Pa. Ranjith's Cinema and the Rejection of Star-Centric Filmmaking: Reclaiming Representation and Resistance in Indian Cinema

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Abstract: *Mainstream Indian cinema relies heavily on star power, subordinating narratives to celebrity appeal and marginalizing Dalit-Bahujan stories through stereotypes or erasure. Filmmaker Pa. Ranjith challenges this by centering Dalit resistance in Kabali (2016) and Kaala (2018), subverting stardom-via Rajinikanth collaborations-to amplify subaltern histories and Ambedkarite symbols like blue imagery. As producer of star-less Pariyerum Perumal (2018), he proves cinema's viability beyond commercialism for cultural reclamation. This paper contrasts star-driven hegemony with Ranjith's visual politics, arguing his oeuvre democratizes representation and redefines cinema for social justice.*

Keywords: Dalit representation, subaltern aesthetics, resistance, social justice

Mainstream Cinema and Stardom's Politics

Indian cinema evolved around hero-worship, portraying stars as upper-caste messiahs embodying moral authority and masculinity. Dalits, Adivasis, and laborers appear as comic relief, villains, or servants, reinforcing exclusion. This star-centric model prioritizes spectacle over realism, sustaining a political economy where upper castes control narratives. Pa. Ranjith disrupts this by critiquing power relations in Dalit portrayals. His films expose how stardom perpetuates caste fictions of a unified "Indian" identity, replacing savior tropes with collective assertion.

In mainstream narratives, marginalized groups are rarely protagonists. Dalits (formerly untouchables), Adivasis (indigenous peoples), and working-class laborers are relegated to stereotypical roles: the loyal servant (e.g., the comedic sidekick in films like *Shabaash Mithu*), the villainous outsider (often portrayed as barbaric or criminal), or comic relief (think of the buffoonish village idiot in rural-set comedies). This reinforces caste hierarchies, where upper castes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, or their modern equivalents—hold moral and narrative authority. Such portrayals perpetuate exclusion, as seen in films like *PK* (2014), where Adivasi characters are exoticized for laughs, or *Gully Boy* (2019), which romanticizes slum life but centers upper-middle-class saviors. This political economy sustains inequality: stars from privileged backgrounds (e.g., Rajinikanth or Shah Rukh Khan) amass wealth and influence, while marginalized actors like Pa. Ranjith himself face barriers in mainstream roles due to caste biases.

Reimagining Stardom with Rajinikanth

Ranjith's *Kabali* (2016) casts Rajinikanth as a Malaysian Tamil laborer embodying community agony, subverting gangster genres with Ambedkarite elements like Buddha statues and blue attire. *Kaala* (2018) positions the "black" (Kaala) protagonist as Dharavi's defender against displacement, celebrating Dalit pride over typical villainous color symbolism. These collaborations harness Rajinikanth's capital to politicize stardom, foregrounding Dalit dignity without individual heroism. Ranjith reframes the superstar as communal symbol, deepening audience engagement with marginalized realities.

Rajinikanth, often called "Superstar," has been a cultural icon in Tamil cinema since the 1970s, embodying the quintessential masala hero—combining action, comedy, and moral righteousness in films like *Baasha* (1995) or *Sivaji* (2007). His persona draws from Dravidian politics, with roots in the DMK and AIADMK parties, where stars like M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) pioneered the "cinematic politician" archetype. Rajinikanth's image as an invincible, larger-than-life figure has historically reinforced upper-caste, patriarchal narratives, portraying him as a savior who transcends social divides. However, his collaborations with Pa. Ranjith mark a pivotal shift, using his massive fanbase (estimated at 70 million followers) to challenge caste hierarchies and reframe stardom as a tool for Dalit empowerment.

Analysis of Kabali (2016)

In *Kabali*, Rajinikanth plays Tony Lee, a Malaysian Tamil laborer imprisoned for 25 years after a gang war, who returns to reclaim his community and family. This subverts the gangster genre, traditionally dominated by individualistic anti-heroes like those in *The Godfather*. Ranjith infuses Ambedkarite symbolism: Tony wears blue attire (a nod to Ambedkar's preference for the color, symbolizing knowledge and rebellion against saffron Hindu nationalism), and the film features Buddha statues, referencing Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism as a rejection of caste oppression. Rajinikanth's character embodies "community agony"—not personal vendetta, but collective suffering of Tamil diaspora workers exploited in Malaysia. The film's climax emphasizes solidarity, with Tony rallying laborers against corrupt bosses, highlighting migrant labor struggles and caste discrimination abroad. This politicizes Rajinikanth's stardom by stripping away his usual solo-hero flair, making him a vessel for Dalit narratives. Box office success (₹500 crore worldwide) amplified Ranjith's message, though critics noted diluted caste critique due to Rajinikanth's mainstream appeal.

Analysis of Kaala (2018)

Kaala centers on Karikalan (Rajinikanth), a Dalit leader in Mumbai's Dharavi slum, defending his community from a real estate mogul (played by Nana Patekar) seeking to displace residents for profit. The title "Kaala" (meaning "black") directly counters racist and casteist tropes where "dark" skin signifies villainy or inferiority—Ranjith flips this

to celebrate Dalit pride, with Karikalan's blackness symbolizing resilience and ancestral strength. The film draws from real events like the 2004 Dharavi redevelopment controversy, portraying upper-caste elites as colonizers. Rajinikanth's role avoids individual heroism; instead, he mobilizes the slum as a collective force, using songs and rituals to assert Dalit identity. Ambedkarite elements include references to Periyar and anti-Brahminical rhetoric, with Karikalan's blue attire recurring. This collaboration deepened audience engagement, as Rajinikanth's fans—often from working-class, non-upper-caste backgrounds—saw their realities reflected, leading to discussions on caste in public spheres. Despite commercial success (₹200 crore domestically), the film faced backlash from Hindu nationalist groups for its anti-caste stance.

Beyond Stardom: Producing Realism

Directed by Mari Selvaraj and produced by Pa. Ranjith under Neelam Productions, *Pariyerum Perumal* follows Pariyan, a Dalit law student in Tamil Nadu, navigating caste discrimination at college and in love. The film uses authentic dialects, minimal production design, and no major stars, focusing on emotional realism to depict systemic oppression. Ranjith's influence shines in its aesthetics: gaana music (folk songs), street art, and blue motifs symbolizing Dalit resistance. Slums are portrayed as vibrant sites of identity and defiance, not despair. Commercially successful despite low budget, it empowered marginalized actors and sparked debates on caste. This collective storytelling shifts cinema toward empowerment, prioritizing truth over spectacle, and earned critical acclaim for its raw portrayal of Dalit struggles.

Film	Star Presence	Key Subversion	Cultural Impact
Kabali (2016)	Rajinikanth (lead)	Gangster as Dalit laborer leader	Ambedkarite symbols mainstreamed
Kaala (2018)	Rajinikanth (lead)	Black as pride, not villainy	Dharavi as resistance hub
Pariyerum Perumal (2018)	None major	Rural caste romance	Dalit pride without saviors
Thangalaan (2024)	Vikram	Revolution & Counter Revolution	Buddhism in India Glory of gold in India.

Reclaiming Representation as Resistance

Ranjith's work aligns with Ambedkarite cultural politics, viewing art as equality's battleground. "Representation is resistance," he states, portraying Dalit strength over victimhood. Chawls and streets emerge as unity spaces, countering dehumanizing gazes. Initiatives like Neelam Cultural Centre and Casteless Collective extend this via gaana-rap fusion, nurturing community art.

Cultural Reclamation and Political Vision

Ranjith rejects hierarchical production, democratizing cinema for the oppressed. His Neelam ventures realize Ambedkar's cultural emancipation, blending activism and art. This postcolonial aesthetic liberates subaltern voices from erasure.

Conclusion

Pa. Ranjith's cinema signifies a paradigm shift in Indian filmmaking. By challenging the hegemony of star-centric narratives and capital-driven production, he reclaims cinema as a tool of representation, resistance, and reimagination. His use of mainstream platforms to promote Dalit consciousness, his production of content-driven films like Pariyerum Perumal, and his aesthetic engagement with subaltern symbols collectively reshape the cultural landscape of Indian cinema. Ranjith's contribution lies not only in portraying Dalit identity but in democratizing the very process of storytelling—making it participatory, political, and deeply human. His work dismantles the myth that commercial success and social relevance are mutually exclusive. Instead, he proves that cinema, when grounded in truth and justice, can transcend entertainment to become a revolutionary force of equality.

In rejecting the cult of stardom and embracing the politics of representation, Pa. Ranjith offers a radical vision of Indian cinema—one that belongs to the people, speaks their language, and fights for their dignity.

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