

## Chapter 16

# Film as a Reflection of Society: Reception of Social Drama in Tamil Cinema

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### ABSTRACT

*Movies have become such an integral part of man's life that it is tough to imagine a world without this form of entertainment. This world can be larger than life, or it can be about the hustle and bustle of everyday life, or it can paint the heart-wrenching stories of the ostracised and abused sections of society. Social film genres help one to awaken to a sense of responsibility and to show empathy towards emotional situations. Even though films have been able to record the different social changes, its impact has never been systematically explored. This chapter is an attempt to conduct a systematic study of applying the reader-reception theory in a few films in Tamil and to study their impact on society. The films chosen for study are Aruvi, Mercury, Mersal, Velaikaran, and Nisabdham, which were bold cinematic portrayals of sexual abuse of children. These socially enlightening films help in reaching the audience and creating awareness among them. They influence the thought process in a positive way and help one to try to do his/her bit in order to be of help to humanity.*

### INTRODUCTION

In a global scenario, movies have become such an inseparable part of man's life that it is tough to imagine a world without this form of entertainment. How delightful it is to sit back and be ecstatically carried away to another world for a couple of hours! The world that one is transported to while watching a feature film can be larger than life, or can be about the hurly-burly of everyday life, or can paint heart-wrenching stories of the ostracized and abused sections of the society. Different movie genres help to awaken a sense of responsibility and to show empathy towards such situations. Society is reflected in movies and in turn movies influence society by changes in representations, challenging the audience's morals and transforming viewers' opinions (Mines & Lamb, 2010).

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Films capture the imagination of the viewer and educate him or her about issues that he/she may not know. The best attribute about films is that they tell a story. Sometimes it can be hard to understand what discrimination, poverty or suffering are like when it doesn't affect a person personally. Films can immerse the viewers in another person's lives for a few hours and help the viewer to empathize with people whom they have never met (Saravanan, 2012).

Analyzing the history of Indian cinema, one finds that it dates long back to the first film, Raja Harishchandra (1913). It is a 40 minute-long, silent feature film based on Hindu mythology, directed by Dadasaheb Phalke. The production took place only for seven months and 21 days. Screened for the first time in Olympia Theatre, Grant Road in Mumbai for a select audience and later as a public release at the Coronation Cinema, it was a monumental success. About the cast, the lead male actor was Marathi theatre actor, Dattatraya Damodar Dabke. Since there were no female actresses, the role was played by a man, Annasaheb Salunke, a delicate-postured cook at a restaurant. From then on, Indian cinema has seen no setbacks. In recognition of Phalke's contribution to the world of Indian cinema, the Government instituted the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1969, an award presented annually by the President of India for lifetime contribution to Indian cinema. The first Indian directors and producers shrewdly adapted mythology as the base of their movies, making it easier for the public to accept the medium of cinema, portraying it in a favourable light (India Today, 2019).

Kollywood, the Tamil film industry had its beginning in 1916, with a mythology-based story, again a silent movie, KeechakaVadham directed by Nataraja Rangaswamy. The writer, FirozeRangoonwalla (2003) records that a reviewer for The Mail praised the film: "It has been prepared with great care and is drawing full houses." The success of the movie was so profound that today Kollywood is one of the well-acclaimed film industries that have gained viewers in South East Asia and other parts of the world. Similarly, in more recent times, movies like *Chandralekha* and *Muthu* were dubbed into Japanese and earned a record \$1.6 million in 1998. In 2010, *Enthiran* crossed a record \$4 million in North America.

Tamil movies have come a long way from being commercialized ones to those creating awareness for social causes. The change has been slowly ushered in because of young Directors who are more concerned with cultural ideas, concepts and characteristics of the common man. Sasikumar, the Director of the movie, *Subramaniapuram* has commented: "Audiences scarcely want superstars. They want reality. They want to see something that is commonplace in their daily lives. They want to see scenes that they can identify with. More the film gets under their skin, more they like it"(Nair, 2011). The movies, thus, blend sweetness and darkness, tragedy and comedy, crisp narrative and documentary realism, and introduce a fresh, vital and emotionally engaging breakthrough that becomes a genre of its own.

'Social problem movies', variously named as 'social consciousness movies' and 'message movies' are films that dramatize a set of societal concerns which are depicted as representatives of a particular historical movement. The settings are roughly contemporary with their moment of release. The tone is serious and there is a realistic model of representation when dealing with the subject matter. The designation, 'social problem' indicates the attitude that the films take towards their subject matter. According to Charles J Maland (1988), "to identify a state of affairs as a social problem indicates that it is contingent rather than natural, brought about by people's attitudes, behaviours and institutions and can thus be ameliorated by deliberate effort."

The movies present narratives of change through a liberal lens, inviting the audience to identify themselves with the suffering of the individual characters and to applaud the relief from the same at the resolution of the narrative. They have often been used to spread awareness and to attack social evils such as child marriage, sati (practice), the prohibition of widow remarriage, untouchability, and social

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