



Reframing Myth As Political Allegory: Caste And Class In Contemporary Indian Cinema

¹ B. Ranjani, ² Dr. A. Shanthi, ³ E. Vishnu Sharma, ⁴ A. Tahar Basha, ⁵ R. Chandra Vadhana
Tamil Shibi

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication,
Sona College of Arts and Science, Salem, Tamil Nadu - 636005.

² Head & Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication,
Sona College of Arts and Science, Salem, Tamil Nadu – 636005

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication,
Sona College of Arts and Science, Salem, Tamil Nadu – 636005

⁴ Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication,
Sona College of Arts and Science, Salem, Tamil Nadu – 636005

⁵ Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication,
Sona College of Arts and Science, Salem, Tamil Nadu – 636005

Abstract

Myths have historically functioned as cultural narratives that legitimize social order and moral values. In the Indian context, epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have provided enduring archetypes that continue to shape contemporary discourse. This paper examines how Indian cinema reframes myth as political allegory to interrogate issues of caste and class, focusing on Mani Ratnam's *Thalapathi* (1991) and *Raavan* (2010), and Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018). Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of myth as ideological signification and Dalit studies on counter-myths, the analysis highlights how these films subvert traditional narratives by elevating marginalized figures such as Karna and Ravana into heroes of resistance. Through visual symbolism, characterisation, and narrative inversion, the films destabilize hegemonic interpretations of "good" and "evil," foregrounding caste-based exclusion, land struggles, and state violence. By reading these cinematic texts as modern allegories, the study argues that Indian cinema does not simply retell mythology but actively reinterprets it as a tool for social critique. In doing so, it transforms myth from a static cultural repository into a dynamic medium of resistance, allowing suppressed voices to contest dominant ideologies. The paper positions cinema as a contemporary myth-making practice that reimagines epics in the service of social justice.

Keywords: Myth; Political Allegory; Indian Cinema; Caste; Class; Subaltern Studies; Counter-Myths

Introduction

Myths have long served as cultural frameworks through which societies negotiate questions of morality, power, and identity. In India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata remain foundational narratives that continue to shape political discourse, popular culture, and collective imagination. These epics are not static repositories of the past but living texts, constantly reinterpreted to validate or contest prevailing social orders. Within cinema, myth often functions as a symbolic language that transcends entertainment, offering a means to encode and critique contemporary realities.

Indian cinema, particularly in its mainstream and regional forms, has repeatedly drawn upon mythological archetypes to construct political allegories. Heroes and villains are reimagined as embodiments of broader struggles over justice, legitimacy, and belonging. Yet, while classical interpretations of myth have historically reinforced hierarchical structures, contemporary filmmakers increasingly subvert these narratives to foreground marginalized voices. Mythic characters such as Karna and Ravana are re-signified, no longer cast solely as tragic or villainous figures, but as symbols of caste oppression, resistance, and social justice.

This paper explores how myth is reframed as political allegory in Indian cinema, focusing on Mani Ratnam's *Thalapathi* (1991) and *Raavan* (2010), and Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018). Through close textual analysis, it investigates how cinematic retellings of myth destabilize hegemonic binaries of good and evil, foreground caste and class struggles, and articulate counter-narratives of resistance. By situating these films within the larger discourse of myth and ideology, the study highlights cinema's role as a contemporary myth-making practice that reimagines epics in service of social critique.

Review of Literature

Myth as a System of Ideological Power

Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) remains foundational in understanding myth as a semiotic system that naturalizes ideology. Scholars like Stuart Hall (1997) extended this to cultural studies, emphasizing how myths disguise power relations as "common sense." In the South Asian context, Partha Chatterjee (1993) argued that cultural forms like myth become tools for constructing modern national identities, often reinforcing hierarchies while claiming universality. These theoretical perspectives show how myths in cinema are never neutral but serve ideological functions in shaping social imagination.

Myth, Modernity, and Popular Culture

Myths are not restricted to ancient texts; as Rajeev Bhargava (1998) notes, they are continuously adapted into modern political discourses. Cinema, as a mass cultural medium, often becomes the "new stage" for myth-making. Christopher Prendergast (2000) observed that myths survive in modern art by being re-coded into narratives of nationhood and morality. In India, M.S.S. Pandian (1992) famously analyzed

how Tamil cinema has historically transformed epics into vehicles of Dravidian politics, highlighting how screen myths like those of M.G. Ramachandran and Rajinikanth embody populist allegories of justice and oppression.

Epic Reinterpretations in Indian Cinema

Scholars like Philip Lutgendorf (1991) have detailed how cinematic adaptations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* reframe epic narratives for mass audiences, embedding contemporary political concerns within mythic archetypes. Lalitha Gopalan (2002) argued that Bollywood and regional cinema strategically deploy myth not only for spectacle but also as moral commentary on governance, gender, and justice. In Tamil cinema, Selvaraj Velayutham (2015) stresses that epics are re-inscribed through local idioms—heroism, community loyalty, and caste-based hierarchies—making them sites where political anxieties of modern Tamil society are negotiated.

Myth as Political Allegory in Parallel and Popular Cinema

Film scholars have tracked how both parallel cinema and mainstream blockbusters employ myth as a language of resistance. Madhava Prasad (1998) explored how cinematic narratives are structured by “epic melodrama,” which legitimizes political hierarchies through moral archetypes. More recently, Rangan (2016) analyzed Mani Ratnam’s films, showing how epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are destabilized through fragmented, subjective retellings. Similarly, Pa. Ranjith’s *Kaala* has been discussed in Dalit studies (Guru, 2019; Geetha, 2020) as a cinematic counter-myth, where Ravana and Krishna-like figures are recoded to symbolize subaltern resistance.

Caste, Counter-Myth, and Subaltern Reclaiming of Epics

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2009) and Gopal Guru (2011) critique the Brahminical dominance of Hindu epics, pointing out that the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* often reproduce caste hierarchies. This has led to the rise of counter-myths—alternative readings of epics that foreground Dalit and tribal experiences of oppression. Sharmila Rege (2013) emphasizes how cultural production, including cinema, becomes a crucial site for re-signifying myths. Pa. Ranjith’s cinema exemplifies this turn, as Srinivas (2019) argues, by constructing a visual language of resistance where myth is not rejected but radically reinterpreted to voice Dalit assertiveness.

Myth, Space, and Visual Politics

Scholars have also examined the visual dimension of myth-making in cinema. Moinak Biswas (2003) described how landscapes, costume, and color codes function as “mythic markers” that reinforce ideological positions. In Mani Ratnam’s films, K. Sivathamby (2000) highlighted the use of urban and rural spaces to contrast state authority with subaltern insurgency. In *Kaala*, Ranjith deploys black attire and Dharavi’s spatial politics to symbolize resistance, while Thalapaty uses fire and shadow imagery to

evoke the cosmic moral struggle of the Mahabharata. This visual framing underscores how myth works both narratively and aesthetically as political allegory.

Postcolonial Myths and National Identity

Homi K. Bhabha (1994) argued that myths in postcolonial societies are never simply inherited; they are hybridized, fractured, and re-signified in negotiation with modernity and colonial legacies. In the Indian cinematic context, Ashis Rajadhyaksha (2009) emphasized that mythological themes in cinema often function as “national allegories,” legitimizing state ideologies while also creating cultural cohesion. Benedict Anderson’s (1983) concept of “imagined communities” has also been applied to Indian cinema (Dwyer, 2006), where epic narratives like the *Ramayana* are deployed to forge national identity but often marginalize minority or subaltern perspectives.

Gender and Myth in Cinema

Myths are also crucial to understanding gender representation in Indian cinema. Lalitha Gopalan (2002) observed that heroines are often framed as mythic embodiments of sacrifice, purity, or betrayal, echoing archetypes like Sita and Draupadi. Uma Chakravarti (1993) critiqued how epic retellings frequently reinforce patriarchal roles, yet filmmakers such as Mani Ratnam in *Raavan* experiment with more ambiguous portrayals of female characters like Ragini, complicating the Sita archetype. Scholars like Shohini Ghosh (2010) note that reworking myth from a gendered perspective opens up alternative readings of resistance, especially when tied to caste and class oppression.

Spectatorship and Popular Myth Reception

Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge (1995) highlighted that cinema, particularly myth-based cinema, functions as a “public culture” where audiences actively negotiate meanings. This is particularly significant in South India, where fan cultures often treat actors as mythic figures themselves (Hardgrave, 1973; Dickey, 1993). M.S.S. Pandian (1992) pointed out that M.G. Ramachandran’s star persona merged cinematic myth with political charisma, shaping Dravidian populism. Such studies underline that myths in cinema do not operate in isolation—they are mediated by audience reception, star images, and political mobilization.

Myth, Populism, and Political Cinema

Scholars like Ravi Vasudevan (2010) and Tejaswini Ganti (2012) have examined how cinema in India frequently functions as political commentary, with myth providing a coded language for articulating dissent. Tamil cinema, in particular, is marked by what S.V. Srinivas (2019) terms “political mythmaking,” where films like *Kaala* and *Thalapathi* reframe epic structures to critique state power, corruption, and caste domination. Ranjith’s cinema exemplifies what Geetha (2020) calls “Dalit aesthetics,” turning myth into a site of collective memory and struggle.

Comparative Global Scholarship on Myth in Cinema

Although your study is grounded in Indian cinema, global scholarship provides useful parallels. Northrop Frye (1957) analyzed mythic archetypes in Western literature and drama, showing their persistence in modern art. Joseph Campbell's (1949) *Hero with a Thousand Faces* provided the "monomyth" structure, later applied to Hollywood blockbusters (Vogler, 1992). Scholars like John Izod (2001) linked myths in film to collective psychological needs, while Jack Zipes (2000) examined how myths and fairy tales are repurposed to address social anxieties. These perspectives show that the reinterpretation of myth as political allegory is not unique to India but part of a global cinematic tradition.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine how myth is reframed as political allegory in contemporary Indian cinema. Rather than treating films as isolated texts, the analysis situates them within their socio-political and cultural contexts, exploring how mythological narratives are reinterpreted to address caste and class struggles.

Research Design

The research is designed as a textual and contextual analysis of selected films. Textual analysis focuses on narrative structure, characterisation, dialogue, visual motifs, and symbolic imagery, while contextual analysis links these cinematic elements to broader discourses of caste, class, and power in Indian society.

Film Selection

Three films have been selected as primary case studies: Mani Ratnam's *Thalapathi* (1991) *Raavan* (2010), and Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018).

These films are chosen because they directly engage with mythological frameworks (Mahabharata and Ramayana) while explicitly addressing issues of social inequality, marginalisation, and resistance. Together, they provide a temporal and thematic continuum—from allegorical reinterpretation to radical counter-mythmaking.

Analytical Framework

The study employs **semiotic and cultural analysis**, drawing upon Roland Barthes' (1957) theory of myth as ideological signification, Stuart Hall's (1997) framework of representation and encoding/decoding, and insights from Dalit studies (Shepherd, 2009; Guru, 2011) on counter-myths. This interdisciplinary approach enables a critical reading of myth not simply as narrative, but as a political discourse embedded in cinema.

Data Sources

Primary data consists of close readings of the films, including detailed examination of key scenes, dialogues, and visual aesthetics. Secondary sources include scholarly texts on myth, cinema, and caste studies, as well as published interviews with directors, film reviews, and critical essays. These materials provide insights into both the intended meanings encoded by filmmakers and the wider interpretations generated within academic and popular discourse.

Limitations

The study is limited to selected films in Tamil and Hindi cinema and does not attempt a comprehensive survey of all mythological reinterpretations in Indian film. Audience reception is considered through secondary literature rather than field ethnography. However, the focused scope allows for a deeper, comparative analysis of how myth is mobilised as political allegory in specific cinematic contexts.

Case Studies and Analysis

Thalapathi (1991, Mani Ratnam)

Mani Ratnam's *Thalapathi* reinterprets the *Mahabharata* through the friendship between Karna and Duryodhana, translating the epic's concerns into the language of caste and class. The protagonist Surya (played by Rajinikanth) is born out of wedlock and abandoned as an infant, echoing Karna's illegitimacy. The opening sequence, where the child is left in a box by the river, establishes illegitimacy as a marker of exclusion, resonating with the caste system's tendency to stigmatize individuals by birth rather than merit. As Surya grows up, he finds kinship with Devaraj (Mammootty), who corresponds to Duryodhana. Their brotherhood destabilizes the epic's traditional moral binaries by portraying Devaraj not as a villain, but as a leader of the marginalized.

The political allegory intensifies with the arrival of Arjun, the district collector who represents the state and the dominant order. Here, the film aligns Arjun with the archetypes of Arjuna and Rama—upholders of dharma and law—while Surya and Devaraj embody the moral law of the underclass. The confrontation between them highlights the conflict between state authority and subaltern justice. The climax, where Surya sacrifices his personal desires for loyalty to Devaraj, transforms Karna's tragedy into a dignified resistance to caste and social exclusion. Thus, *Thalapathi* frames myth as an allegory of caste-based legitimacy and the moral worth of those deemed outsiders.

Raavanan (2010, Mani Ratnam) — Tamil Version

Raavanan reimagines the Ramayana from the perspective of Ravana, yet in its Tamil version the Ravana-inspired figure appears as Veera (Vikram), a tribal leader resisting state oppression and land dispossession. In contrast, Dev (Prithviraj), the police officer who embodies the Rama archetype, represents the law, order, and moral authority of the state. At the center of this tension stands Ragini (Aishwarya Rai), who becomes the symbolic Sita, caught between two competing moral worlds. By shifting the narrative focus to Veera, Mani Ratnam destabilizes the epic's binary of good versus evil and raises a more complex question: Who truly embodies justice—the state that wields authority, or the subaltern rebel who defends his people's rights?

The visual language of the film reinforces this political allegory. Veera is depicted through the natural landscape: forests, earth-toned palettes, and fluid bodily movements emphasize his organic bond with land and community. Dev, conversely, is framed within rigid postures, uniforms, and militarized spaces, symbolizing the coercive machinery of the state. One of the most striking moments is Veera's introduction, where the forest reverberates with his presence—not as a monstrous figure, but as charismatic and layered. In this way, *Raavanan* reframes the *Ramayana* not as a fixed tale of morality but as a contested political narrative, highlighting issues of tribal displacement, state violence, and the ongoing struggle for justice.

Kaala (2018, Pa. Ranjith)

Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* offers the most radical counter-myth among the three case studies by explicitly inverting the *Ramayana*. The film's protagonist, Kaala (Rajinikanth), is cast as a Ravana-like figure, dark-skinned and dressed in black, in opposition to the antagonist Hari Dada (Nana Patekar), who resembles Rama through his white attire and association with "purity." Here, the myth is not only retold but reimagined to challenge Brahminical hegemony, turning Ravana into a symbol of Dalit resistance and dignity.

The political allegory in *Kaala* is centered on land. For Kaala and his people, land is not merely property but identity and survival, echoing Ravana's association with Lanka as a homeland. Hari Dada's attempts to seize Dharavi for urban "purification" parallel Rama's conquest of Lanka, but Ranjith reverses the moral valence by making the subaltern hero the defender of justice. Symbolic use of color—black for the marginalized, white for oppressive purity—underscores the ideological conflict. The climax, where Kaala merges with the crowd after his apparent death, signifies the immortality of resistance and reframes Ravana as an enduring presence within collective struggle. In this way, *Kaala* transforms myth into a counter-allegory, reclaiming narrative space for the oppressed and articulating cinema as a vehicle of subaltern empowerment.

Comparative Discussion: Evolving Mythic Allegories in Indian Cinema

The trajectory from *Thalapathi* (1991) to *Raavan* (2010) and finally to *Kaala* (2018) demonstrates a significant evolution in how Indian cinema reinterprets myth to engage with shifting socio-political realities. Each of these films draws upon epic narratives—Mahabharata in *Thalapathi*, Ramayana in *Raavan*, and a combination of mythic/religious imagery in *Kaala*—to question entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and state power.

In *Thalapathi*, Mani Ratnam's retelling of the Karna–Duryodhana friendship locates myth within the underworld of urban poverty. Here, myth is used to humanize marginalized figures and reimagine the villainous archetypes of the epic as morally complex individuals. Karna, recast as Surya (Rajinikanth), becomes a symbol of loyalty, brotherhood, and the moral ambiguities of justice. The film's power lies in its ability to bridge classical myth with the lived struggles of the urban poor, suggesting that myths are not static but living frameworks through which new forms of justice may be imagined.

Nearly two decades later, *Raavan* intensifies this project by shifting the narrative gaze from the epic hero to the demonized Other. By foregrounding Veera (Vikram), Mani Ratnam re-centers the Ramayana around subaltern resistance, highlighting the struggles of tribal communities against displacement and state violence. Unlike *Thalapathi*, which frames its mythic retelling primarily through interpersonal conflict, *Raavan* makes the political dimension explicit: the “demon” is no longer a moral transgressor but a protector of the land and his people. This destabilization of the binary between good and evil reflects an evolving cinematic consciousness that aligns with postcolonial and subaltern critiques of dominant cultural narratives.

Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018) extends this trajectory even further by fusing Rajinikanth's star persona with mythic and religious symbolism. *Kaala*, the leader of Dharavi's oppressed, is visually aligned with dark hues, invoking both the god Yama and Krishna, figures associated with justice, destruction of evil, and protection of the marginalized. Unlike *Thalapathi* or *Raavan*, which rely on epic intertextuality, *Kaala* engages myth as a tool of direct political assertion—challenging Brahmanical dominance and foregrounding Dalit identity. Here, myth is not merely retold but radically reappropriated to dismantle hegemonic versions of history and affirm subaltern agency.

Taken together, these films illustrate a clear evolution: from myth as a humanizing lens for marginalized figures (*Thalapathi*), to myth as a political allegory of subaltern resistance (*Raavan*), to myth as an emancipatory counter-narrative explicitly aligned with caste struggle (*Kaala*). This progression highlights how Indian cinema increasingly mobilizes myth not to preserve cultural hierarchies but to challenge them, transforming ancient narratives into tools of critique and empowerment in contemporary society.

Film	Myth Referenced	Central Allegory	Political Function
Thalapathi (1991, Mani Ratnam)	Mahabharata (Karna–Duryodhana friendship)	Surya (Karna) as an outlaw reimagined with moral complexity; Deva (Duryodhana) as a benevolent underworld leader.	Humanizes the marginalized; questions rigid binaries of hero/villain; explores caste and poverty through epic loyalty and moral ambiguity.
Raavanan / Raavan (2010, Mani Ratnam)	<i>Ramayana</i> (Ravana vs. Rama)	Veera (Ravana) as a tribal leader resisting displacement and state oppression; Dev (Rama) as the coercive state authority.	Re-centers myth around the subaltern; destabilizes the “good vs. evil” binary; foregrounds tribal struggles and critiques state violence.
Kaala (2018, Pa. Ranjith)	Hybrid references: Yama (god of death), Krishna, and dark-as-divine archetypes	Kaala as protector of Dharavi; darkness reinterpreted as dignity, power, and justice.	Explicitly aligns myth with Dalit identity; challenges Brahmanical hegemony; uses counter-myth to assert subaltern political agency.

Analysis and Discussion

The reinterpretation of myth in Indian cinema demonstrates a gradual shift from personalized moral dilemmas to collective political struggles. In *Thalapathi* (1991), Mani Ratnam used the *Mahabharata* to frame questions of friendship, loyalty, and moral ambiguity. Here, the epic functions less as political critique and more as a humanization of outlaw figures situated within the socio-economic margins of caste and poverty. The myth is reimagined to show that even those branded as “anti-social” embody moral codes rooted in epic traditions.

By the time of *Raavanan* (2010), Mani Ratnam pushes mythological allegory into explicitly political terrain. Through the *Ramayana* lens, the film interrogates state violence and tribal displacement, raising the question of who has the moral right to claim “justice.” The shift in focus from personal morality (*Thalapathi*) to collective struggles (*Raavanan*) reflects a growing cinematic engagement with subaltern identities and their resistance to dominant power structures.

This trajectory culminates in *Kaala* (2018), where Pa. Ranjith reclaims myth altogether as a site of counter-hegemonic power. Instead of simply inverting epic binaries, *Kaala* re-signifies darkness as sacred and aligns myth with Dalit identity, challenging Brahmanical hierarchies. Unlike Ratnam’s allegories, which often remain ambivalent, Ranjith employs myth in an assertive, radical manner, transforming it into a tool of political empowerment.

Together, these films demonstrate that myth is not a static narrative but a flexible cultural resource. Its reinterpretation in cinema evolves from humanization (*Thalapathi*), to critique of state authority

(Raavanan), to explicit counter-hegemonic assertion (Kaala). This progression reflects larger shifts in Indian political discourse, particularly around caste, class, and subaltern identities, where cinema becomes a crucial space for reimagining the moral boundaries of justice.

Conclusion

The reinterpretation of myth in contemporary Indian cinema reveals how age-old narratives are never static but continually reshaped to address pressing political and social concerns. Through films like *Thalapathi*, *Raavanan*, and *Kaala*, directors such as Mani Ratnam and Pa. Ranjith demonstrate the evolving power of myth as political allegory. In *Thalapathi* (1991), the *Mahabharata* serves as a moral framework to humanize figures operating on the margins of legality, subtly questioning caste hierarchies and the social construction of justice. Two decades later, *Raavanan* (2010) complicates the binary of good and evil in the *Ramayana*, foregrounding the struggles of tribal communities against displacement and state violence. Finally, in *Kaala* (2018), myth is transformed into an explicitly counter-hegemonic discourse, where darkness and the marginalized are not demonized but re-centered as sacred, reclaiming dignity and agency for Dalit identities.

Taken together, these films illustrate a trajectory in which myth progresses from narrative backdrop, to political critique, and ultimately to radical reclamation. Cinema, therefore, does not merely retell myths but redefines them, making them living cultural resources that speak to caste, class, and subaltern struggles in the present. This study affirms that myth in cinema functions not as a relic of the past but as a dynamic site of ideological contestation, where cultural memory, power, and resistance converge.

Future Research Directions

While this study has examined *Thalapathi*, *Raavanan*, and *Kaala* as case studies of myth as political allegory in Indian cinema, the scope for further research remains vast. One promising direction would be to explore how regional cinemas across India—such as Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, and Bengali—reimagine epics and folk narratives in relation to local struggles of land, gender, caste, and class. For example, the retellings of the *Mahabharata* in Malayalam cinema or tribal myths in Jharkhand-based films may reveal how myth is mobilized differently across cultural and linguistic contexts.

Another avenue is to extend this inquiry beyond mainstream or auteur-driven works to popular masala films, which often embed mythological archetypes in disguised or commercialized forms. Studying these “everyday myths” could uncover how myth operates subtly in shaping popular consciousness about caste, morality, and nationhood.

Additionally, comparative research between Indian cinema and global traditions—such as African or Latin American political films that use myth for anti-colonial resistance—could situate Indian films within a broader framework of postcolonial cultural production. Finally, with the rise of digital and streaming platforms, the adaptation of myths in web series and immersive media (VR/AR narratives,

graphic novels, and digital art) offers fertile ground for understanding how myth evolves in new technological landscapes.

In essence, future scholarship should continue to investigate myth not only as narrative but as a cultural strategy, examining how it is continuously reinterpreted to negotiate identity, power, and resistance in contemporary societies.

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