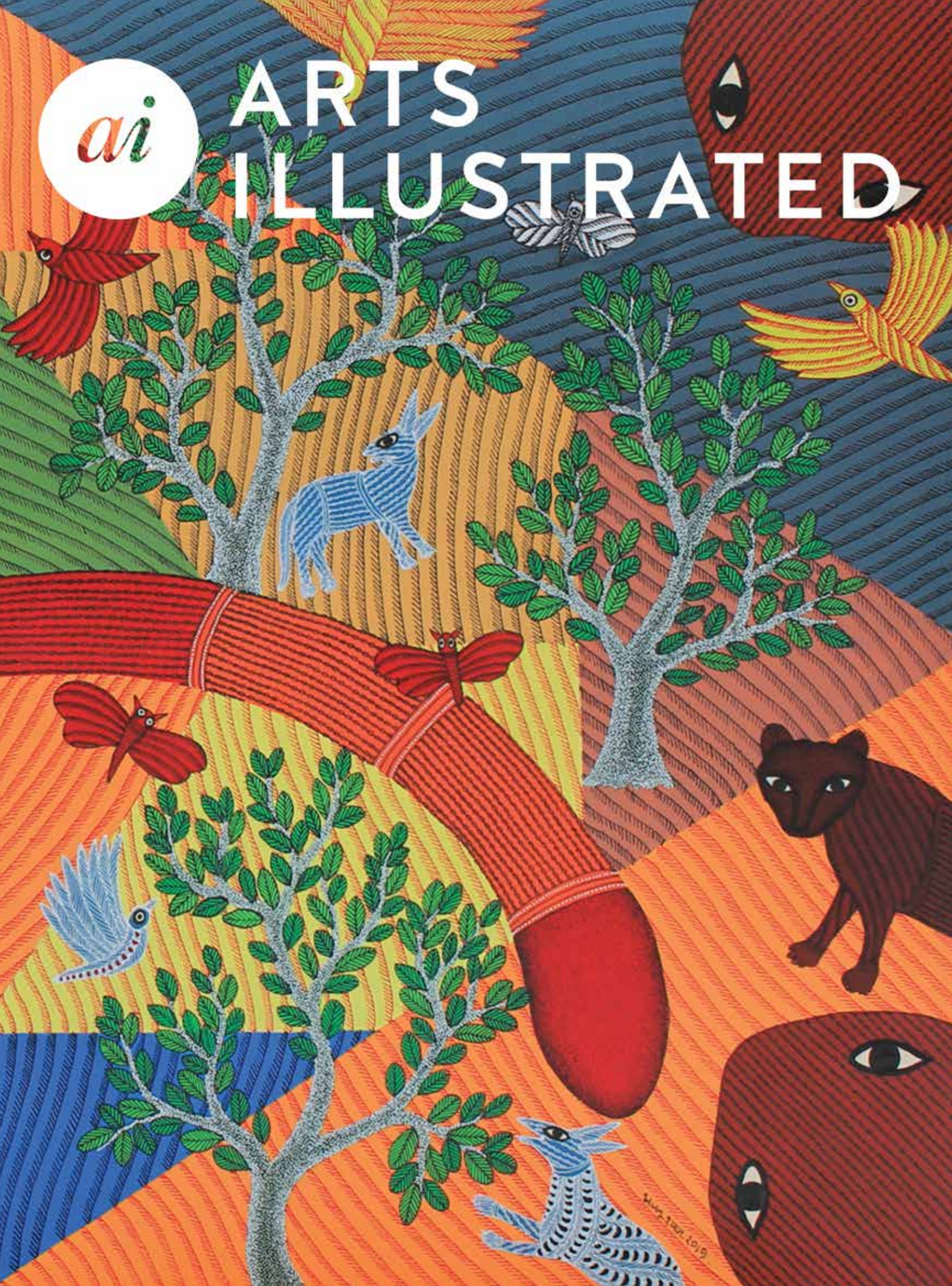




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Publisher's note

After the rains, that unmistakable smell of wet earth – *mann vasanai*, as we say in Tamil – is like an old, weathered hand reaching out from the depths of the earth to meet us. In that gesture of reaching up, it carries with it a deep-rooted sense of knowing. We see that gesture in a young sapling or an ancient tree, and are reminded, time and again, that it is the soil beneath our feet that makes us stand tall.

And, so, our theme this issue is simply that – Soil – with all the images, metaphors and symbolism it carries: the politics of caste, identity and belonging; the artfulness (and earthworm-y quality) of constant restructuring and relevance; the power and influence of privilege and perceived dominance; and even those sensory filaments of memory and nostalgia unconsciously (and consciously) conditioned with dollops of prejudice.

Vincent Adaikalraj



Editor's note

Science textbooks in middle school will tell you about the different layers of soil and the different kinds of soil, and record books will carry intricate drawings with careful pencil shading, and, maybe, if you are lucky, a field trip will happen to understand it all better. And yet, between school and what is now scarily called adulthood, what we understand about the various nuances ingrained in this ground beneath our feet inexplicably floats on the surface like oil in water.

This issue was a revelation in so many ways. Our original vision was to look at ways in which the idea and ideology of soil can be interpreted, but where it took us instead was to examine our own ideas and ideologies; roots buried so deep that it took a lot of spadework to even realise that the premise where we began was flawed; our lens was narrow, our world-view sensitive but not sensitised, and our understanding mostly dust-filled like textbooks and record books in the attic.

For me, this issue and its collection of compelling perspectives were also stories that were filled with hope. Not the kind born out of despair, but one born out of beauty, of the need to create and express and dialogue and build spaces that inform rather than explain by virtue of its existence, like soil itself, delighting more in its presence than in its action, and trusting more in its effect than in the promise of consequence, reacting always to the connections it makes.

Like words.
Colours.
Thoughts.
Ideas.
Expression.

Innumerable and inexhaustible, like non-judgemental, accepting, tolerant grains of sand. Lessons learnt much? Yes. But also, strangely, lessons discarded much.



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With the intention of creating the universe, *Bara Dev* (the Supreme God), floating on a lotus leaf, rubbed the dirt off his body and created a blue crow. He ordered it to fetch some mud. Flying for several days in search of mud, the crow sat on what he thought was an island, but was actually a snake, whose poisonous breath turned the crow black, as we see it today. The crow asked the snake for help in finding mud. The snake directed him to *Kekramal Shatri* (crab warrior).

Kekramal was resting with his head in the sky, body in water and hind legs in the netherworld. He held the crow in his claws and took him to the netherworld, the abode of the *Kenchua* (earthworm) king. Mud was food to the *Kenchua*. So, on hearing about the request, the king swallowed all the mud to save it for his subjects and refused to give any of it to the crow. *Kekramal* squeezed the head of *Kenchua* with his claws to disgorge seven lumps. The squeezing of his neck left a ring that can still be seen on all earthworms. The crow then rolled the mud into three balls, held one in its beak, two in its claws, and took them to *Bara Dev*.

Bara Dev flattened the mud balls across water to form a floating layer of crust. However, *Sutaikeda* (dung

beetle) cracked and crumbled it. In anger, *Bara Dev* tossed the *Sutaikeda* into the water. *Sutaikeda*, along with *Jalharin Mata* (water goddess), emerged from the water and divided the earth into *Khands* (divisions), each invested with its own special qualities. Some full of minerals, some fertile, some with red clay and some filled with sand.

The Great *Khand* was still unstable. To secure it for eternity, the four corners were pinned down by four snakes. On this now-stabilised earth, *Bara Dev* created trees, rivulets and mountains. With the remaining mud, he created man and woman and breathed life into them. Meanwhile, *Jalharin Mata* created *samaya* (time), the moon, and the sun. *Bara Dev* and *Jalharin Mata* beheld with joy the creation of life and disappeared.

For this issue of Arts Illustrated I have depicted The Great *Khand* with 14 divisions. The back cover represents everything below the ground and underwater. The front cover is the *Shrishti* (universe) above ground. The earthworm runs across both, since it is one animal that lives in water, underground and above it. It also links back to the mythological story of the creation of this planet.



Bhajju Shyam

Still from the film **Madras** (2014).



Cinema Q & A

Footprints in the Soil

A compelling interview with Pa. Ranjith,
who changed the language and grammar
of Tamil cinema with his deep-rooted
insights on caste and land politics

SARITHA RAO RAYACHOTI



Still from the film *Attakathi* (2012).

Take a long strip of paper, make a twist at one end, and then seal the edges together. You now have a physical representation of a Möbius strip that has only one surface, on a continuous loop. The curious thing about the strip is that if you cut it lengthwise along its center, past the looped surface, until you reach the beginning of the cut, you are left with one large strip, twice the size of the one you began with.

My conversation with Tamil movie director Pa. Ranjith turned out exactly like a Möbius strip. On the face of it, all his movies have compelling stories in the foreground, but it is the symbolism and the social significance of caste in the background that opens up the larger context to the stories.

Take, for instance, *Attakathi* (2012), a romantic comedy that narrates the tale of an ordinary youth from the suburbs of Chennai whose singular

purpose in life is to fall in love with a girl. You notice, in the visual backdrop, images of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, alluding to the specific colony, and thereby, the caste that the youth belongs to. While *Madras* (2014) is about Kaali who lives in a housing board tenement in Vyasarpadi with his parents, the story gains momentum when his friend falls victim to the politics surrounding a wall – an actual wall – of contention between two political factions. On the face of it, *Kabali* (2016) is about an erstwhile underworld don who sets out to find his wife, while trying to curb the drug trade run by local gangs. But the story is set against the backdrop of the struggle for land rights among Malaysian Tamils. Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018) is as much about the underworld don Kaala and his domain Dharavi in Mumbai as it is about the fate of slum dwellers in the backdrop of the wave of gentrification of Indian cities in the name of development.

Here's where things got interesting. While I had heard about Ranjith's incisive opinions on the subject of caste, it became all the more apparent during our conversation that directing movies is only one expression of his Dalit identity. My carefully prepared questions on the symbolism in Ranjith's movies seem inconsequential in the face of his narration of the larger context of his movies – of how intrinsically land and language are connected to identity. Of how land ownership came to be a symbol of power and, thereby, of oppression. And the caste politics at the heart of language.

Much like the Möbius strip, one of the highlights of a good conversation is that it begins with a set of questions and, in the process of finding answers, it leaves you with a different set of questions from the ones you began with.

Excerpts from the interview (translated from Tamil)

Land is an important aspect of all your movies, whether it is the choice of suburbs as a setting, or the rights of land workers and urban dwellers. How are land and identity interlinked?

Land, today, is not only to live in or cultivate; it has become a symbol of power. The person who owns land is considered powerful. The system determines who can own land, and who cannot. Before the Indian freedom struggle, land, and the power to collect land taxes, was entrusted to the zamindars. That is why zamindars were created – they were not of a different caste – they were from a higher class and became people who collected land tax. Caste was determined by profession, but rights – about who can or can't have land – were determined by the 'sasthiram and suthiram' of the Brahminical system. In effect, on the basis of caste, some were denied land ownership, and land was taken from them. The exploitation was also in the form of exorbitant taxes. The lands of those who were unable to pay were appropriated. Secondly, the zamindar needed someone to work on the land. So he used the same people as slaves. Thus, the zamindar became powerful. This created a rift between the foreign autocrats and the Indian ones. This became the basis of the Indian freedom struggle. This is one layer.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar asked a question – when we refer to the Indian freedom struggle, who are we truly fighting for? The people were already divided. There is no land for people – when India attained Independence, nearly 70% of the people had no land. Thirty per cent of people had captured all the cultivable land. Land, in Indian society today, is about caste. Nearly 60% to 70% of villages are divided by caste. Who will live near temples? Why are Dalits outside the village? A person from an oppressed community cannot buy land in a specific street or in streets near a temple. Then, it means that land can determine who can live near whom. Land evokes a feeling of independence. That is why, from the zamindars to upper caste society, everybody ensured that land was grabbed in a systematic way.

What about urban dwellers?

In this caste-based appropriation, the landless

have been rendered migrants from their villages to the towns. Did the city give them land? The (*odhukkapattavargal*) Ex-Untouchables were brought in by the British Government from the surrounding regions of Tindivanam, Villupuram, Chengalpattu and Vandavasi to create a city like Chennai. From the LIC building to the Ice House, many of the landmarks were built because of them. The infrastructure of the city was created on the blood and efforts of these people. After the city evolved and grew, it is said that the city's cleanliness is being ruined by these same people, and this is used as an excuse to throw them out of the land. The people who have a connection to this city, this land, who created the city, who converted it to a place where people can inhabit, are now being thrown out. So, when there was a need, they were brought into the city, and when not, they are exploited. The life and mindset of the landless people is that of refugees in their own country.



Pa. Ranjith, on the set of *Madras*.

If they owned land, how different would it have been? That's why we must understand and enquire into the mindset of the landless. When we are all part of a system like this, the way to normalise such exploitation exists. That system exploits your soil, your land, your labour. Everything. You cannot question the system.

How does language feature in this equation between land and identity?

There are many differences among languages. When the ruling classes wanted to make Hindi the national language, the Tamil speakers questioned the need to learn another language. Tamil has its own history – it is a 2000-year-old language and this has been

established by research. As Tamils, we have a great sense of pride about it. You can't compare it to a language that's more recent. There is some anger about this. The regional dialects are another aspect of language. These are important in any language. There is the Chennai Tamil from the Northern Tamil Nadu region. Then there is the Kovai dialect (from Kongumandalam or Coimbatore region). Madurai has its own regional dialect. Then there's Tirunelveli. And Kanyakumari. Why is the language of the Brahmins portrayed as a refined language? In literature, it is used extensively – that's because they were the first to write. After that, when it had to be depicted in the performing arts, it was

perceived as a special language. In the same way, why is Madurai Tamil so popular? Because it is important in politics. In M.G. Ramachandran's time, the Thevar community was considered a pillar by him. He gave them a lot of space. Their language became more mainstream. Specifically, Bharathiraja has done important work in the Tamil film industry. The sons of the soil that he introduced, their culture, life, became prominent, and the language attained value.

Through language, we see the significance of caste. In the Kongumandalam region, for instance, the Gounders are the majority community. The language spoken in that region is regarded as their own. Their language has words like – *vaanga*,

poanga, yaenunga, yennaanga – they will speak with a respectful suffix. But the Dalits who work in their fields will not be addressed in the same manner. They are addressed as – *Yaenda, Muniyan!* without the respectful suffix, called by name, using the phrase, 'da' to denote hierarchy. Thus, the language to handle people from oppressed communities is different from the language they speak with those they regard as social equals.

How did the Chennai dialect come to be depicted as inferior in popular culture? And how is this connected to caste and identity?

Whether it is movie directors who came from the community of Gounders from Coimbatore, or from the Madurai region, or from any region for that matter, they have all depicted the Chennai language in their movies as inferior.

In movies, including those by K. Balachander, the Chennai dialect has been depicted as inferior or bawdy for the purpose of comedy, usually featuring Cho, Nagesh, Thengai Srinivasan and Manorama. In *Anandha Vikatan* magazine, from the 1960s to the 1990s, in almost all the cartoon strips, the dacoit or the thief or the bad politician – they are all portrayed as speakers of the Chennai slang. Depicting them as bad, comic or as idiots became a culture. Why?



Because the person making these movies has come from outside Chennai.

If this person from the more dominant communities steps out of a train at one of Chennai's railway stations and hails a porter, ordering him to pick up luggage, the porter will ask point blank what he wants, and speak in the singular (without the respect-suffix). This man will get enraged because in his hometown he holds a position of power – he is a '*modhalali*', a landowner. He thinks, 'Why is a worker speaking to me so disrespectfully?' The people here look similar in skin tone and from a similar economic status as those who worked for him, who would have addressed him with respect. Here, they have the right. In the city, they are not worried, they are fearless, and the dealings are transactional. This, he cannot digest. The scorn he feels towards the person is directed towards his language.

However, lately, there has been change and awareness. Now people are conscious and

exercise some caution about how they depict a community or a language because they will be questioned. We are now able to demand better depiction in popular culture and say that just because I speak this language, you can't depict me as a bad person.

For me, this language is the basis of my confidence. On the basis of my caste and class, if you consider my language lowly, then you are lowly. The time has come, and the necessity has risen, to say that compared to the language you speak, the one I speak is the best.

In all the television programmes I have participated in, I have said this – my Chennai Tamil is the best dialect. It is not restricted to the geographical region of Chennai; its roots are spread between Karaikudi and Krishnagiri. It is a language that everybody speaks.

Images Courtesy of Pa. Ranjith.



Still from the film *Kaala* (2018).



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