

Annihilating Caste on Screen: Inter-Caste Intimacy and Constitutional Morality in the Tamil film *Pariyerum Perumal*

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Abstract- Mari Selvaraj's Tamil film *Pariyerum Perumal* B.A., B.L. (2018) stages the encounter between a Dalit law student and the caste order of southern Tamil Nadu as a drama of endogamy, the mechanism that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar identified as the very essence of caste. This paper reads the film through Ambedkar's early sociology in "Castes in India" (1916), his analysis of inter-marriage in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), and his account of constitutional morality in the Constituent Assembly. It argues that the film moves the question of caste violence from the spectacle of atrocity to its structural logic: the policing of who may sit, speak, study, love, and live beside whom. Through close readings of the opening sequence involving the dog Karuppi, the law-college episodes, and the film's refusal of a conciliatory ending, the paper shows how the film translates Ambedkar's theory into affective cinematic form. It further examines the politics of Dalit authorship and the burden of forbearance the film places on its protagonist, and concludes that the film's power lies in holding constitutional promise and social resistance in unresolved tension.

Keywords: *Pariyerum Perumal*, B. R. Ambedkar, endogamy, inter-caste marriage, constitutional morality, Dalit cinema, Mari Selvaraj, Tamil cinema, caste violence

I. Introduction

When *Pariyerum Perumal* B.A., B.L. was released in Tamil Nadu on 28 September 2018, its title already made an argument. A protagonist introduced by his name and his degrees, one who is a Dalit young man in a Tirunelveli law college, is a figure whose credentials function as a claim. In a social order where the surname or village once announced a person's rank before he spoke, the film presents a title earned through education as its counter-inscription. The film was the debut feature of Mari Selvaraj and was produced by Pa. Ranjith's Neelam Productions, a banner whose commitment to anti-caste cinema has reshaped the field of Tamil filmmaking since the mid-2010s.

The story is deceptively simple. Pariyan, a first-generation learner from a Dalit family, enters a law college, struggles with English, is befriended by a classmate named Jo (Jothi Mahalakshmi) from a dominant-caste family, and is progressively drawn into a cycle of humiliation and violence orchestrated by her relatives. What distinguishes the film from earlier social dramas is its refusal to locate the cause of that violence in individual cruelty. The violence is protective in its own terms, a defence of a boundary. The film thereby returns to the question that Ambedkar placed at the centre of his



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analysis of caste more than a century ago: how is an order of graded inequality reproduced across generations without the need for constant coercion, and what happens when that order is threatened by intimacy?

This paper investigates the film as an Ambedkarite text in a sense different from the one commonly applied to Dalit cinema. Iconography, whether the blue flag, the portrait, or the slogan, is present in the film, but the argument advanced here is that its deeper Ambedkarism lies in its analytic structure: endogamy as the mechanism of caste, education as the means of contesting it, and constitutional morality as the ethical demand that the social order has yet to meet. The paper also considers the film's representational politics, its Dalit authorship, its treatment of Jo, and the moral labour it assigns to its protagonist.

II. Review of Literature

The scholarship relevant to this study falls into three fields: Ambedkar's sociology and constitutional thought, Dalit and Tamil political history, and studies of Dalit representation and testimony.

Ambedkar's paper "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" (1916) remains the foundational text for any analysis of endogamy. Ambedkar argued there that caste is best understood as an enclosed class, and that the practice of endogamy, sustained by the control of women's marriage, is the mechanism through which enclosure is maintained. Annihilation of Caste (1936), in the annotated critical edition prepared by S. Anand, develops the corollary: if endogamy is the essence of caste, then inter-marriage is its real solvent. Eleanor Zelliot's *Ambedkar's World* (2013) and Christophe Jaffrelot's *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability* (2005) supply the biographical and political frameworks in which these arguments were formed, while Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters* (2019) demonstrates their continued relevance to contemporary caste violence, including violence directed at inter-caste couples.

For the Tamil context, M. S. S. Pandian's *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin* (2007) traces how the Tamil political present was formed through the Dravidian movement's critique of Brahminical power and, importantly, how that critique left intermediate-caste dominance over Dalits largely unexamined. This is the social terrain of southern Tamil Nadu on which the film is set. Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (1996) offers a complementary analysis of Dalitbahujan culture as an alternative epistemology and a counter-tradition to Brahminical Hinduism. Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2009) examines how caste, atrocity, and law became entangled in modern India, and her analysis of the "atrocity" as a legal and cultural category is particularly relevant to the film's treatment of violence.

On representation, Gopal Guru's "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995) and Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's *The Cracked Mirror* (2012) argue that the experience of caste carries an epistemic specificity that cannot be adequately spoken for by others. Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006) extends this argument by showing how Dalit



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women's testimonies make visible the intersection of caste and patriarchy, an intersection that is central to any reading of the inter-caste romance at the heart of the film. Finally, the constitutional provisions of most immediate relevance are Articles 15 and 17 of the Constitution of India, which prohibit discrimination and abolish untouchability, and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.

III. Research Gap

Saraswathi et al. (2023) highlight that AI can influence several HR functions while also creating challenges associated with data governance, organisational readiness and responsible implementation. Pandey et al. (2024) emphasise that AI adoption in HRM must be considered alongside employee morale, trust, productivity and data-security concerns. Krishnan et al. (2024) identify the potential of AI to improve HR efficiency and employee experience through applications in recruitment, onboarding, performance management and talent development.

The employee perspective is particularly important. AI can simplify HR service delivery, provide personalised recommendations and improve the speed of employee support. At the same time, excessive automation, algorithmic opacity, surveillance concerns and lack of human interaction may negatively influence employee perceptions. Thus, AI adoption should not be viewed simply as an automation decision.

Another important dimension is HR decision-making. AI-based HR analytics can process workforce data and provide predictive insights regarding recruitment, absenteeism, employee turnover, learning needs, performance and workforce planning. Yadav et al. (2025) found that AI-enabled HR analytics can support predictive decision-making and improve the effectiveness of HR practices in Indian service organisations. Bhadoria and Kushwah (2026) similarly identify AI-supported analytics as a mechanism for more timely and data-driven HR decision-making.

The organisational dimension is equally important. AI adoption requires financial investment, data infrastructure, employee training, technology integration and governance mechanisms. Therefore, the organisational value of AI depends on whether HR departments can convert technological capabilities into improved decision quality, employee outcomes and organisational performance.

The present study therefore develops an integrated empirical framework connecting AI adoption → employee experience and AI adoption + HR decision-making → organisational performance. The study focuses specifically on the Indian organisational context and attempts to provide an integrated view of the employee, managerial and organisational consequences of AI-enabled HRM.

Objectives:

The present study sets out the following objectives:



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1. To examine Ambedkar's theory of endogamy and inter-marriage as an interpretive framework for the film.
2. To analyse the film's opening sequence and its treatment of the animal body as a representation of caste violence.
3. To read the law-college sequences as a dramatisation of the gap between formal constitutional equality and social hierarchy.
4. To assess the role of inter-caste intimacy in the film and the significance of its refusal of a conciliatory resolution.
5. To evaluate the film's representational politics, including Dalit authorship, the characterisation of Jo, and the burden of forbearance placed on the protagonist. To contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship on Dalit cinema by connecting film form with Ambedkarite social theory.

IV. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology combining close reading of the film, interpretive analysis of Ambedkar's primary texts, and critical cultural studies. The primary method is close reading, applied to the film's mise-en-scene, sound, narrative sequencing, and dialogue. The analysis focuses on three nodal sequences: the opening episode involving the dog Karuppi, the law-college episodes involving language, friendship, and confrontation, and the film's closing sequence. The philosophical component reads Ambedkar's writings as a coherent social theory, one that links a sociological account of caste (endogamy and enclosure) to a political programme (education, organisation, and constitutional citizenship). The critical cultural

studies component draws on Dalit Studies, in particular the work of Guru, Rege, and Rao, to assess the film's representational choices. All claims are interpretive rather than statistical. Descriptions of scenes derive from the author's viewing of the film; because film analysis depends on precise recollection of sequence and dialogue, dialogue is paraphrased rather than quoted.

V. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Ambedkar on Endogamy: The Mechanism of Caste

In "Castes in India," presented at Columbia University in 1916, Ambedkar argued that the customs usually taken to define caste, such as the prohibition of inter-dining and the hierarchy of occupations, were derivative. Their basis, he argued, was endogamy. Because caste groups were closed to marriage outside themselves, the boundary between them could be maintained across generations. The maintenance of that boundary required the regulation of women, whose marriage choices were the point at which the enclosure could be breached. Caste, for Ambedkar, was therefore inseparable from the control of women's sexuality and the surveillance of intimacy.

Twenty years later, in *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar drew the corollary directly. Having argued that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers,



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he concluded that the real remedy for breaking caste is inter-marriage, and that nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste (Ambedkar, *Annihilation*). The proposition is often quoted but seldom pursued to its implications for representation. If inter-marriage is the solvent, then the social violence directed at inter-caste relationships is not incidental to caste but is the immune response of the system to the threat that most directly endangers it. A film that stages the violence provoked by a Dalit man's proximity to a dominant-caste woman is therefore staging, whether or not it cites Ambedkar, the central dynamic of his theory.

Ambedkar's account also implicates constitutional morality. Drawing on the historian George Grote, he warned in the Constituent Assembly that constitutional forms could be preserved while constitutional morality, the habit of reverence for the constitution's ethical spirit, was absent, and that in India democracy was "only a top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic" (Constituent Assembly Debates). This gap between form and spirit provides a second interpretive key for the film's institutional spaces.

5.2 The Dog and the Body: Violence Before Speech

The film's opening establishes its moral world before a word of law is spoken. Karuppi, the dog who belongs to Pariyan, is killed by men of the dominant caste, and the camera treats the death as an event of consequence rather than a plot device. The scene establishes the film's grammar of violence: the harm is done first to what the protagonist loves, is done without any need for justification, and is followed by silence. The animal is the first body in the film to be treated as disposable, and it prefigures the treatment of Pariyan's own body and of the bodies of his family.

The choice to open with an animal rather than a human victim is an act of formal intelligence. It enacts what Anupama Rao describes as the peculiar status of the Dalit body under the sign of atrocity, a body that is visible as an object of violence and invisible as a subject of rights (Rao). Karuppi cannot speak, cannot be a witness, and cannot invoke a statute. Its death is therefore an image of the condition that Article 17 of the Constitution and the Prevention of Atrocities Act were designed to end, namely a life that may be extinguished because no one in authority is obliged to notice.

The later humiliation of Pariyan's father, a folk performer whose art involves cross-gender performance, extends the analysis. The violence directed at him is inflicted not only on his caste but on his person and his art, and it functions as a public lesson: the community's dignity is to be broken in front of the community. The scene links the film's individual story to the collective experience of caste as a spectacle of humbling. In doing so it echoes Ambedkar's insistence in *Annihilation of Caste* that the disabilities of the untouchable are not merely economic but are social and symbolic, a denial of the right to appear in public as an equal.

5.3 The Law College: Formal Equality, Social



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HierarchyPariyan's enrolment in a law college is the film's principal act of Ambedkarite affirmation. Education was, for Ambedkar, the first term of his celebrated triad, and law was the discipline through which he himself claimed standing in the national polity. Pariyan's ambition to become a lawyer belongs to this genealogy, and the film underlines the connection through its use of Ambedkar's image and its recurrent blue palette, without permitting these to substitute for narrative.

The college, however, is presented as an institution in which formal equality prevails and social hierarchy persists. Pariyan is admitted under the reservation policy, a constitutional mechanism of redress, and the film shows how that admission is treated by peers and staff as an anomaly to be tolerated, tested, or corrected. His difficulty with English is presented not as an individual deficiency but as a consequence of unequal schooling, and Jo's offer to help him with the language is a gesture that is at once generous and structurally fraught, since it positions the dominant-caste student as tutor. Anand, played by Yogi Babu, offers a different model of friendship, one that does not require Pariyan to be reformed before he is accepted.

Here the film dramatises the contradiction that Ambedkar named on the eve of the Constitution's adoption, the entry into "a life of contradictions" in which political equality would coexist with social and economic inequality. The law college is the film's laboratory for that contradiction: it grants Pariyan a seat and denies him ease, provides him with the vocabulary of rights and surrounds him with people who have never needed to invoke them. The institution's motto of equality is contradicted by the ordinary conduct of those who inhabit it

5.4 Inter-Caste Intimacy and the Refusal of Reconciliation

The relationship between Pariyan and Jo is drawn with restraint. It is, for most of the film, a friendship whose romantic potential remains unspoken, and the film is careful not to present Jo as a rescuer or Pariyan as a suitor. This restraint has an Ambedkarite logic. A conventional romance would locate the obstacle in the lovers' families and the resolution in the lovers' constancy. The film instead makes clear that the obstacle is the structure of endogamy itself, and that Jo's family acts not out of exceptional malice but out of an ordinary commitment to the boundary. The threat they perceive is real from within the logic of the system, for Ambedkar's argument is precisely that inter-marriage would dissolve it.

The film's ending refuses the consolations of the genre. Pariyan survives, and a confrontation of a kind occurs, but there is no embrace, no conversion of the antagonist, and no declaration that love has triumphed. As I read it, the closing image places the two men in shared physical space without shared understanding, a co-presence that stops short of reconciliation. The refusal is consequential. Mainstream social cinema has often resolved caste conflict through an act of individual repentance, which reassures the audience that the problem lies in a few bad hearts. By withholding repentance, the film insists that a change of heart is not the remedy Ambedkar proposed. His remedy was structural: the dissolution of endogamy, the spread of education, the enforcement of rights, and the cultivation of constitutional morality across the society.



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There is also an important sense in which the film's ending can be read as a statement about time. The institutions of the Constitution exist; the society that would make them meaningful does not yet. The film does not claim that the distance has been closed. It offers instead the image of a young man who has refused to leave, refused to retaliate in kind, and refused to disappear, and who therefore remains a claim upon the conscience of those who share the frame with him.

5.5 Representational Politics:

Authorship, Jo, and the Burden of Forbearance

Whereas *Jai Bhim* (2021) has been debated for placing a dominant-caste advocate at its centre, *Pariyerum Perumal* comes from a Dalit director and a Dalit-led production house, and this difference matters. Gopal Guru's argument that Dalit experience possesses an epistemic specificity finds an instance here in the film's attention to details that outsider narration tends to miss, such as the small calculations of seating, the timing of speech, and the management of a look. Authorship, however, is a condition of representation rather than its guarantee, and the film must still be evaluated for what it does.

Two critical questions may be raised. The first concerns Jo. Sharmila Rege's work reminds us that caste is reproduced through the regulation of women, and that dominant-caste women are themselves subject to that regulation even as they benefit from the caste order. Jo occupies exactly this ambiguous position. She is in one respect Pariyan's friend and in another the daughter of a household committed to endogamy. The film gives her relatively little interior life, and it is fair to ask whether her limited agency serves the film's structural argument or limits its account of how women negotiate caste and patriarchy. The film's restraint on this point can be defended as consistent with its analysis, but it also leaves the most intimate site of the caste-gender nexus partly unexplored.

The second question concerns forbearance. Pariyan endures repeated humiliation and does not retaliate; the film's moral weight rests on his restraint. This may be read as an Ambedkarite virtue, since Ambedkar consistently preferred constitutional and educational means to vengeance. It may equally be read as an imposition, in that the oppressed are again asked to supply the moral labour that the oppressors withhold. The film is aware of this tension and does not resolve it. Its refusal to reward forbearance with reconciliation is a form of critique: the burden is shown, and its unfairness is left visible. This is the more honest choice, and it aligns the film with Ambedkar's insistence that the responsibility for the annihilation of caste lies with those who sustain it.

VI. Findings

The analysis yields the following findings:



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1. The film's deepest Ambedkarism lies in its analytic structure: it treats caste violence as the enforcement of endogamy, in accordance with the theory advanced in "Castes in India" and Annihilation of Caste.
2. The opening sequence involving Karuppi establishes the film's grammar of disposable life and prefigures the treatment of human bodies, linking the film to the concerns of Article 17 and the atrocity framework.
3. The law-college sequences dramatise the gap between formal constitutional equality and social hierarchy, giving concrete form to Ambedkar's warning about a life of contradictions.
4. The film relocates the source of violence from individual malice to social structure, and its refusal of a conciliatory ending expresses the Ambedkarite view that the remedy is structural rather than sentimental.
5. The film's Dalit authorship yields a texture of lived detail that outsider narration rarely achieves, though authorship does not remove the need for critical evaluation.
6. The characterisation of Jo, while consistent with the film's structural argument, leaves the gendered dimension of caste partly unexplored.
7. The burden of forbearance placed on the protagonist is both an Ambedkarite virtue and a source of ethical tension, and the film's refusal to reward it with reconciliation makes the tension visible rather than resolving it.

VII. Conclusion

Pariyerum Perumal makes its argument by refusing consolation. It shows a young man armed with a degree and a constitutional vocabulary entering a social order that has not yet agreed to recognise them, and it declines to pretend that the meeting ends happily. In this refusal it is most faithful to Ambedkar, who never believed that constitutional guarantees would execute themselves and who regarded the annihilation of caste as a task for the whole society rather than for its victims alone.

The film's contribution to Dalit cinema lies in its translation of a sociological theory into affect. Endogamy, an abstraction in the pages of "Castes in India," becomes in the film a look across a classroom, a warning delivered kindly, a threat delivered softly, and a violence

delivered in the name of family. The audience does not learn a theory but feels its operation, which is the kind of understanding that political education, in Ambedkar's sense, must ultimately seek.

Future research might compare the film's treatment of endogamy with that of other recent Tamil films by Dalit directors, including Pa. Ranjith's *Sarpatta Parambarai* and Mari Selvaraj's own *Karnan* and *Maamannan*, and might place it alongside Marathi and Hindi films that address inter-caste intimacy. A further avenue is the study of audience reception, particularly among young Dalit students for whom the film's law-college setting is not a fiction but a near-daily experience. Such work would test the claim advanced here, that the film's Ambedkarism lies not in its iconography but in its capacity to make a structure visible.



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