they have to undergo inside educational institutions in India. By restricting social interaction, the Dalit students are thus faced with deprivation of capabilities, a common feature practised and perfected by caste Hindus in educational institutions to maintain and safeguard their caste privileges. Another important issue that the film discusses in a powerful way is how the feeling of love between two adults becomes impossible in a caste society.

The film's heroine, JothiMahalakshmi (Jo), hails from a dominant intermediate-caste family who, unaware of the implications of cross-caste love, slowly falls in love with Pariyan. Through her actions and frequent references to Pariyan, she gives her family members (especially her dad) no doubt that she has deep feelings for him. Jo invites Pariyan to her sister's wedding and claims that he was the only person she had invited in the whole college, thus expressing her affection for him. Following a careful ploy, her father sends Jo, who was anticipating the arrival of Pariyan, away and when he arrives, her father takes him inside a room.

The Paruthiveeran (2007) film song performed by the singing troupe orchestra in the background provides us an idea of the heroine's caste, though it is never made explicit. Jo's father, through questions about his village, identifies Pariyan's caste (a unique way of finding a person's caste in India) and confronts him about his effrontery in being friends with his daughter. He advises Pariyan that members of his caste would not only murder the latter but also his own daughter. As he is talking to him, an angry mob of male relatives and youth from Jo's community break into the room and beat Pariyan severely, one among them eventually urinating on him.

Here, both the act of shaming and inflicting humiliation are marked by power in a form of both physical and psychological violence. Pariyan, who is shamed and humiliated, keeps it to himself and does not share this with Jo. His struggles to free himself of the memory of this deep, intense shame were poignantly portrayed in the film. In many cases, these forms of shaming and humiliation are deadly, as they leave an inefaceable mark on those who survive. Humiliation, for the victim, represents this agonising knowledge of the power and violence of the public witness and gets embodied with the shamed individual. The presence of others when acts of shaming and humiliation

occur is extremely important. Though the act of humiliation in this context happens within a room, there were a lot of individuals present as witnesses to the act.

With a sterling performance, the actor showcases the emotional turmoil that he undergoes with regard to the impossibility of love grounded in an uninhabitable casteist environment. Pariyan, instead of seeking revenge by taking up arms, practises civility and restrains from violence even after multiple attempts on his life and various acts of humiliation including the disrobing of his father to ridicule him and make him run for cover. He showcases how such forms of power relationships embedded in acts of humiliation can be reversed, and makes his shamers feel ashamed of themselves. This he does through practising civility of gradual distancing as a form of individual protest. Carrying his dream of becoming like Ambedkar, he tries to overcome the humiliations he faced by practising restraint and not giving up, thus foreseeing a future society where a more equitable and dignified treatment can be made possible through debates. This film is an appeal to the responsiveness of fellow human beings trying to prick their conscience; it is to make them feel the guilt as practitioners of the most carefully planned discriminatory social structure.

As with any Tamil film, there is a lot of symbolism at work in this film as well. Apart from the points mentioned above, the film showcases how the campuses in Tamil Nadu are widely demarcated among the student population based on caste. This is shown through close-up shots of the coloured wristbands, which are used as a form of identification by respective caste students. It is a common feature in most of the schools and colleges in the rural, semi urban and some urban pockets of southern Tamil Nadu.

Taking examples from real-life incidents of recent attacks in Srivaikundam Taluk, the film has a scene where Pariyan who is traveling in a local bus, is pulled out of the bus and taken to a nearby field to be attacked. Fighting off his assailants in a highly realistic action sequence shot in a plantain farm, he runs away to the other side. The men too stop chasing him, which is when the audience could listen to the

lines: *Ethanaiyorathavaligalaiengalmudhuginilthandavaneethanaiyumvattimudhaludanungalkaranga lilthandhiduvom* (You have slashed our backs for long, giving us innumerable pains but soon we will repay it to you in the same manner) in the background and the camera cuts to show a group of men and boys dancing to the song 'Poradadavaalendhada' (Herald a sword and fight) on a tape recorder, thus showcasing that he is safe as he has entered his village. The song here acts as a spatial marker indicating the soundscapes of caste, which restrict his attackers' movement forward and ensure his safety.

The most touching scene in the film is when Pariyan decides to take his real father to meet the principal. He was reluctant to do so earlier because of the father's profession as a street theatre artiste who performs as a female dancer at village music festivals. The effeminacy associated with the profession has made him refer his dad as an agriculturist who owns bullock cart. Following his decision, he goes to meet the father, who is getting ready for a koothu performance. And while watching the performance along with the audience, he sees his father among female Karagattam dancers, making his moves to a famous folk song in south Tamil Nadu among the Pallars that captures the life and times of anti-caste martyr Immanuel Sekaran. The song performance, interspersed with 'slices of time' shots, shows Pariyan doing mundane things with his father, mother and their pet dog Karuppi, to showcase the emotional bond of a village family life. If this scene speaks to close bonds within caste, most of the film speaks to the exclusive identities that caste can generate.

The caste murders committed by an old man targeting youngsters who are involved in cross-caste relationships with such ease and expertise to make it look like an accident, reminds us of some of the honour killings that shook Tamil Nadu in the recent past. The old man claims the committing of such murders as a sacrificial offering to the lineage god. In a slightly implausible sequence that speaks to the power of civility, the old man is troubled when offered an assignment to kill Pariyan,

saying that he knows him and he is a nice person who can be talked to. Jo's relatives, however, insist that he should be killed as things have gone out of hand. The limits of civility are seen when – in failing to do the assignment – the old man commits suicide instead. The old man's suicide speaks to the same emotional and psychological turmoil experienced by Jo and Pariyan.

The song "Naan yaar" (Who am I?) in the film stands out for its metaphors: it reflects not only the trauma and mental agony of the protagonist who faces all the humiliation based on his identity but also the prevailing social prejudices. Through quick cut shots, it highlights RohithVemula's suicide, Ilavarasan's death, and the practice of double tumbler system, inability to pull the Kandadevi temple car, the Keezhvenmani killings, the Tamirabarani massacre, sewer deaths and spatial discrimination in the form of separate habitations outside village proper. Splashed with colours of blue, the song celebrates these deaths as martyrdom, thus spreading the blue revolution as a path towards social justice and equality.

The film ends with a beautiful scene metaphorically indicating the need for a debate through those two tumblers juxtaposed to each other and markedly separated by a jasmine flower. The glass tea tumblers are still remnants symbolising the longstanding caste discrimination in Tamil Nadu, where members of the marginalised castes are served in different tumblers. The film, in other words, goes a long way in addressing the issues that have been systematically silenced in mainstream Tamil cinema.

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