

# PA. Ranjith's Cinematic Vision: Comparing Themes, Aesthetics, and Politics in Direction and Production

Chandra Mouly V<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Valarmathi S<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Visual Communication, School of Mass Communication, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS) Pallavaram, Chennai, India  
Email: [moulykhan\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:moulykhan[at]gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor & Associate Professor, Department of Visual Communication, School of Mass Communication, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS) Pallavaram, Chennai, India

**Abstract:** *Pa. Ranjith has redefined Tamil cinema through his roles as director and producer, weaving Ambedkarite ideology into narratives that spotlight marginalized communities, especially Dalits. This paper compares his directorial works, such as Kabali and Thangalaan, with his production ventures, like Pariyerum Perumal, analyzing their thematic focus on caste, class, and resistance, alongside distinct aesthetic and political choices. It argues that Ranjith's dual contributions challenge mainstream conventions, enrich subaltern representation, and reshape Tamil cinema's socio - political landscape while nurturing new voices.*

**Keywords:** Dalit Films, Pa. Ranjith, Ambedkarite Politics, Subaltern Aesthetics, Tamil Cinema

## 1. Introduction

### Background of Tamil Cinema and its Socio - Political Dimensions

Tamil cinema, often dubbed "Kollywood," has long been a medium of cultural and political expression in South India. Historically intertwined with the Dravidian movement, it has addressed themes of social justice, caste hierarchies, and regional identity since the mid - 20th century. However, mainstream Tamil cinema has frequently perpetuated dominant caste narratives, sidelining subaltern voices. In this context, Pa. Ranjith's emergence as a filmmaker marks a paradigm shift, bringing Dalit identity and anti - caste politics to the forefront. His narratives celebrate transformative shifts, challenging caste hierarchies and socio - political dynamics. He focuses on the interplay between politics, cultural themes, and caste aesthetics. The study aims to distinguish Pa. Ranjith's directorial and production works by enhancing their creative and narrative innovation, socio - political advocacy, and cultural and traditional caste discourses.

### Brief Introduction to Pa. Ranjith as a Filmmaker and Producer

Pa. Ranjith, born in a working - class Dalit family in Chennai, entered Tamil cinema with his directorial debut *Attakathi* (2012). The film is a romantic comedy that subtly portrays a working - class youth and his lifestyle. His subsequent films, including *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), and *Kaala* (2018), have garnered critical acclaim for their bold political commentary and authentic portrayal of marginalized communities. The film *Madras* foregrounds a strong battle that takes place in North Chennai's Dalit communities by using the wall as a symbol to escalate caste - based conflicts. Both *Kaala* and *Kabali* were at the forefront of the diasporic struggles, resilience, and resistance faced by the oppressed community. Pa. Ranjith's important films in his career *Thangalaan* (2024) and *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021), showcase his ability to blend socio - political themes with

immersive storytelling while maintaining a distinct aesthetic rooted in realism and subaltern resistance. Both films explore oppression, resistance, and identity but through different historical contexts. *Sarpatta Parambarai* is set in 1970s North Chennai and examines the politics of boxing, caste pride, and working - class struggles. It portrays the fight for dignity and survival against both internal and external oppression, using boxing as a metaphor for resilience. *Thangalaan*, on the other hand, is set in colonial India and tells the story of the indigenous people of Kolar Gold Fields (KGF) who were exploited by the British and upper - caste elites. The film highlights caste - class oppression, indigenous identity, and land dispossession while portraying resistance against colonial and capitalist forces.

As a producer under Neelam Productions, Ranjith has supported independent filmmakers, backing films like *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Writer* (2021), amplifying subaltern narratives and challenging caste - based oppression. The movie *Pariyerum Perumal*, produced by Pa. Ranjith showcases the themes of caste, oppression, social injustice, and the resilience of the human spirit. The undaunted journey of Pariyan, a young Dalit man facing extreme caste discrimination in society. The latter *Writer* is a social drama directed by Franklin Jacob and produced by Pa. Ranjith. It revolves around a police officer. He faces caste discrimination and institutional corruption. The other movies from his production include *Bommai Nayagi* (2023) and *Seththumaan* (2020). The film *Bommai Nayagi* directed by Shan and produced by Pa. Ranjith follows the story of a working - class man's struggles alongside his daughter. It highlights the challenges faced by marginalized communities, issues of caste and systematic oppression. The movie *Seththumaan* is about Poochi and his grandson Kumaresan, the story has a tough theme of caste and class struggle. It also talks about the consumption of pork and food politics in a higher frame. *Blue Star* (2024), directed by S. Jayakumar, explores caste discrimination within cricket, using sports as a

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lens to examine social exclusion. The film's setting in a small - town cricket rivalry provides a unique way to address caste hierarchies in everyday life. *J Baby* (2024), directed by Suresh Mari, shifts the focus to familial relationships and generational trauma, particularly through the experiences of a working - class mother. It adds a gendered dimension to Ranjith's political vision, shedding light on women's struggles within oppressive social structures.

### Significance of Studying Pa. Ranjith's Directorial and Production Ventures

Ranjith's dual roles offer a unique opportunity to examine how creative control and collaborative production shape socio - political cinema. His work bridges mainstream and independent filmmaking, making him a pivotal figure in redefining Tamil cinema's aesthetic and political landscape. His films are an unflinching experiment of caste - based oppression, class struggles, and identity politics. He contributes a distinctive approach to his craft making it significant and unique. He strives to bridge commercial appeal with political message, taking cinema as a conscious tool for social change. By fostering a new wave of resilience towards caste discrimination, he encounters historical relevance and power structures in his films like *Thangalaan* (2024). He has eventually and strongly emerged as a foreground of Tamil cinema by using compelling narratives of societal inequalities.

His directorial ventures provide insights into character development, integrity, powerful dialogues, and thematic resonance. He focuses exclusively on the betterment of Dalit and lower caste people. He prioritizes weaving a socio - political framework to portray the underprivileged. He also initiated the Neelam Cultural Centre and Vaanam Art Festival to celebrate Dalit history, art and identity. He is instrumental in documenting the public discourse of Dalits and lower caste activism. His films put forth international attention to women - centric characters by giving them a powerful role and bold voice to fetch excellence. He potentially dismantles the stereotypes of Tamil cinema to transform the medium for social change and cultural reflection.

## 2. Research Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to:

- 1) Analyze recurring themes, aesthetics, and political messages in Ranjith's directorial films.
- 2) Examine the thematic and stylistic contributions of his production ventures.
- 3) Compare his directorial and production roles to assess their impact on Tamil cinema.

The methodology involves a qualitative analysis of Ranjith's films, drawing on auteur theory, postcolonial theory, and Ambedkarite philosophy. Primary and secondary sources (films) (interviews, reviews) inform the analysis.

### 1) Pa. Ranjith as a Director: Themes, Aesthetics, and Political Standpoints

#### Recurring Themes in Directorial Films

Ranjith's films consistently engage with socio - political issues, particularly caste and Dalit identity. In *Attakathi*, he subverts romantic tropes to explore urban youth culture

through a Dalit lens, while *Madras* portrays the struggles of North Chennai's working - class Dalits amid political violence. His Rajinikanth starrers, *Kabali* and *Kaala*, elevate caste discourse to a global stage, depicting Dalit resistance against systemic oppression. Urban spaces, nostalgia, and working - class solidarity are central to his narratives, as seen in *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021), which intertwines boxing culture with political upheaval in 1970s Chennai. His protagonists resist upper - class and caste domination, defending their rights to life and education. His usage of characters systematically confronts the prevailing caste and class inequalities through the thoughts of anti - caste politics and education inspired by B. R. Ambedkar. Ranjith also addresses gender and intersectionality, portraying women as resilient figures, though his feminist critique remains less pronounced than his caste commentary.

### Aesthetic and Narrative Style

Ranjith's aesthetic choices are rooted in realism, often employing raw, unpolished visuals to reflect the lived realities of his characters. Symbolism is a recurring device—blue, associated with Ambedkarite ideology, dominates his color palette in films like *Kaala*. Music plays a pivotal role, with composers like Santhosh Narayanan blending Gaana (a Tamil folk genre) with contemporary sounds to evoke cultural rootedness and resistance. His characterization prioritizes subaltern voices, presenting protagonists as complex, flawed individuals rather than stereotypical heroes. His use of realism, authenticity, symbolism, color, and cinematography forms a progressive palette to explore themes of identity and resistance. He uses naturalistic dialogues, detailed screenplay and intense music to employ the visual and narrative style of storytelling.

### Political and Social Messaging

Ranjith's cinema is deeply influenced by Ambedkarite ideology, advocating for self - respect, equality, and the annihilation of caste. His films critique mainstream Tamil cinema's casteist tropes, as seen in *Kaala*, where the protagonist's fight for land rights becomes a metaphor for Dalit assertion. By placing caste politics in popular cinema, Ranjith challenges audiences to confront systemic inequities, making his work a form of cinematic activism. His films and production house advocate consistent anti - caste principles, subaltern empowerment, critique of power structures, and intersectionality of class, gender and education. He reimagines and restyles his heroes after a significant space in the screenplay, subverting the traditional stereotypes and mass scenes for them. For instance, his *Kaala* and *Kaabali* have protagonists drawn from a community of marginalized backgrounds. His heroes evolve within the same class. He applies the impact of Dravidian politics in the film *Madras* and capitalist greed and the urge for power in *Kaala*.

### 2) Pa. Ranjith as a Producer: Expanding the Narrative Space

#### Themes in Production Ventures (Neelam Productions)

Under Neelam Productions, Ranjith has nurtured films that align with his anti - caste vision. *Pariyerum Perumal*, directed by Mari Selvaraj, explores caste - based violence and Dalit resilience, echoing Ranjith's thematic concerns. Similarly, *Writer* delves into the struggles of a Dalit - Christian policeman, highlighting institutional discrimination. These

films diversify Tamil cinema by introducing new voices while maintaining a focus on caste, class, and gender intersections. Caste and social justice are the two dominant themes of his narratives. His characters tend to assert their dignity and self-respect by committing themselves to the rightful path of addressing caste-based discrimination.

#### Aesthetic and Narrative Innovations in Production Films

While Ranjith's directorial works lean toward mainstream appeal, his production ventures embrace experimental storytelling. *Pariyerum Perumal* uses allegory (e.g., the recurring motif of a dog) to critique caste hierarchies, while *Writer* employs a minimalist aesthetic to underscore its protagonist's isolation. Though distinct from Ranjith's vibrant visual style, these films share his commitment to realism and subaltern representation. He uses different motifs to emphasize his character's resistance against oppression, mental and physical trauma, and self-expression. Pa. Ranjith's production ventures *Seththumaan* (2022) and *Bommai Nayagi* (2023), exemplify his commitment to aesthetic and narrative innovations that center marginalized voices. These films depart from mainstream Tamil cinema's commercial aesthetics, embracing realism, subaltern storytelling, and political consciousness.

*Seththumaan*, directed by Thamizh and produced by Ranjith's Neelam Productions, employs a raw, documentary-like visual style to depict caste oppression and food politics. The film's naturalistic cinematography, earthy color palette, and minimal background score enhance its immersive realism. The narrative unfolds through the perspective of a young boy and his grandfather, challenging the upper-caste moral policing of Dalit food habits. The slow-paced storytelling and detailed mise-en-scène capture the everyday struggles of the oppressed, subverting mainstream cinematic tropes.

Similarly, *Bommai Nayagi*, directed by Shan, presents an emotionally charged narrative of caste and gender-based injustice. The film's aesthetics rely on subdued lighting, close-up shots, and a restrained yet powerful background score to heighten its emotional depth. The storytelling prioritizes lived experiences over dramatic spectacle, allowing for an intimate portrayal of resistance and resilience. Both films redefine Tamil cinema's aesthetic and narrative boundaries, proving how Ranjith's production ventures serve as vital political and artistic interventions.

#### Political and Social Commitments in Production Choices

Ranjith's production choices reflect a deliberate effort to empower marginalized filmmakers. By backing directors like Mari Selvaraj and Franklin Jacob, he creates a platform for authentic Dalit narratives, challenging Tamil cinema's gatekeeping tendencies. His work with Neelam Productions also fosters a progressive discourse, encouraging discussions on caste and identity in mainstream spaces. His symbolic visual style amplifies, encourages, and brings marginalized voices into the mainstream focus. *Bommai Nayagi* (2023) critiques caste and gender-based violence through the story of a labourer's fight for justice for his assaulted daughter. The film highlights institutional apathy, the struggles of the working class, and the resilience of oppressed communities. By producing such a film, Ranjith reinforces his focus on exposing systemic injustices and advocating for legal and

social reforms. *Seththumaan* (2022), directed by Thamizh explores caste-based discrimination through the seemingly simple act of consuming pork, a food associated with Dalit culture. The film critiques upper-caste moral policing and economic exploitation while portraying the aspirations of a young boy seeking education as a means of social mobility. Ranjith's decision to produce this film underscores his commitment to amplifying Dalit narratives and questioning Brahminical hegemony. *Blue Star* (2024), directed by S. Jayakumar, addresses casteism within cricket, exposing how the sport—often viewed as a neutral or elite domain—mirrors the rigid caste hierarchies of society. By highlighting the struggles of Dalit players fighting for recognition, the film aligns with Ranjith's recurring themes of resistance and self-assertion against systemic exclusion. Through *Bommai Nayagi*, *Seththumaan*, and *Blue Star*, Pa. Ranjith's production house continues to function as a platform for radical storytelling. These films not only challenge dominant caste narratives but also create space for authentic Dalit and working-class experiences, proving that cinema can be both an artistic and political tool for social transformation.

### 3. Comparative Analysis: Directorial vs. Production Films

#### Similarities

Ranjith's directorial and production films share common socio-political themes, particularly the critique of caste oppression and the celebration of Dalit identity. Both emphasize visual storytelling, using symbols and music to convey resistance. The representation of marginalized communities remains central, with narratives grounded in lived experiences rather than romanticized ideals.

#### Differences

As a director, Ranjith exercises greater creative control, allowing for a cohesive aesthetic and narrative vision. His films often cater to mainstream audiences, balancing political messaging with commercial elements (e.g., star power in *Kabali*). In contrast, his production ventures prioritize independent voices, fostering experimental approaches that may lack the polish of his directorial works but gain depth in authenticity. While directorial films like *Kaala* target a broader audience, production films like *Pariyerum Perumal* appeal to niche, socially conscious viewers, amplifying their impact in independent cinema circles.

**Directorial Films:** Ranjith's films, including *Attakathi* (2012), *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016), *Kaala* (2018), *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021), *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu* (2022) and *Thangalaan* (2024) are infused with socio-political commentary, focusing on issues of caste, class, and resistance to oppression. His stories consistently highlight marginalized groups and challenge systemic inequalities.

**Production Films:** Films produced by Ranjith, like *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Seththumaan* (2022), also tackle social issues. *Pariyerum Perumal*, directed by Mari Selvaraj, addresses caste-based violence and discrimination, aligning closely with Ranjith's anti-caste ethos. Similarly, *Writer* (2021), another production, explores police brutality and bureaucratic corruption, reflecting a shared concern for the subaltern experience. Pa. Ranjith's production choices in



*Bomma Nayagi* (2023) and *Blue Star* (2024) reflect his deep political and social commitments to anti - caste narratives, state violence, and marginalized representation. *Bomma Nayagi*, directed by Shan, highlights caste and gender - based violence, portraying a labourer's fight for justice against institutional apathy. *Blue Star*, directed by S. Jayakumar, addresses caste discrimination within cricket, using sports as a lens to explore societal exclusion and Dalit assertion. By producing these films, Ranjith ensures that Tamil cinema serves as a tool for social consciousness, challenging dominant narratives while amplifying the struggles and resilience of the oppressed.

#### Impact on Mainstream vs. Independent Cinema

Ranjith's directorial films have reshaped mainstream Tamil cinema by normalizing caste discourse in blockbuster formats, as evidenced by the commercial success of *Kabali*. His production work, however, has bolstered independent cinema, providing a counter - narrative to mainstream tropes and nurturing a new generation of filmmakers committed to social justice.

## 4. Conclusion

#### Summary of Key Findings

This study highlights Pa. Ranjith's distinct yet complementary roles as director and producer. His directorial works, blending mainstream appeal with caste critique, contrast with his production ventures, which foster experimental subaltern narratives. Rooted in Ambedkarite ideology, both avenues challenge Tamil cinema's conventions, amplify marginalized voices, and inspire a socially conscious filmmaking wave. Ranjith's legacy lies in bridging commercial and independent spheres, reshaping cinematic and political landscapes alike.

#### Contribution of Pa. Ranjith to Tamil Cinema and Social Discourse

Ranjith has redefined Tamil cinema by centering Dalit narratives and anti - caste politics, inspiring a wave of socially conscious filmmaking. His work has not only elevated subaltern voices but also compelled audiences and filmmakers to engage with systemic inequities, making him a pioneer of Ambedkarite cinema. Pa. Ranjith's films, both in direction and production, emphasize social justice, represent subaltern voices, and uphold cultural authenticity, embodying his fundamental beliefs.

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