



## Examining Hegemony, Ideology, and Class in Mani Ratnam's *Raavanan* (2010)

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Cultures often adopt the good versus evil dichotomy within their narratives of religious texts, aural anecdotes, and cultural mythologies. The *Ramayana* narrates a divine story that transcends time of the battle between the forces of good and evil, between Prince Rama and Ravana. Numerously adapted through time, the *Ramayana* is today told through moving visuals and has been adapted by Mani Ratnam through *Raavanan* (2010). *Raavanan* is adapted to the premise of hero versus villain using the good versus evil premise as Dev Prakash (Rama) searches to rescue his wife Raagini (Sita), who is abducted by Veeraiya (Ravana). The film, however, departs from the *Ramayana* as *Raavanan* is told through the perspective of Veeraiya. In the film, Veeraiya is portrayed as a flawed anti-hero who battles against injustice instead of being the antagonist. He seeks revenge for his sister and stands up against the oppression of his tribe. In this battle, he questions ideological understandings of justice and morality that have been conventionally interpellated within society. This paper discusses how Mani Ratnam, through the film *Raavanan*,

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contests hegemony, ideology, and class differences within modern cinema and society alongside the more significant question surrounding India's sociocultural conditions.

**Keywords:** Ravanaan, Class, Hegemony, Ideology, Mani Ratnam.

## I . Introduction

In 2010, the release of the film *Ravanaan* was met with critical success. Mani Ratnam's film featuring Vikram, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, and Prithviraj Sukumaran was simultaneously released in Tamil, Hindi, and Telegu. *Raavanan* met with critical acclaim and was a box-office success. It made more than US\$8 million at the box office. The film was also screened at the 67<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival, 15<sup>th</sup> Busan International Film Festival, and 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council. This film's success in India and internationally is a testament to the Tamil film industry's development, which has flourished over the past 100 years.

*Raavanan* borrows heavily from the plot of *Ramayana*. Filmmakers from the Tamil film industry commonly do this act. These films revolve around the plot of good versus evil and a quest for justice and vengeance using mythologies. The film begins with the abduction of Raagini by Veeraiya. As he fails to kill her, they slowly develop a mutual affection as they both discover the pasts of one another. Only Veeraiya seems to have a deep secret: his sister's death was caused by the police force. Raagini seems to empathize with him, hence the affection. Veeraiya was most probably affected by her beauty, bravery, and ability to adapt quickly to their tribal lifestyle. Dev, Raagini's husband, a Superintendent of Police, then leads a search to rescue his abducted wife. He also harbors a deeper intention of killing Veeraiya, a leader of a tribal-bandit-resistance movement.

As the plot of the film heavily borrows from *Ramayana*, Rama (Dev) attempts to rescue Sita (Raagini), who was abducted by Raavana (Veeraiya). *Raavanan* presents an alternative reading of the *Ramayana* as Dev is portrayed as the anti-hero. In *Ramayana*, Raavana is the antagonist, but Veeraiya is portrayed otherwise in

the film. He is humanized. This character stands up against injustice. Nonetheless, Raavanan remains the hero who seeks revenge against certain police force members who detained his sister Venilla (Surpanakha) and shot Veeraiya in a botched arrest and assassination attempt made during her wedding. This is in line with the understanding of a hero who reflects the highest goals of a culture embodied in the life and image of a specific individual.

Venilla was raped in police custody and committed suicide upon her release. This incident led to Veeraiya's emergence as a vigilante as he launched his vendetta against Dev and his police force members as he hid within the deep trenches of the jungle. The film questions the age-old dichotomy of those in positions of authority being portrayed as "good characters" versus outlaws who defy the law and positions in authority as "evil." In *Ravaanan*, the lines and notions that separate between good and evil is constantly blurred as Dev, in his role as protector and defender of justice, exploits his position of power in his search to kill Veeraiya, who is an outlaw who defends the weak, poor, and oppressed and is very much loved by his people. This dichotomy of good versus evil is further blurred. It becomes a contest of class when Dev, the police superintendent from the upper class, is supposed to represent goodness or Rama. On the other hand, Veeraiya, the embodiment of evil of Ravana and the lawbreaker, comes from the lower class.

Like Rama, who leads an army of monkeys and bears to search for Sita in *Ramayana*, Dev leads an army of police officers into the jungle searching for Raagini. As the forces led by Dev and Veeraiya engage in a "game of cat-and-mouse," the film's plot also discusses the Naxalite-Maoist conflict with state forces in Central India. Director Mani Ratnam, known for his critical views about Indian politics, formed a parallel discussion about the armed struggles of the Indian Maoists or the Naxalites from the Adivasis tribe against the forces of the State in the film, in which the former had experienced numerous human rights violations, including forceful eviction, displacement, and custodial misdemeanours. As an act of self-defence and preservation of their generational habitat from state-backed capitalist appropriation, the Adivasis armed themselves in defiance of the idea of authority. *Raavanan's* (2010)

cross-parallelism of Ramayana mythology and the Naxal insurgency is an intellectually and ideologically sound viewpoint depicting an alternative perspective to the entire State versus the Naxal debacle. Though the timeline of the conflict between the two parties (state forces are seen as an extension/organ of the capitalist classes) was intense in the late 1960s, the new-age setting in Raavanan (2010) is a revised method of the Fifth Generation Filmmakers of the Chinese in the 1980s to circumvent strict censorship and scrutiny of the State (Havis 2019). For example, Yellow Earth (1984) by Chen Kaige structured a pre-Communist era in which a Communist cadre, representing the party’s vision for a national liberation, entered the rural landscape with vigorous ideas and promises entailed in the Communist party. Nonetheless, the film contained abstract and metaphorical criticisms of the current Communist leadership, whose promises remained unfulfilled and largely rhetorical. Unlike Yellow Earth, Raavanan took the underlying spirit of the Naxal-State to allude the battle between the powerful and the powerless; to expose the polemics, ego, and power imbalance found both in the mythology as well as the current society.

Mani Ratnam also demystifies the idea of democracy due to the oppression of the indigenous tribe Adivasis. They are considered an uncivilized society, ethnic group, and caste. Thus, this paper examines how Mani Ratnam discusses ideas about power and class differences within the context of modern cinema.

Table I: Character parallels in Ramayana and Maniratnam’s *Raavanan*.

<b>Characters in the Mythology</b>	<b>Parallel Characters in the Movie</b>
Raavan (King of Lanka)	Veera (The rebel, tribal leader)
Rama (King of Ayothya)	Dev (Police Officer)
Sita (Wife of Rama)	Raghini (Dev’s wife)
Surpanakha (Sister of Raavan)	Vennila (Veera’s sister)
Vibeeshanan (Younger brother of Raavan)	Sakkarai (Veera’s younger brother)
Hanuman (Disciple of Lord Rama, Commander of the Monkey Army)	Gyanaprakasam (Forest Officer)
Lakshaman (Younger brother of Rama)	Hemanth (Dev’s trusted police aide)

## II. Literature Review

### 1.1. Ravana and the Ramayana

The *Ramayana* is attributed to a bandit-turned-sage written by Valmiki, considered the first poet or "adi-kavi." Hence, the *Ramayana* is the "adi-kavya," or the first poem to be written (Vanamali 2014). Although Valmiki is the initial author of *Ramayana*, the most cited or referred version of *Ramayana* was written by Kamban.

Historical analysis however finds the *Ramayana* to be a work of oral compositions that do not have a single original text or accurate version (Balakrishnan et al. 2020). Scholars have however interpreted the symbolic significance of the *Ramayana* as a representation of human weaknesses and susceptibility leading towards a conflict between the forces of good and evil (Maheshwari and Maheswari 2020). *Ramayana* imbibes the essence of "ethics, responsibility, and obligations of an ideal man in ancient Indian social relations" that constructs a "relationship between Indian art and Hindu ethics" (Diamond 2013; Wedhowerti 2014; Bich Thuy 2019).

The *Ramayana* follows the tale of Rama, a "Maryada Purushottam," or a man who closely follows the rules and religion on his quest against Ravana (Pattanaik 2016). According to Valmiki's version (Pattanaik 2016; Vanamali 2014), the *Ramayana* narrative, in brief, talks about the journey of Rama, an Ayuthian prince who goes on a quest to rescue his beloved wife, Sita. Rama, the eldest son of Dasharata, King of Ayodya, and seventh avatar of Lord Vishnu, becomes the rightful ruler of the Kingdom of Koshala when Dasharata abdicates the throne. While Rama marries Sita, Dasharata, upon abdicating the throne, is tricked by his youngest wife into handing the kingdom to her son Bharata and banishes Rama.

This incident results in Rama, his brother Lakshman, and Sita going into a 14-year exile in the forest. There, a demoness, Surpanakha, tries to seduce Rama. He, however, rejects her advances, and in retaliation, she attacks Sita. This retaliation causes Lakshman to mutilate her to punish her for her lustful desire. Her

brother, Ravana, then abducts Sita to avenge the death of his sister. However, after defeating Ravana, Rama only receives Sita back into his arms after undergoing a trial by fire to prove her chastity, for she was held captive in another man's house. In the sacred Hindu epic of the Ramayana, Sita, Rama's wife, is upheld as the model of an honorable and ideal woman in Indian culture (Ahmed 2015).

The goodness of Rama and the evilness of Ravana are minutely differentiated to the readers. Rama is the "perfect" ideal hero: talented, brave, joyful, honest, and obedient to his father. Meanwhile Ravana is associated with being a "whimsical, lustful demon, defiant and despised morality and Dharma" (justice). The war on Lanka Island is thus depicted as a conflict between Dharma and Adharma (injustice)" (Bich Thuy 2019).

## **2.2. Mani Ratnam and Raavanan**

Since directing his debut Tamil film *Pagal Nilayu* in 1985, Mani Ratnam has been described as one of the new and young talents to reinvigorate Tamil cinema (Velayutham 2008). In 1986, Mani Ratnam directed *Mouna Ragam*, which enjoyed critical box-office success. The common themes discussed within his films are sociocultural and political issues affecting ordinary people at present. His films such as *Roja* (1992) discussed Indian nationalism and complex contemporary issues related to the Kashmir separatist movements.

While discussions about issues deemed "sensitive" are not uncommon in Mani Ratnam's films, neither is his making films based on mythological adaptations. In *Thalapathy* (1991), Mani Ratnam questioned the dichotomy of good and evil in the *Mahabharatha* by developing a theme discussing male friendships and emphasizing the anti-hero character. *Thalapathy* was thus seen as a Mani Ratnam's way of focusing on audience empathy to better understand the roles of misled and misunderstood characters. In other words, the antagonist does not seem to be driven by evil forces but is a victim of circumstances that forces motivates behavior in such a way. Additionally, the antagonist is also standing up for the weak against the protagonist, who is also seemingly

misunderstood and is driven to protect the interests of those in positions of power.

In *Raavanan*, Mani Ratnam revisits the cinematic formula of reassessing the relationship between what constitutes good and evil. Mani Ratnam then adapts mythology into this film by using the *Ramayana*. Based on these structures, *Raavanan* presents a different reading of the *Ramayana* as Mani Ratnam presents the mythological epic from the anti-hero's perspective, Veeraiya. *Raavanan*, like *Thalapathy*, deals with employing the notion of both the protagonist and antagonist believing that the ends justify the means and will do whatever it takes to uphold their sense of justice. Discussion of ideology is significant and cannot be separated from both films. While the film does present its efforts at criticizing social and political injustice as a form of popular cinema, *Raavanan*, like the epic *Ramayana*, preserves existing social order and valorizes the axiological authority, which is the moral and ethical viewpoints within the narrative of the film (Golkusing and Dissanayake 2012). As in the *Ramayana*, at the end of *Raavanan*, the "purity" of Raagini remains unscathed, and order and status quo are restored when Veeraiya is killed for his transgressions. This incident was shown to imply the difficulties and challenges ordinary people face when they confront those in positions of power and authority. On the other hand, Mani Ratnam's films, as a form of popular culture and being a form of commercial enterprise (Lause 1996; Lee 2022), are renowned for their interweaving discussions of socio-political and economic issues. These forms of discussions are also present in *Raavanan*.

### **2.3. The 1967 Uprising Between Peasants, Landowners and the State**

In locating the film's context as a discussion about the Naxalite uprising, the incident in 1967 can be traced to the attempts by Maoist groups to revolt against the peasants due to oppressive working conditions. Small farmers were forced to surrender at least half of their harvest to their landlords or Jotedars (Harnetiaux 2018). Disassociation from new technologies and moneylending at inflated rates forced small farmers into greater poverty. Since the late 1800s, the farmers have been paying taxes to the Zamindars, while the

peasants or subalterns worked the lands owned by the Jotedar in return for a share of crops (Gupta 2007; Pain 2017).

Inspired by Mao Tse Tung's "people's war" in the mid-1900s, the Indian Maoist movement led by the Communist Party of India (CPI) started an armed struggle to free peasants from feudal control (Ramachandran 2011). The eventual removal of the Zamindari rights and the West Bengal communist-led government decree that the peasants and landless be the rightful owners of the land (Gough 1976; Biswas 2020). The peasant unions distributed the land among the peasants, but the Jotedar refused to surrender their lands. This eventually erupted into the armed uprising in Naxalbari in West Bengal when supporters of local landlords assaulted a tribal sharecropper. In retaliation, the members of the tribe attacked the landlords and claimed their lands. The uprising spread to other parts of India.

The Naxalites continue to be regarded as terrorists by the Indian government. With more than 100,000 members located throughout 190 of the 626 districts in India, they are labelled as a security threat (Shah and Jain 2017).

#### **2.4. Class Antagonism**

To Marx and Engels, an individual's relationship to wealth determines social class (Bell and Cleaver 2002). The identification of social class and the subsequent expansion of the capitalist system caused both thinkers to define social class dichotomously (Ismail and Mohd Zuhaili 2012). Anyone exchanging their labour for wages was classified as the proletariat. At the same time, the capitalists or landlords were described as the bourgeois (Ismail and Mohd Zuhaili 2012).

The bourgeoisie class owns and controls the means of production (technology, organizational resources, and equipment needed to produce commodities). At the same time, the proletariats are the labor force exploited to create wealth for the former. The desire to amass wealth by generating profit amongst capitalists with minimal production cost was converse to the interest of the working class [Marx and Engels articulated the constant conflict between the



social classes (bourgeois and proletariat), resulting in societal and economic transition (Ismail and Mohd Zuhaili 2012)].

The labor's role in modern society has undergone a significant transformation due to the nature of employment not being restricted within the confinements of factories versus owners or peasants versus landowners. The layers within the social class have massively evolved into a more diverse and complicated system of society due to the expanding capitalist economy. Simultaneously, the class struggle persists because profit is only achievable through the continuous exploitation of the working class (Marx and Engels 2019).

Hence, the essence of social classes as a product of exploitation brings us to the question posed by Marxists themselves – why the working class is not aware of these exploitations or not driven to participate in overhauling the exploitative capitalist economic system? Neo-Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci critically sought answers to the question.

### III. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Hegemony

The concept of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci is one of the essential radical departures from economic determinism expounded in traditional Marxism (Manojan 2019). Gramsci's trajectory involves the critical introspection on "culture, ideology, social class, and oppression" to comprehend the polemics churned out by capitalism and the society where it is practised (Manojan 2019). His critical view on economism which he termed "vulgar" while working in the Marxist tradition, carved a new path to assess and comprehend the "creative role of the politician and political leadership" in sustaining their political power (Schwarzmantel 2015). Hayward (2018) asserts that hegemony exposes the dominant group's constant striving to coalesce the support of the subordinate groups in society, either by consent or coercion.

Gramsci argued that power could be effectively retained if the ruling group or those who intend to achieve power are mischievous

to capitalize on both tangible and intangible methods that affect the minds and hearts of the masses (Schwarzmantel 2015). Therefore, subordination to the ruling class is achieved and co-opted by feeding fear or a sense of loyalty. In line with Gramsci's Hegemony, Althusser sought answers to a grappling question of people's obedience to the state or a revolt against capitalism fails to take place as envisaged by Marxist theorists (Schwarzmantel 2015; Mambrol 2016).

Seeking answers, Althusser developed the concept of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). These apparatuses analysed by Althusser illustrate the institutions' role in promoting fear and conformity among the masses. At the same time, repressive apparatuses work primarily by coercion tactics that translate into punitive consequences. The ideological apparatuses operate on the premise of morality and conscience by co-opting the masses to acknowledge the power to be rightful and needful for themselves. Thus, the ruling class's power is safely retained in society. The ideologies created by ISAs are attributed to work in subtlety, Althusser opines (Mambrol 2016).

In cinema, Hayward (2018) denotes that the “mainstream or dominant cinema,” under the control of the dominating class, strives to advance a specific set of ideology, rhetoric, or politics to ensure the dominated class would be hesitant to resist the existing structure of governance or hegemony in other words.

### **3.2 Ideology**

Pearson and Simpson (2014) remark that ideology is a system of ideas, opinions or viewpoints. Ideology, by Marx and Engels, is abstract in its context. Marx and Engels discuss how ideologies are helpful to maintain class “divisions” through a faculty of ideas attempting to create meanings of the society but according to the wills and wants of the ruling classes or bourgeois class (Hayward 2018).

Althusser, however, argues that ideology is a real lived experience (Leonardo 2005). Affirming Althusser, Zizek says, "ideology has nothing to do with 'illusion,' with a mistaken, distorted

view of socio-political and cultural life" (Laclau 1997). According to Ahmad (2002) and Ahmad and Lee (2015), ideology contents are real social and cultural situations in a society that imply a thorough understanding of the social world, sometimes as common sense or natural. For instance, the existence of the rich and poor is structured as a given thing that needs no further critical evaluation over the exploitation and distribution of wealth.

Thus, a primary question about ideology is whether it fits into the cinematic terrain and its representation. As cinema does not operate in a vacuum (Hayward 2018) but in a larger political context, cinema is perceived as an ideological apparatus that disseminates ideas, opinions, and messages—just like any other medium. Cinema serves the purpose of bridging the gap between those who want to speak (express) with the masses (targeted audiences) (Hayward 2018). The ideologies can certainly not be limited to a patriarchal, feminist, socialist, capitalist, ethnic supremacist, and minority rights perspectives.

#### IV. Methodology

This paper employs textual analysis to examine power and class differences by discussing the roles of the hero and villain. To achieve this, analysis and discussion of the roles of Dev as Superintendent of Police and Veeraiya as the hunted outlaw need to be analyzed from the perspective of social class. While this paper acknowledges that caste and class are status groups based on Weber's phraseology, castes are perceived as hereditary groups with a fixed ritual status. Social classes are defined in terms of the relations of production. A social class is a category of people with a similar socioeconomic status to other social classes (Ahuja 1999). As such, this paper will not examine caste as it only examines the politics of class in the film.

As a critical methodology of Cultural Studies, textual analysis exhibits qualities of asking the right questions in dissecting the views and ideologies presented and discussed in the film (McKee 2003). Using textual analysis, the researchers will also examine the society

and context in which this film is produced by reading it and providing an educated guess of its textual content.

Since the film is an adaptation of the classic mythology of *Ramayana* (perceived as religious guidance) and happens between the two-opposing group of people (also socially belonging to opposing social classes), the textual analysis makes a necessary parallel analysis with the characterization of the *Ramayana* characters, contradictory to the portrayal of *Raavanan* the filmmaker tries to achieve.

This method essentially draws parallel identification with the epic mythology *Ramayana* and applies the “good vs. evil” dichotomy in the context of the powerful (state apparatus) versus the powerless (tribal people). To achieve this, the researchers would observe and question the elements in the film that create meaning based on the context in which the film is based. This is done so that a better understanding of how *Ravanaan* and the discussion of Dev and Veera and the depiction of good versus evil fit within the larger contexts of the film's social, historical, and cultural settings. When watching the film, the researchers would identify scenes according to the concepts of ideology, hegemony, and class. These scenes would then be analyzed and discussed based on the above concepts to determine how Mani Ratnam discusses ideas about power and class differences within the context of modern cinema through the film *Raavanan*.

## V. Analysis and Discussion

At the film's beginning, Dev arrives in the town as the champion of justice and is tasked with arresting Veeraiya. Veeraiya, who is blamed for causing the ongoing violence, is a beloved figure supported by the villagers. This support can be seen through the many songs and dance routines in which the villagers willingly participate with Veeraiya. Despite knowing that Veeraiya has also committed a crime by kidnapping Raagini, the villagers themselves willingly participate in this kidnapping by aiding Raagini with food, shelter, and company. They openly display their fondness towards

Veeraiya and see him as a hero. They endearingly describe him as humorous, brave, and kind-hearted warrior. These naturally displeases Dev, who places himself on the side of the right and of the law as a police officer and is not recognized in such a positive manner. He has a personal vendetta against Dev, who has wronged him by kidnapping his wife.

Dev and Veeraiya are characters at the complete ends of the spectrum, coming from different backgrounds and social classes. Dev, who holds the Superintendent of Police or SP's rank, not only belongs to the upper classes that occupy a position of power and authority. He is also seen as an educated, cultured individual who has risen so high up the echelons of society that he seems out of touch with the common folk's sufferings and distresses. As the police force functions as a repressive state apparatus, Dev, as the SP, can be understood as a leading member of the bourgeoisie class, suppressing, and controlling the lower classes' ideological and mental output. He also represents the figure of power and authority. He has the police force's might under his command and is highly respected and feared by the officers under his command.

One such example occurs when the forest ranger (the character representing Hanuman) makes a complete fool of the police officers, who initially question his duties and responsibilities when they arrive at the forest entrance. Presumably drunk and under the influence of alcohol, he refuses to cooperate with them, does not answer their questions, and makes them chase him around foolishly. However, he immediately behaves himself upon meeting Dev (or Rama) and respectfully addresses him as superior, according to his rank, and is obliged to his request.

Veeraiya, on the other hand, is seen as the people's hero who lives, eats, and socializes with the masses. He originates from a rural village of native Adivasis tribes located on the outskirts of the town. In this village, he is seen as their protector or the working-class hero, as he is also the leader of this tribe. Veeraiya is also a well-respected figure who commands the respect of the villagers. However, he is a member of the working class or proletariat, loved and endeared but is not feared.

This film's conflict arises when Veeraiya and his brothers question the ruling class's legitimacy and authority. In an act of defiance, they decide to claim their right to their land and run their village according to their administrative system without adhering to the central State's law. This defiance was seen as an attempt to challenge the ruling class's hegemony and an anarchical act to overthrow a legitimate government's power in power. This defiance reflects the 1967 struggle of the Naxalites, who possessed a different ideological viewpoint from the central Indian government. The Naxalites, who supported communism and the working classes, eventually challenged their land ownership rights and called for their governance rights. In both instances of the film and actual events, the denial of the government's legitimate rule is a form of social emancipation termed by Marx as the proletariat's dictatorship. This is when political power ceases to the bourgeoisie but is in the hands of the proletariat.

To reclaim their sense of authority and restore power, the state utilizes the repressive state apparatuses through the rule of law and police force. In the Naxalite uprising, the police force was mobilized to quell the uprising and restore order. This situation of regaining power and legitimacy by force is also present in the film through the excessive usage of police resources in the search for Raagini and to rescue her from her captors. This search and rescue operation and the excessive use of police resources could be read as an overt attempt at rescuing a prominent member of the police force's wife. It could also be read as an act of oppression and intimidation of the elite classes over the working classes. In this case, they were deploying the repressive state apparatus to quash the uprising led by Veeraiya and the leaders of his village tribe under the guise of rescuing the kidnapped Raagini. These acts were carried out to legitimize the central government's rule and uphold its ideological values.

To further discuss class differences in *Raavanam*, it would be necessary to discuss the characters' portrayal and the color of costumes for Dev and Veeraiya. Veeraiya is seen standing over a cliff in the opening scene as he contemplates jumping into the water below. As the camera circles around him from a low angle, Veeraiya

is dressed in white and placed in authority. This incident would be the only time he dresses in white before transitioning into darker or black clothing. This moment could be seen as a transitional moment as Veeraiya goes on his quest to murder the presumably corrupt police officers, kidnaps Raagini, and leaves behind his old life. He dives and submerges into the water to carry out an act of cleansing of his past deeds. However, he emerges in black clothing, reinforcing that black or dark clothing does not necessarily symbolize negativity or evil. Veeraiya then emerges shortly before the opening credits and stands at the bow of a boat. He remains unshaven and is now dressed entirely in black to symbolize that he has turned over to the dark side and has transitioned into a shadowy figure. Raagini, too fixates her attention upon him and is transfixed by his presence, even though the boat she is currently on would be colliding head-on with the boat that Veeraiya is standing in. Here, Veeraiya is introduced as a monstrous figure. This rabble-rouser has broken the law and is on the run from the authorities.

After the opening credits, Dev is introduced to the audience. He is shown fully dressed in his police attire. He is overseeing an investigation of the police officers who were burnt alive. His uniform is of bright colour, is clean and well-pressed. He also keeps a clean appearance; his face is cleanly shaved. He is also shown in an authoritative position as the shot is constantly at a low angle. In another scene during the film's opening, he is again shown as an authoritative figure. As the police convoy's journey to rescue Raagini is halted at a barrier upon entering the forest, they are greeted by the forest guard, who lies on the barrier. He refuses to allow them entry and is presumably intoxicated. An open bottle of clear liquid is seen beside him. He mocks the police officers by makes them chase him around. He, however, comes to a complete stop as he realizes that Dev has been standing behind him. After allowing Dev to confiscate his weapon, the forest guard respectfully greets Dev with, "...Good morning, sir, SP sir...". This introduction of Dev portrays him as the hero. This authoritative and chivalrous figure is on the righteous side of the law and on the mission of rescuing his kidnapped wife and bringing justice to her kidnappers.

As the film continues, questions about the morality of both Dev and Veeraiya begin to emerge. Who is the real protagonist: Dev, the superintendent of police or Veeraiya, the outlaw on the run? Who is Rama and who is Ravana? Veeraiya constantly eludes capture. Dev begins to feel a sense of frustration not for his failure to rescue Raagini but for his inability to capture Veeraiya. He begins to be morally conflicted, questions his motives, and descends into a confusion. In his search for Veeraiya, he ignores fellow police officers' pleas to send the brother-in-law of Veeraiya to the hospital after Veeraiya had amputated his arm for failing to protect his sister when the police ambushed the wedding scene. Instead, Dev tortures him to extract information about where Veeraiya and his fellow members are hiding.

The groom, who belongs to the upper caste and a high-class society, is Vennila's love. Veeraiya gifted a watch to the groom as a respectful gesture that welcomes a new family member. Nevertheless, during the wedding ceremony, the police force led by Dev ambushed and fired a shot at Veeraiya, who was severely injured. Due to his injury, he was brought to safety by his compatriots. Instead of protecting Vennila, the groom ran from the wedding, fearing his safety and upon his parents' insistence. Vennila was thus left unprotected and subjected to harassment and detention by the police. Disappointed with the groom's dishonesty that caused his sister to kill herself after being raped by some police officers, Veeraiya would later amputate his brother-in-law's arm. As he does that, Veeraiya says, "the watch I gifted is here, but my sister is not." This act symbolizes the display of material possessions valued by certain upper classes and castes who value material possessions over love, humanity, and care. The fact that the watch was still being worn affirms this. The amputation of the arm wearing the watch could be interpreted as a punitive act on the higher class and upper caste community whose promises are insincere and how Veeraiya disconnects himself entirely from the class system.

In another instance, when Veeraiya's brother seeks for Dev to send a message of peace, Dev hunts him down in the jungle and shoots him in cold blood despite guaranteeing Veeraiya's brother that they were to meet peacefully. He is ultimately portrayed as a



frustrated individual who began as someone who was respected and ended up as someone highly feared. He appears to be a man belonging to the upper classes and detached from the rest. This act of “backstabbing” (as Veeraiya's brother was shot from behind) was indicated earlier with Dev poking the faces of Veeraiya and his confidantes with a cigarette butt from the back of the picture published in a newspaper. This was yet another visual hint communicating the mischievous acts Dev would employ to terminate the rebels.

Despite his questionable morality as an outlaw and rebel, Veeraiya is often shown as a misunderstood character. The audience eventually sympathizes with his cause as he could not bring himself to murder Raagini on numerous occasions. Instead, he is often shown easily blend in with his fellow villagers and is not seen as a villain. In one such instance, he playfully teases and flirts with Raagini as he proposes to stay behind with him in the village. He is seen playing with the children in the water as they cheerfully sing along while spinning around on floats. This scene depicts to the audience the human side of Veeraiya, as he eventually starts to open to Raagini about his painful past and why he chose to exact revenge upon Dev and the police officers involved in his sister's death. Eventually, it is revealed that Dev was a silent bystander who chose not to do anything to prevent Veeraiya's sister from being raped at the police station. Towards the film's end, Veeraiya is revealed as a feared villain into an individual looking for a sense of justice. It was denied to him because of his social standing. He is a man that the peers of his class embrace.

As the leader of the Adivasis tribe Veeraiya, leads his people to take up arms and stand up against any form of oppression and threats. Their resistance against the ruling elite causes them to go underground to fight a guerrilla war against the police force. In retaliation, the police force, as the State's apparatus, is mobilized to suppress this rebellion. This situation faced by the Adivasis reflects the Naxalite uprising as a class exploited and oppressed for many years by the upper classes.

In leading the police force, Dev mentions in the early part of

the film that "for half of the people, Veeraiya is a God, the other half are merely afraid to stand against him, but in the eyes of the law, he is a terrorist, lawbreaker, and extremist." However, the hunt for Veeraiya becomes a form of persecution of the upper class onto the lower classes. The line between right and wrong and personal and professional becomes further blurred when Dev exclaims that he was brought to the town with the unique mission of destroying Veeraiya. At the same time, efforts at rescuing Raagini are pushed to the side.

Another example of class difference occurs when Veeraiya and Raagini appears in a Lord Vishnu deity's backdrop in the sea. Veeraiya describes himself and his community as an "oppressed" class in this scene. Later in the film, he makes the statement, "is this the first time they are trying to scare us? They raised their hand, we raised too, took the stick, we did too, but today, they are using guns, so we shall crush their head." This statement appeared later in the film when the confrontation between Veeraiya and Dev reaches its climax. Dev's police force is closing down Veeraiya's trails. Veeraiya had to abide by his younger brother's request to negotiate with Dev. Nevertheless, the Veeraiya's dialogue states his oppression and his desire to stand up against oppressors.

In the same scene, Veeraiya makes Raagini admit that she sees him as flawless and handsome, almost god-like. However, at this point, she no longer sees him as her captor, has developed feelings for him, and refuses to acknowledge his request. However, she rejects his advances. This rejection is likely due to the need to remain loyal to her husband and, faithful to the plot of *Ramayana*. The rejection is probably due to their caste and class differences. His appearances were not compatible with the ideals of a Brahmin caste but the lower castes. The black-colored Vishnu statue in the film is probably an attempt to negotiate the false consciousness among believers. Though Vishnu is always described as naturally dark in mythologies, his statues are often portrayed in the dark blue, whereas demons (asuras) are either conveniently brown or black (Pattanaik 2009). This is believed to have developed from the North-South divide of India, where fair-skinned Indians are commonly associated with the Northernmost region. At the same

time, darker skin tone people are considered Southern Indians (Mishra 2015).

The statue of Vishnu is also black and seemingly is portrayed as the god not belonging to the upper classes. In Hinduism, white is often seen as representing purity, helpful, goodness and "communicating help from any obstruction" and described as an attribute to the caste of priests (Brahmins). On the other hand, a dark tone is consistent with "shades of refusal" or the outright opposite of white (Kudrya-Marais & Olalere 2022).

This meaning of colors associated with what is represented by white and black is once again questioned in the scene where Dev battles with Veeraiya. As they find themselves fighting on a collapsing suspension bridge that is also on fire, Dev is seen dressed in white and Veeraiya in black. During the fight, Dev does his best to make Veeraiya fall under the bridge and into the valley below. In one such instance, Dev slips, but Veeraiya allows him to hang on to his shirt collar and allows Dev to bring himself back to safety. However, when Veeraiya slips, he is not offered the same help by Dev, who stares and taunts him. Veeraiya instead swings himself back safely onto the bridge and runs to safety when the bridge eventually collapses. Both men's actions inspire questions: Does Dev, dressed in white, still represent goodness and purity? Moreover, how does Veeraiya, dressed in black, represent the opposite of goodness when his actions show otherwise?

## VI. Conclusion

The film has placed forth questions about the notion of righteousness in its discussion about ideology, hegemony, and class. In borrowing from the *Ramayana*, the filmmaker demystifies the notions of good and evil according to its continuous shifts in meaning based on contexts. The methods of Dev, the police superintendent, as protector of the weak and upholder of the law, was portrayed instead as an oppressor in his mission of protecting the needs of the upper classes. On the other hand, Veeraiya, the proletariat outlaw wanted by the police for his cause against

injustice, was the misunderstood fugitive who stood by his people in championing the rights of the natives. In this displacement, the filmmaker also questioned ongoing class differences, equal rights, and injustice that continue to divide societies in contemporary India. His questions about the rule of law that champions the needs of the few over the many remain relevant in contemporary cinema and today's society.

Despite taking bold steps in reversing the conventional understandings of what represents goodness and evil and highlighting the oppression of the Adivasis in *Ravaanan*, Mani Ratnam's killing of Veeraiya at the end of the film puts forth new dilemmas. Firstly, the killing of Veeraiya could be seen as the filmmaker supporting the conventional understanding of good triumphing over evil, despite the good using questionable methods to achieve its motives. Secondly, the death of Veeraiya in the hands of Dev could be read as a means of supporting and justifying police actions. In other words, the Adivasis, as the proletariat, must be punished for their transgressions against the bourgeoisie. Ultimately, for a state of new equilibrium and hegemony to be restored, any form of uprising by the lower classes must be destroyed. Thirdly, despite the film attempting to be critical of the sociocultural and political situation caused by class differences, the triumph of Dev in not only winning back his wife but in killing off his opponent shows that the film itself is a commercial enterprise aimed at profit gaining and not produced as a means of creating social change.

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