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Embodied Resistance: Caste, Cinema, and the Politics of Sports in *Bison: Kaalamaadan*

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Abstract: The paper aims to explore the movie *Bison: Kaalamaadan* (2025), by Mari Selvaraj, as an important contribution, a timely cinematic intervention to contemporary Tamil Cinema (Kollywood), engaging with the caste question and subaltern memory. The film challenges the idea of sports (Kabaddi) within a caste-marked social hierarchy, exposing how athletic spaces are shaped by structural inequalities rather than by talent. The protagonist's journey demonstrates how access to participation, visibility, and recognition is shaped by underlying social power relations, conceptualizing the body as a contested space shaped by control and resistance. The paper analyzes how the film's narrative design and symbolic motifs align individual desire within the broader histories of marginalization, challenging hegemonic understandings of progress and success. The paper argues that the film reframes sports as a contested arena where caste hierarchies are negotiated and resisted. The paper highlights wherein the film advances a critique of institutional exclusion while simultaneously rearticulating sporting achievement as a performative assertion of dignity and agency. The paper tries to understand how cinema operates as a critical site for interrogating the intersections of caste, identity, and socio-political struggle within contemporary cultural formations.

Keywords: *Sports Drama, Caste, Resistance, Representation, Social Exclusion*

Introduction

Bison 'Kaalamaadan' is a critically acclaimed sports drama that deals with caste, questioning the rationale behind violence, especially in the Southern parts of Tamil Nadu, crafted by Mari Selvaraj with poignant perfection. Directors like Pa. Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj, and the new wave directors contest traditional mainstream cinema through their art. The mainstream films had legitimized the caste-based hierarchies in society by producing films that reinforce meritocratic success and individuals' (protagonists') heroic achievement. The new wave directors have entered the field of cinema to debunk these individualistic and conventional narrative forms, thereby creating a new discourse addressing the caste question that the mainstream cinema has conveniently ignored. Their films transcend tokenistic representations to expose the material and embodied consequences of the prevailing caste discrimination, producing such powerful visuals and narrative languages that challenge dominant representations. Director Mari Selvaraj earned a distinctive position among the new wave directors through his meticulous engagement with caste in films like *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan*, *Maamanan*, *Vaazhai*, and *Bison: Kaalamaadan*. Mari, in his films, poignantly portrays the violence, rejection, humiliation, and aspirations inscribed upon the bodies of subaltern subjects, exploring the systemic caste-based exclusion while simultaneously becoming sites of resistance and self-assertion. His latest film, *Bison: Kaalamaadan* (2025), which I have taken to analyze in this paper, extends these caste questions and structural exclusion in the field of sports, a domain that had been viewed as a space of merit, discipline, and equal opportunity while simultaneously reflecting the entrenched social hierarchies and inequalities. Although sport is constructed as an egalitarian institution and space for equality and social mobility, transcending the petty differences of caste, class, and religion, the existing narratives emphasize individual merit and achievement, which tends to obscure the social inequalities that govern access to sporting spaces and recognition. However, the engagement of marginalized and oppressed communities in sports remains intertwined with the existing social structures and social inequality that influence access, recognition, and opportunities for advancement. The sporting body operates as both a site of aspiration and regulation, where embodied experiences of caste, mobility, and dignity are negotiated. Thus, locating its narrative within this framework, *Bison: Kaalamaadan* contests the perceived neutrality of sport by demonstrating how caste continues to shape the athletic (oppressed) bodies even in the institutions that claim to uphold meritocracy and equal opportunity. The paper examines the critical space for exploring complex relationships tied to caste, embodiment, and athletic identity in contemporary Indian society. This paper contends that *Bison: Kaalamaadan* reimagines and meditates the sporting body as an embodied archive of caste memory and resistance. The Director is very particular and conscious of not making this film individualistic or a tribute to the real protagonist, Manathi Ganesan, but rather about showcasing the socio-political pressure and climate of South Tamil Nadu in the 1990's. It deals with the feud between Kandasamy and Pandiaraja,

Kandasamy's fight for his pride, and Pandiaraja's fight for survival in a caste-dominated terrain of the southern part of Tamil Nadu. Director Mari is known for his craft and poignant documentation of caste atrocities and discrimination faced by Dalits in the southern part of Tamil Nadu, which were often marginalized or underexplored in the mainstream Tamil cinema. In doing so, Mari creates a new discourse that challenges the dominant narratives and the attitudes of Directors, who tend to glorify caste symbols, rituals, and traditions tied to caste. The film *Bison: Kaalamaadan* departs from the conventional Tamil sports drama that emphasizes perseverance, teamwork, and sports capacity to inspire personal transformation. *Vennila Kabaddi Kuzhu* (2009), *Jeeva* (2014), *Eeti* (2015) are some of the sports films that construct sport chiefly as a means of personal accomplishment and social advancement, while obscuring the hegemonic structural violence of caste that shapes the sporting experiences. In contrast, Mari's *BISON* redefines the conventions of the sports genre by positioning caste as a constitutive framework through which the sporting subject is produced and experienced. Rather than representing sport as a politically neutral arena, the film exposes it as a contested social space where caste hierarchies are reproduced through institutional exclusion and challenges through acts of embodied resistance.

Framing the Discourse: Caste, Contemporary Tamil Cinema, and Sport

The paper argues that the investigation of caste has become pivotal in recent scholarship on Tamil cinematic discourse that critiques the broader social system governed by hegemony and caste. The conventional mainstream cinema that deals with the southern part of Tamil Nadu, such as Tirunelveli, Madurai, and Tuticorin, beautifully captures rurality, class conflict, nationalism, and familial drama, thereby avoiding the question of caste. And in some movies like *Thimiru*, *Devarattam*, and *Sandakozhi*, the caste hierarchy is very evident from the dialogues and actions. Thus, it reinforces the dominant narrative and patriarchal notions of honour through its convenient representation of village life and masculinity. The paper does acknowledge the role of new wave directors like Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj, who created a counterculture that relegates the protagonist's individual journey to the periphery and centralizes the struggles of the broader collective or community. Mari Selvaraj's *Bison: Kaalamaadan* marks a significant departure by locating caste at the centre of the sporting discourse, exposing how athletic participation is shaped by the everyday structural inequalities, institutional exclusion, and the politics of social identity.

Selvaraj Velayutham, in his article contend that Tamil cinema operates as a cultural institution where social identities are constituted and political meanings are negotiated. Rather than serving as passive reflections of society, films operate as cultural sites wherein questions of belonging, identity, and cultural memory are produced, negotiated, and contested. The intervention of directors like Pa. Ranjith & Mari Selvaraj helped critics and scholars reimagine cinema as a space where caste is actively

debated and contested through visual language and narratives. Both of their films document the voices that went unheard, the roles that were stereotyped, and the actions that were misrepresented in mainstream Tamil cinema (Velayutham and Devadas 105). Pa. Ranjith's *Attakathi* and *Madras* completely changed the Tamil cinematic landscape, paving the way for Mari Selvaraj, who occupies a central place in contemporary scholarship on Tamil cinema, is respected there, and is known for his craft in filmmaking and his animal-versus-human metaphors. Consequently, contemporary Tamil cinema has become an important arena for understanding how popular culture reflects and challenges the existing social orders.

Mari Selvaraj's early films, including *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Karnan* (2021), and *Maamanan* (2023), have garnered significant scholarly attention for their exploration of caste as an embodied experience. His film portrays humiliation, anger, violence, memory, and collective resistance while contesting the dominant social apparatus anchored by caste. Through his films, Mari introduces the rooted, rustic tradition of Dalits in southern Tamil Nadu to mainstream cinema. The mainstream Tamil cinema screen and space were occupied by the intermediate-caste identities, traditions, and customs through films such as *Virumandi*, *Chinna Gounder*, *Thevar Magan*, and many more. Mari Selvaraj departs from this tradition by reimagining the rural landscape through the lived experiences of historically marginalized communities. In doing so, he challenges the caste-narratives that have historically shaped the industry's notion of "rural". Mari Selvaraj's reimagining of the rural landscape is further reflected in the film's musical and cultural textures. The song *Engum Pugal Thuvanga* (*Pariyerum Perumal*) highlights the rooted traditions, folk aesthetics, and collective ethos of marginalized communities. Thus, reclaiming cultural practices that have long remained underrepresented in the Mainstream cinematic depictions of the Tamil village. Through such representations, the film expands the meaning of the rural by foregrounding histories, memories, and identities that have often been excluded from dominant narratives. In his Film *Karnan* (2021), the very denial of public transport to the protagonist's village (*Podiyankukam*) becomes a powerful metaphor for structural exclusion, while the police are portrayed not as impartial law enforcers but as agents of a state apparatus shaped by entrenched caste hierarchies reproducing caste violence. This representation marks a significant departure from the mainstream Tamil cinema, where police-centric films such as *Saamy* (2003) and *Singam* (2010) largely celebrate the police as heroic guardians of justice and social order. Thus, his film exposes the complicity of the state apparatus in perpetuating social inequality; in doing so, Mari Selvaraj reorients the cinematic discourse from institutional heroism to institutional critique. In his film *Maamanan* (2023), he examines how electoral democracy and party politics are deeply entrenched in caste hierarchies, exposing the persistence of dominant-caste authority within democratic institutions. The film reveals how caste continues to shape political legitimacy, access to power, and the exercise of authority, thereby critiquing the casteism embedded in the political

establishment. Building upon his critique of caste across rural landscapes, state institutions, and electoral politics, *Bison: Kaalamaadan* (2025) turns to the domain of sports, revealing that athletic institutions are equally implicated in the production and reproduction of caste hierarchies. In doing so, the film reimagines the athlete's body as a political site where exclusion, resistance, and social justice converge. Stuart Hall's theory of representation posits that cultural texts do not passively mirror reality; rather actively produce and circulate meanings that shape social identities and power relations. This perspective provides a useful framework for reading Mari Selvaraj's cinema, which challenges dominant representations of caste by reimagining the village, the state, and the sporting arena as contested sites of exclusion and resistance.

While the existing body of scholarship has considerably expanded the understanding of caste in the contemporary Tamil cinema, the nexus between caste and sport remains underexplored. The critical discourse surrounding Mari Selvaraj's cinema has focused on themes of humiliation, memory, violence, spatial segregation, and Dalit assertion in his early films. The existing studies on his films demonstrate how Mari Selvaraj reconfigures cinematic representation by foregrounding marginalized lives and challenging dominant-caste ideologies through alternative visual and narrative languages. However, the extension of these concerns into the domain of sport has received limited scholarly interventions. Although *Bison: Kaalamaadan* has recently begun to attract academic interest, the available scholarship has largely focused on the film's depiction of resilience, caste-discrimination, and social mobility.

This zoological arc is also an arc of consciousness—from innocence through bondage through awakening to assertion. It maps, in symbolic terms, what B.R. Ambedkar identified as the fundamental political task of the Dalit community: the annihilation of the internalised consciousness of inferiority, and its replacement with a consciousness of dignity, rights, and solidarity. (Marx 2677)

Consequently, there remains limited engagement with how the sporting arena itself becomes a site where caste identities are negotiated, contested, and rearticulated. The intersections of caste, athletic identity, institutional exclusion, and representation, therefore, warrant further critical examination. Positioning itself with these ongoing scholarly conversations, the article explores *Bison: Kaalamaadan* as a significant contribution to contemporary anti-caste Tamil cinema. It contends that Mari Selvaraj extends his critique of caste beyond familiar sites such as education, the village, and electoral politics by locating it within the sphere of sport. Through a representational analysis, the article demonstrates how the film constructs the sporting body as a contested cultural space in which caste, resistance, and social justice are continually negotiated.

Theorizing the Sporting Body: Representation, Caste, and Sport

The present study employs Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of sport, and critical insights from Dalit Studies to examine how *Bison: Kaalamaadan* constructs meanings around caste, sport, and identity. These theoretical perspectives provide a complementary framework for reading the text as a cultural space in which questions of power, identity, social mobility, and belonging are articulated and contested. While Hall's theory facilitates an understanding of how meaning is produced through representational practices, Bourdieu's sociology of sport situates sporting practices within broader structures of social inequality. Dalit Studies further enhances the framework by foregrounding caste as a lived social reality and by attending to the experiences and knowledge of historically marginalized communities. Collectively, these perspectives enable the sporting body to be read beyond its physical dimension, as a social and cultural construct through which broader relations of power are negotiated.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation provides the primary conceptual basis for examining how *Bison: Kaalamaadan* construct meanings around caste and athletic identity. Hall challenges the assumption that representation mirrors an already existing reality. Instead, representation is understood as a process through which meaning is actively produced, organized, and circulated through language, images, signs, and discourse. Cultural texts, therefore, do not merely reproduce social realities but participate in determining how these realities are understood. Representation is consequently inseparable from relations of power, since the ways in which individuals and communities are represented can reinforce dominant understandings or create possibilities for alternative forms of identification. Hall's conceptualization of identity as culturally and historically shaped is primarily relevant to the present article. The sporting identity represented in *Bison: Kaalamaadan* cannot be separated from the protagonist's caste location, social environment, and experience of exclusion. The sporting body acquires more meanings beyond physical ability: it becomes a medium through which questions of caste, dignity, aspiration, recognition, and resistance are articulated. By positioning a marginalized subject at the centre of a sporting narrative, the text interrogates dominant discourses of meritocracy that celebrate individual achievement while obscuring the unequal social conditions through which athletic identities are formed.

Bourdieu's sociology of sport extends Hall's concern with representation by directing attention towards the social structures within which sporting practices take place. Bourdieu challenges the assumption that sport constitutes a neutral field in which success is determined exclusively by talent, discipline, and perseverance. His analysis of cultural practices demonstrates that participation and achievement are influenced by unequal distributions of economic, cultural, and social capital. These forms of capital shape access to resources, institutional networks, training, recognition, and opportunities for social

mobility. Sport, therefore, cannot be detached from the social conditions of those who enter and participate within it. Bourdieu's concept of *Habitus* is equally significant to this reading because it explains how social structures are internalized through everyday dispositions and practices. The body becomes a bearer of social history, carrying the effects of the social conditions within which individuals live and act. This understanding is particularly productive for reading *Bison: Kaalamaadan*, where the sporting body is situated within a social environment marked by unequal access and caste-based hierarchies. Bourdieu's conceptual framework enables the article to question the assumption that sporting institutions automatically provide equal opportunities, thus exposing how structures outside the sporting field may continue to influence participation, recognition, and mobility within it.

The article is further strengthened by the interdisciplinary insights of Dalit Studies, which conceptualizes caste as a lived and embodied structure extending beyond formal institutions into everyday social experience. Dalit Studies has challenged dominant modes of knowledge production by foregrounding the voices, experiences, and intellectual contributions of communities historically positioned at the margins of social and cultural discourse. Sharmila Rege's articulation of a Dalit standpoint is particularly significant in this context, as it emphasizes the epistemic value of lived experience and challenges the tendency to treat marginalized communities merely as objects of scholarly inquiry (Rege). This perspective shifts attention from abstract formulations of caste towards its everyday manifestations via social interactions, institutional practices, exclusion, humiliation, dignity, and resistance. Within the context of *Bison: Kaalamaadan*, this perspective situates the protagonist's sporting journey within the broader structures of caste, moving beyond an individualized understanding of athletic achievement. The pursuit of sporting success is consequently shaped by caste-based conditions that the protagonist negotiates in pursuit of recognition, mobility, and belonging. Dalit Studies thus enables the article to foreground the experimental dimensions of caste that accompany the protagonist's engagement with the sporting field.

The Sporting Body as a Site of Caste and Resistance

In *Bison: Kaalamaadan*, the sporting body emerges as a contested cultural site where caste, affiliation, aspiration, and resistance converge. Kittan's engagement with Kabaddi initially appears to offer a space where athletic ability can secure recognition beyond the limitations of his social location. However, the narrative complicates this possibility by situating his sporting journey within the longstanding feud between Kandasamy and Pandiaraja, thereby lending it particular significance. Their antagonism is not merely interpersonal conflict but is embedded within the caste relations that organize the village community. Kittan's entry into Kandasamy's club consequently acquires a significance that extends beyond the boundaries of the game. Yet, within the caste-conscious social order of the village,

Kittan's presence in the club of an intermediate caste landlord and Pandiaraja's rival is interpreted through existing structures of caste loyalty and belonging.

Kittan's entry into Kandasamy's club, therefore, acquires a significance that extends beyond the boundaries of the game. His association with the club does not originate in a conscious allegiance to Kandasamy or a deliberate rejection of Pandiaraja; rather, it emerges from Kandasamy's recognition of Kittan's exceptional ability in Kabaddi. As an ardent admirer of the sport, Kandasamy identifies Kittan's potential and offers him an opportunity to play for his team, particularly when the village captain and his team remain unwilling to accommodate him. Yet Kittan's movement into Kandasamy's sporting space acquires a different meaning within the caste-conscious social environment of the village. As a Dalit (individual) player entering the team of an intermediate-caste landlord who is positioned as Pandiaraja's rival, his sporting association is interpreted through pre-existing structures of caste allegiance. What begins for Kittan as an opportunity to pursue his passion and develop his athletic potential is consequently transformed by the community into an act of perceived betrayal. His presence within Kandasamy's team thus unsettles the assumed correspondence between caste identity, community affiliation, and sporting allegiance. The social consequences of this association become primarily evident in the manner in which Kittan is labelled a "Traitor" by the senior Kabaddi captain of his village team, who is a devotee of Pandiaraja. The term "Traitor" consequently transforms a sporting affiliation into a moral and collective transgression, Kittan's participation is interpreted not as an individual pursuit of athletic excellence but as a violence of allegiance expected from members of his community. The accusation therefore exposes how caste structures the meanings attached to sporting participation; Kittan's experience demonstrates that these principles cannot be separated from the social identities carried into sporting space. Thus, his body remains subject to the expectations and restrictions imposed by the caste order beyond the game.

The politics of allegiance is further materialized through the tattoos carried by the supporters of Kandasamy and Pandiaraja. The inscription of their names upon the hands or chest of their respective followers transforms the body into a visible marker of collective affiliation. These tattoos function not merely as expressions of individual admiration but as embodied declarations of belonging within a polarized social environment. The body consequently operates as a cultural text that communicates identity before the individual's speech or action, Kittan's body acquires a contrasting significance in such a trifling atmosphere. Although, he does not bear the name of either figure upon his body, his association with Kandasamy emanates a form of social marking around him through which his community (supporters of Pandiaraja) interprets him. The contrast between the tattooed bodies of the villagers and Kittan's athletic body is particularly significant to the representation of identity in the narrative. The tattoos primarily establish allegiance, whereas Kittan becomes marked through meanings attributed to his sporting association and therefore his body inscribed symbolically rather

than physically. Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as culturally and historically constituted is relevant here, since Kittan's identity as an athlete cannot be separated from the social meanings through which his body is interpreted. Within the sporting field, his body signifies athletic ability and potential; within the village, the same body becomes associated with betrayal because of the club for which he plays. The narrative thus exposes the instability of sporting identity when it encounters the social structures of caste.

The consequence of Kittan's perceived transgression extends beyond the sporting field and become embodied within his family through the transformation of his father. As the possibility of violence surrounding Kittan increases, his father begins carrying a knife to safeguard him. The knife becomes a material manifestation of the insecurity generated by Kittan's crossing of caste-coded boundaries. This very incident explains that the consequences of sporting participation are not confined to the individual athlete but extend into domestic and familial life. Kittan's pursuit of Kabaddi consequently becomes a source of both aspiration and vulnerability. His father's transformation reveals an awareness that his son's talent cannot, by itself, protect him from the social structures governing the world into which he seeks to enter as a professional kabaddi player.

The knife may therefore be read as more than an instrument of protection; it signifies the anticipation of violence that accompanies the transgression of caste boundaries. The father's need to remain prepared for possible confrontation illustrates how caste operates not only through visible acts of discrimination but also through fear, insecurity and the anticipation of violence. Kittan's sporting body consequently becomes connected to the protective body of his father, demonstrating how the consequences of caste are distributed across familial relationships. His pursuit of sporting recognition produces effects beyond the Kabaddi field, revealing the extent to which individual aspiration is negotiated within a wider social structure. Kittan's experience also exposes the limitations of the meritocratic promise associated with sport. His exceptional display of Kabaddi is sufficient for Kandasamy to recognize his potential and provide him with an opportunity, but it is insufficient to shield from the caste conflict surrounding that opportunity. Bourdieu's sociology of sport is useful in understanding this contradiction, since sporting participation and recognition remains embedded within broader structures of social power. Kittan's athletic ability provides a form of embodied capital, but its value remains conditioned by the caste-based structures through which recognition is distributed. The narrative challenges the assumption that sporting excellence can transcend structural inequalities by demonstrating that talent itself is interpreted through existing relations of caste and power.

From a Dalit Studies perspective, Kittan's journey reveals caste as a lived and embodied structure that shapes his affiliations, aspirations, and sporting identity. His experience of caste is manifested through the regulation of his affiliations, accusations of disloyalty, threats of violence, and the restrictions

imposed upon his aspirations. At the same time, his continued commitment to Kabaddi introduces an important dimension of resistance. This resistance does not necessarily stem from an explicitly articulated political consciousness; instead, it develops through his determination to pursue his sporting aspirations despite the social consequences attached to them. Kittan's body becomes a site of negotiation between the identity imposed upon him for playing for Kandasamy's club and the identity he attempts to construct through his athletic abilities. Kittan's sporting journey ultimately exposes the tension between athletic talent and the social structures that determine its recognition. His entry into Kandasamy's club is motivated by his passion for Kabaddi and the recognition of his sporting ability; however, the caste-conscious environment transforms this opportunity into an act of perceived betrayal. The conflict between Kandasamy and Pandiaraja, the tattoos displayed by their supporters, the accusations of being a "Traitor" and his father's use of the knife collectively demonstrate that Kittan's sporting body cannot be understood independently, cut off from the caste relations that surround him. The paper argues that *Bison: Kaalamaadan* challenges the conventional understanding of sport as a neutral and meritocratic field of opportunity. Although Kittan's talent enables him to enter the sporting field, it does not shield him from the caste structures that shape the perception of his body, affiliations, and aspirations. The sporting body thus emerges as a contested site where caste, identity, recognition, dignity, and resistance are continuously negotiated.

Sport, Social Mobility, and the Politics of Recognition

The sporting field in *Bison: Kaalamaadan* also opens up a complex relationship between athletic aspiration and the possibility of social mobility. For Kittan, Kabaddi is not merely an activity through which physical ability is demonstrated; it becomes a means through which he examines a future beyond the immediate limitations of his social environment. Kittan's aspiration to pursue Kabaddi professionally invests the sporting body with a significance that extends beyond physical performance. The body becomes a resource through which Kittan seeks visibility, recognition, and the possibility of transforming his social position. In this sense, the film complicates the conventional understanding of sport as a straightforward avenue for individual advancement. While athletic ability may open possibilities for social mobility, the social and caste-based structures within which such ability is recognized continue to determine the extent to which these opportunities can be realized. Kittan's sporting aspiration is particularly significant because it provides an alternative basis for recognition. Within the social environment portrayed in the film, caste remains an important determinant of how individuals are perceived and positioned. Kabaddi, however, introduces another register of value through which Kittan can be acknowledged for his physical ability, discipline, and potential. His body acquires significance within the sporting field not simply because it belongs to a particular social group but because it possesses an athletic capacity that commands attention. This possibility of being recognized through sporting ability is central to Kittan's aspiration to pursue Kabaddi professionally.

His desire for sporting advancement can therefore be read as an attempt to establish an identity through which his abilities, rather than the social identity imposed upon him, becomes the basis of recognition.

Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of capital is useful in examining this process as Kittan's physical ability may be understood as a form of embodying sporting capital that acquires value within the Kabaddi field. His talent makes him visible as a player and creates opportunities through which his potential can be developed. However, possessing athletic ability does not automatically guarantee advancement. Sporting capital acquires value only when it is recognized within institutional and social structures capable of converting potential into opportunity. Kittan's journey therefore reveals a distinction between talent and access: although his physical ability is central to his sporting success, development of his game and skills depends upon opportunities to participate, train, compete, and receive institutional recognition. The film consequently complicates the assumption that sporting achievement is determined exclusively by individual merit. This tension becomes particularly significant in relation to the meritocratic ideal associated with sports. Athletic competition is often imagined as a field in which social differences can be overcome through discipline, perseverance, and talent. However, the film situates Kittan's aspiration within a caste-structured social environment in which such possibilities remain unevenly distributed. His movement through sports does not constitute a simple escape from caste, rather, sports provide a space through which he negotiates the restrictions surrounding his social position. Kittan's athletic ability creates possibilities for mobility, but the realization of those possibilities remains dependent upon the structures through which sporting opportunities and recognition are distributed.

Kittan's progression to the Tamilnadu Kabaddi team marks an important expansion of his athletic trajectory, his recognition is no longer confined to the village sporting environment but begins to acquire institutional significance at a wider level. Kittan's subsequent representation of India at the Asian games in Japan further extends this movement from the local to the international sporting field. This progression marks more than a change in Kittan's sporting career because it expands the social spaces in which his athletic ability can become visible and gain recognition. Kittan's sporting body is initially shaped by local structures of caste affiliation and social recognition. However, his athletic achievement allows that body to acquire broader social significance and opens new possibilities for recognition and social mobility. His decisive victory against Pakistan at the Asian Games intensifies this transformation, when Kittan secures the final point for India which transcends the boundaries of individual accomplishment and becomes an act of national representation. The player whose sporting affiliation had earlier been interpreted through local caste loyalties now performs on behalf of the nation. This contrast reveals the limitations of the social categories through which Kittan's earlier participation in sport had been perceived and evaluated. Kittan's success does not dismantle the caste structures that have shaped his sporting trajectory and continue to influence the ways in which his

identity and abilities are perceived. Rather, it brings into sharper focus the tension between the restrictive local gains through his athletic achievements.

The film further foregrounds this transformation in the terms of recognition through Pandiaraja's response to the criticism surrounding Kittan's sporting trajectory. Thereby redirecting attention from the circumstances of Kittan's entry into the sporting field to the significance of his eventual achievement, altering how his sporting journey is understood and interpreted. Kittan's initial act, perceived as a transgression of local caste allegiance, is gradually reinterpreted in light of his sporting success. Recognition consequently begins to extend beyond the caste-coded framework through which his identity and sporting aspirations were initially assessed. Taken together, these developments demonstrate that *Bison: Kaalamaadan* constructs sport as an ambivalent field of social mobility in which opportunity and structural inequality remain closely intertwined. The sporting field provides Kittan with a means of transforming his athletic ability into wider opportunities and social recognition, while also exposing the unequal social conditions that mediate this process. His movement from the village sporting field to the international arena therefore cannot be understood solely as the outcome of individual merit. It also reflects an ongoing struggle access, legitimacy, and recognition within a caste-stratified social order. In this sense, the film unsettles the conventional narrative of sports as a purely meritocratic pathway to success and foregrounds the complex ways in which Kittan's sporting journey reshapes the meanings attached to his caste, identity, and sense of self.

Representing Resistance: Caste, Identity, and the Sporting Self

The preceding analysis has established the sporting body in *Bison: Kaalamaadan* as a contested site in which caste, social belonging, and athletic aspiration intersect. Kittan's trajectory, however is significant not merely because it culminates in sporting achievement, but because it progressively unsettles the meanings imposed upon his body and identity. His movement from the village sporting field to the larger institutional spaces of Tamil Nadu and Indian sports alters the terms through which he is perceived and recognized. The film consequently constructs sporting identity not as a fixed or self-contained category but as a dynamic cultural formation shaped through the intersecting forces of caste, representation, and aspiration. Kittan's emergence as a sportsperson therefore involves a continual negotiation between the identity assigned to him by the caste order and the identity he comes to inhabit through his athletic practice.

Stuart Hall's conceptualization of identity as culturally and historically constituted provides an important framework for understanding this process. Rather than treating identity as a fixed essence, Hall approaches it as something produced through representation, difference, and historically situated social relations. This framework offers a productive way of understanding Kittan's identity, which is continually shaped by the competing meanings attached to his caste location and sporting body. Within

the village, Kittan initially positioned through an established structure of caste affiliation in which social belonging determines the boundaries of legitimate association. His entry into Kandasamy's club therefore interpreted not in relation to his passion for Kabaddi but through the existing antagonism between Kandasamy and Pandiaraja. The accusation of betrayal directed at Kittan reveals an attempt to contain his identity within a predetermined system of caste allegiance. His body consequently becomes a representational site upon which the village community projects and negotiates meanings of loyalty, transgression, and caste belonging. The film, however, refuses to allow these meanings to remain uncontested. Through Kittan's sustained engagement with Kabaddi, the sporting body acquires meanings that exceed those imposed upon it by local caste order. Physical ability, discipline, perseverance, and sporting intelligence become significant elements through which Kittan is increasingly recognized. This transformation does not imply that his caste identity disappears; rather, it demonstrates the instability of any attempt to reduce his identity to caste affiliation alone. Kittan's sporting self emerges through the tension between the identity I posed upon him and the identity generated through his athletic practice. In this sense, the film represents identity as a process of negotiation rather a predetermined social condition. His body remains situated within the broader history and materiality of caste, while simultaneously becoming a medium through which the meanings associated with that history can be challenged.

The tension becomes particularly pronounced as Kittan's sporting career transcending beyond the village, Kittan's progression to the Tamil Nadu team, subsequently to the Indian national team representing India at the Asian Games in Japan significantly alter the representational field within which his body is situated. The final point through which he secures victory against Pakistan acquires significance beyond the immediate conditions of the game. Kittan's body, which had earlier interpreted within the village through the language of caste allegiance, is now positioned within a national narrative of sporting arena, a representative of the nation. The film stresses the instability of socially produced identities and demonstrates how the meanings attached to the sporting body shift according to the social and institutional context in which it is represented. Pandiaraja's response to the criticism directed towards Kittan further illuminates his transformation. His emphasis on Kittan's eventual sporting success shifts the terms through which his journey is evaluated, moving attention away from the circumstances of his entry into the club and the caste allegiance attached to it. This shift does not erase the caste tensions that have shaped Kittan's experiences within the village. Rather, it exposes the tension between a social order that seeks to define belonging through caste affiliation and a broader sporting field in which athletic achievement enables alternative forms of recognition. Kittan's success therefore challenges the assumption that his caste position should predetermine the boundaries of his identity and social legitimacy. His sporting accomplishment becomes a space through which the identity imposed upon him can be questioned, negotiated and reconstituted. The insights of Dalit

Studies deepen this reading by allowing Kittan's transformation to be understood from the perspective of lived caste experience. Rege's articulation of a Dalit standpoint is particularly significant because it foregrounds the epistemic value of marginalized experience and challenges representational practices that reduce oppressed communities to objects of observation. *Bison: Kaalamaadan* similarly complicates the representation of the Dalit subject by refusing to confine Kittan to the position of the victim. The narrative remains attentive to caste-based exclusion, humiliation, and vulnerability. Nevertheless, it foregrounds his aspiration, athletic ability, perseverance, and agency. His sporting journey thus emerges as a process in which the Dalit subject is represented not merely by experiences of oppression, but also by his capacity to negotiate, challenge, and reshape the social conditions imposed upon him.

Resistance in the film consequently operates through the body as much as through explicit confrontation. Kittan's continued commitment to Kabaddi constitutes a refusal to let caste-coded expectations determine the limits of his aspirations. His resistance is therefore embodied: it is enacted through movement, performance, endurance, and the persistent pursuit of sporting excellence. The Kabaddi field emerges as a space where the boundaries imposed upon Kittan's social identity are continually challenged. Within this context, the sporting body exists neither beyond the structures of caste nor as a subject entirely determined by them. Instead, it becomes a site through which caste is confronted, negotiated, and potentially reconfigured. The film's portrayal of Kittan's sporting journey challenges the conventional understanding of sport as a simple pathway to individual success. His achievements cannot be understood through merit alone, as the conditions under which his ability becomes visible, legitimate, and recognized remain shaped by caste. At the same time, *Bison: Kaalamaadan* does not allow caste to exhaust the possibilities of his identity. Through Kabaddi, Kittan gains visibility, enabling him to negotiate identities beyond those prescribed by his immediate social environment. Kittan's journey does not signify transcendence of caste through individual merit; rather, it reveals how a marginalized subject negotiates recognition within structures that continue to reproduce inequality. His athletic achievement becomes significant precisely because it unsettles the meanings attached to his body while retaining the history from which those meanings emerge. Kittan's sporting self, therefore, becomes an embodied form of resistance through which identity is continually negotiated, contested, and reimagined.

Conclusion

Bison: Kaalamaadan demonstrates that the sporting field cannot be conceived as a socially neutral space in which athletic ability operates independently of caste. Through Kittan's trajectory, the film reveals how the sporting body remains embedded within the material, cultural, and affective structures that regulate belonging, recognition, and social mobility. Although Kabaddi initially appears to offer

Kittan a means of negotiating the restrictions associated with his caste location, his association with Kandasamy's club exposes the persistence of caste affiliations and antagonisms within the sporting sphere itself. Kittan's body consequently becomes a contested site upon which caste, loyalty, aspiration, and athletic identity converge. The interdisciplinary framework adopted in this study further demonstrates that Kittan's sporting self cannot be reduced to a narrative of individual achievement. Stuart Hall's theory of representation illuminates the cultural processes through which Kittan's identity is constructed and reconfigured across different social contexts, while Bourdieu's sociology of sport reveals how *habitus* and forms of capital shape access to sporting opportunities, legitimacy, and recognition. When situated within the critical insights of Dalit Studies, particularly Rege's emphasis on standpoint and lived experience, these perspectives reveal the sporting body as a social and cultural formation in which caste is simultaneously embodied, negotiated, and contested. Kittan's progression from the village sports field to representing Tamil Nadu, and subsequently India, at the Asian Games challenges the constraints imposed on him by the local caste order. His eventual recognition demonstrates the transformative possibilities that sporting achievement can generate, yet the film does not reduce this transformation to a simple triumph of merit over caste. Rather, his success exposes the contradiction between the restrictive structures that attempt to regulate his social belonging and the wider sporting institutions through which his ability receives recognition. The body that is treated as a marker of caste transgression within the village is subsequently positioned as a representative body of the nation.

Ultimately, *Bison: Kaalamaadan* represents Kittan's sporting journey as a process of negotiation rather than escape from caste identity. His achievement does not dissolve the structures that have shaped his experiences; instead, it challenges their authority to determine the limits of his aspiration and recognition. The film consequently reimagines sporting excellence as a form of embodied resistance through which a marginalized subject contests socially prescribed identities and claims alternative forms of visibility and dignity. By positioning caste at the heart of its sporting narrative, *Bison: Kaalamaadan* broadens the representational possibilities of contemporary Tamil cinema, thereby revealing the sporting body as a complex site where caste is inscribed, negotiated, contested, and identity continually reimagined.

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