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Article

The Symbolic Role of Cars in Contemporary Tamil Cinema: Reflecting Middle-Class Aspirations and Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

In movies, cars are often used as symbols of a character's social and economic status. This is especially true in middle-class societies, where owning a car is often viewed as a symbol of upward mobility and social status. Characters equipped with expensive or luxurious vehicles are often portrayed as successful or financially well-off. This behavior is reflective of understandings or notions associated with status and wealth. Cultural and Regional Context: Content from a Tamil film, like any regional film, will be imbued with specific cultural and regional traditions. The cars depicted on screen may reflect the preferences of consumers from the middle-class segment of the population in Tamil Nadu. The use of physical space and local environment will have an impact on how the cars operate within a more complicated narrative structure. This will offer opportunity to analyze cars (I.e. automobility) in Tamil film released in 2023 by examining Soppana Sundari (April. 2023), Lucky Man (Sep 2023) and Parking (Dec 2023) released in that time frame, including an analysis of the context and positioning of the car and introducing an analysis that described how main themes, symbols and representations of the car relate to the socio-economic history of Tamil Nadu's middle-class society. Unlike analyzing films, this approach looks beyond the text. It considers critical reviews of the films, as well as interviews with the filmmakers, as part of its considerations and motivations, allowing for an understanding of the extent to which filmmakers are influenced by their personal preferences.

KEYWORDS: Middle-Class, Cars, Soppana Sundari, Parking, Lucky man, Socio-economic



FULL PAPER

Introduction

Cinema has long utilized vehicles as more than mere means of transportation; they often serve as powerful symbols that reflect characters' social status, identity, and emotional journeys. Across global film traditions, vehicles such as cars, motorcycles, and bicycles frequently appear as metaphors for freedom, aspiration, power, or vulnerability (Osella 989). A seminal example is Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), where the stolen bicycle is not just a means of livelihood but a symbol of economic survival and dignity in post-war Italy. The loss and desperate search for the bicycle encapsulate broader themes of poverty, social marginalization, and human resilience, making the vehicle central to the film's emotional and social narrative (Fonseka 13).

In Indian cinema, particularly Tamil cinema, vehicles have been similarly charged with symbolic meaning that resonates deeply with audiences. Tamil films frequently portray vehicles as symbols of middle-class aspiration, modernity, and social advancement (Jayapalan 22). The 2007 film *Polladhavan* is a notable example, where the protagonist's motorcycle represents more than just a mode of transport; it is a symbol of freedom, pride, and youthful identity. The taking of the motorcycle sets in motion a dramatic revelation of personal struggle and social conflict, illustrating how vehicles in Tamil cinema serve as agents of interrogation of issues of honor, struggle, and survival within a rapidly urbanizing landscape. (Hebber 57).

Continuing this cinematic lineage, the Tamil films *Soppana Sundari*, *Lucky Man*, and *Parking*, released in 2023, further represent vehicles in their narratives as glossed metaphors for middle-class dreams and struggles. Both films represent middle-class realities in Tamil Nadu, using cars to signify the prospects of upward social mobility as well as the pressures cars impose on personal and social relationships. In depicting vehicles in such detail, these films enable vehicles to symbolize more than mere objects; instead, cars serve as rhetorical narrative devices for examining social awareness and tensions related to identity, status, and value in contemporary Tamil society.

Vehicles as Markers of Socio-Economic Identity

In film stories, cars often transcend their utility value and become powerful symbols of their characters' social and economic status. This symbolic meaning is especially salient in middle-class contexts, where a car is not simply a means of transportation. However, it denotes security, success, and upward mobility that is visible, tactile, and distinctly different from the makeshift options (Gartman 4). Cars in Tamil films, which are predominantly steeped in the culture of Tamil Nadu, are interspersed throughout the narratives as representations of personal dreams and

collective social desires. Cars represent the desire to rise above one's economically constrained social location and pursue a higher social class, as expressed in lived experience by those who experience it.

In Tamil cinema, the formal exponents of cars are not merely representations of wealth; they are also symbols of status. They represent the mental and emotional challenges of striving for economic advancement amidst competing social identities (Blake 32). For characters representing the middle class, car ownership is often a marker of coming of age, entering a configuration of greater class respect, capital exchange, and socialization in (and as) the burgeoning middle class (Virdi 22). However, it is also a site of tension, where the pursuit of material gains leads to conflicts, morals, and social anxieties. Tamil screen versions capture the complexity of cars representing aspirations and challenges; approbation and circumstance manifest the hopes and anxieties of a classed existence.

Most narratives grapple with the way cars mediate social relations, conveying pride, identity, or even estrangement. The cinematic discourse on vehicles is multifaceted; as a site of engagement, Tamil cinema responds to the overarching socio-economic changes evident across Tamil Nadu, utilizing cars as cinematic devices to reflect the aspirations, contradictions, and beliefs that characterize current lived conditions (Arunkumar 15). Thus, cars in Tamil cinema emerge as more than props; they are narrative devices that illuminate the intersection of economic progress, social mobility, and cultural identity.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the recurring themes and symbolism of cars in Tamil films released in 2023.
2. To explore how these depictions align with the socio-economic realities of the middle-class populace in Tamil Nadu.
3. To understand filmmakers' intentions and creative choices regarding the portrayal of cars.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, employing a Qualitative research **methodology** that focuses on film analysis, supplemented by critical reviews and interviews.

Film Textual Analysis

A Close reading and thematic analysis of three selected Tamil films released in 2023 — *Soppana Sundari*, *Lucky Man*, and *Parking* — will be conducted. This involves examining narrative structures, visual motifs, dialogues, and character interactions to

uncover recurring themes and symbolism associated with cars. This method helps to understand how vehicles are positioned within the storylines and what socio-economic meanings they convey (Panin 20).

Contextual Socio-Economic Analysis

The film analyses will be situated within the broader socio-economic context of Tamil Nadu's middle-class society. Secondary data, such as census reports, economic studies, and sociological literature on middle-class identity in Tamil Nadu, will be reviewed. This enables the research to map cinematic representations onto real-life economic conditions and cultural values (Rajesh 3232).

Interviews with Filmmakers and Critics

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with directors, writers, and film critics who are involved with or familiar with these films, where possible (Ray 70). These conversations aim to explore creative intentions, decision-making processes, and perspectives on the socio-cultural symbolism of cars. Such qualitative data provides insider insights into the filmmakers' creative choices (Nandy 57).

Film Summaries and Car Symbolism

Cars as Symbols of Hope and Conflict in *Soppana Sundari* (April 2023)



Fig 1: Soppana Sundari Movie Poster

In *Soppana Sundari*, a car serves as the central plot device, symbolizing both aspiration and chaos. The story revolves around a middle-class family's unexpected acquisition of a luxury car through a contest. The car's arrival disrupts the family's routine, leading to comedic yet poignant conflicts about ownership, societal perception, and class identity. The vehicle becomes a representation of their desire for upward mobility and the societal pressure to maintain a certain appearance. However, the film also critiques this obsession, illustrating how material possessions can strain familial relationships.

In *Soppana Sundari*, the car at the center of the narrative functions as a complex symbol of familial hope and economic leverage within a lower-middle-class setting. The titular car becomes a highly sought-after object that symbolizes stability and social

equity, sparking tensions as multiple characters vie for ownership of it. These negotiations parallel broader societal tensions regarding material instability and the meanings attributed to material objects in Tamil middle-class homes (Ravi, 2023). The film effectively utilizes the car as a vehicle (pun intended) to explore themes of desire, greed, and ambiguity, illustrating how cars can serve as a site for social and familial power dynamics.

The Fragility of Middle-Class Status in *Lucky Man* (September 2023)



Fig 2: Lucky Man Movie Poster

In *Lucky Man*, the protagonist, a man from a small town whose success is defined by that of the city, has a car as a status symbol. The purchase of a second-hand car gives him the confidence and acceptance to settle in urban areas. The film explores how cars often take on an emotional significance (the car as a second identity) for middle-class observers when they connect it to their identity markers. Particularly, he tries to maintain and improve the car, reminding us all of our desire to improve our circumstances.

In *Lucky Man*, the car serves as a vehicle for both good and bad luck, which connects the two pathways in the social class trajectory that the protagonist is traveling. The car initially represents newfound pride and upward mobility for the protagonist, Murugan. However, losing that car represents a downward spiral in his fate. This can validate how middle-class status ground is very lateral and precarious when associated with material ownership, as in *Lucky Man*. This narrative arc of losing and regaining his car plots scenarios for middle-class dignity and stability in Tamil society today, where vehicles are for families as much as they are for individuals, becoming both economic and emotional anchors (Subramanian, 2023).

Cars and Spatial Conflicts in Urban Tamil Nadu: Insights from *Parking* (December 2023)



Fig 3: Parking Movie poster

In *Parking*, the car acts as a representative of territoriality and survival in the context of urban, middle-class living. The story arc of the plot focuses on apartment residents being challenged to find Parking, representing the larger issues of urban congestion and social conflict. The car is displaced from being a driver of status to driving intense drama about competition, space, and priorities in a middle-class landscape.

The film *Parking* opens up a new frame by creating a drama, sparked by the purchase of a new car, out of an everyday, but intense, conflict about a parking space. The conflict represents something bigger in the social contestations of pride, entitlement, and, ultimately, territoriality within urban middle-class living. The story illustrates that the car, which may be perceived as a status symbol, also serves as a precipitating factor in ego battles and entrenchment in social hierarchies within the confines of congested urban spaces. The film highlights how vehicles can spark conflicts over everyday social interactions that reflect urban anxieties about space and belonging in society (Kumar, 2023).

Themes and Symbolism

Cars as Aspirational Icons

Throughout *Soppana Sundari*, *Lucky Man*, and *Parking*, cars are depicted as aspirational entities representing the ambitions and desires of Tamil Nadu's middle class. In a given socio-cultural moment, car ownership is more than simply a utility, operational efficiency, or personal convenience; it is emblematic of personal mobility, financial success, and social self-worth. For many middle-class families in Tamil Nadu, obtaining a car marks a significant milestone, signifying economic security and integration into a larger social space governed by economic conditions that collectively define what it means to be successful at the individual, family, household, and social collective levels.

The cars in these films are rhetorical devices linking social mobility aspirations by the character's social class in ways, which resonates with the reality of middle-class

consumers who tend to pursue the social goal of attaining a range of objectives related to their material aspirations (car ownership often coincides with having a roof over your head, options for your children's education, and a general relaxation to their living conditions). In the Tamil cultural imaginary, the connection between cars and advancement is deeply rooted, where acquiring a car is not just a routine matter but is strongly associated with work and often thought of as a payoff or visible proof of one's success in overcoming significant economic challenges (Vasudevan 93).

In *Soppana Sundari*, the car is a valuable asset that brings optimism to the family and represents hope and upward progress amidst uncertainty and financial fragility. Similarly, *Lucky Man* portrays the car as a tangible manifestation of good fortune and respectability - merely possessing the vehicle represents a significant enhancement in the social capital of the protagonist. At the same time, *Parking* uses the car as a symbol of recognition, and as a contested commodity that reveals competing middle-class desires and the pursuit of legitimacy when social praise in a resource-constrained urban environment is limited.

By weaving cars into their storylines as objects of desire and achievement, these films resonate deeply with audiences who recognize and relate to these socio-economic dynamics (Swamy 91). The cinematic portrayal of cars as aspirational icons thus reflects and reinforces broader cultural narratives about success, progress, and the markers that define middle-class identity in Tamil Nadu.

Materialism vs. Relationships

While cars in *Soppana Sundari*, *Lucky Man*, and *Parking* symbolize aspiration and status, these films also offer a critical examination of the materialism that such possessions can engender, often at the cost of personal and familial relationships. Particularly in *Soppana Sundari*, the family's intense preoccupation with the car, a symbol of financial success and social leverage, becomes a source of deep internal conflict. The narrative exposes how the pursuit and protection of material wealth, embodied in the prized vehicle, disrupts familial harmony and trust. This fixation on the car triggers greed, suspicion, and competition among family members, revealing the fragility of relationships when overshadowed by the desire to possess and control valuable assets.

The film poignantly critiques how excessively materialistic middle-class aspirations can corrode the foundational bonds of love and mutual respect within families. The car, initially a symbol of hope and progress, gradually transforms into a catalyst for division, illustrating the emotional and ethical costs of equating identity and worth solely with material possessions. This tension reflects a broader societal critique pertinent to Tamil Nadu's evolving middle class, where consumerism and

status symbols are increasingly influencing social interactions and personal priorities (Osella 300).

Similarly, *Lucky Man* and *Parking* depict how an obsession with material success, manifested through cars, can alienate characters from their social and emotional networks. In *Lucky Man*, the loss of the car precipitates a crisis that fractures the protagonist's relationships, underscoring the vulnerability that arises when material assets become central to one's identity. *Parking* uses the dispute over a parking space to highlight how property and possessions can inflame ego clashes and social alienation, even among neighbors.

Together, these films warn against the dangers of materialism, which shows that while cars represent upward mobility and success, over-focusing on material things can also undermine the very relationships that are fundamental to social welfare. Therefore, these plots enable important commentary on the delicate balance between an economic orientation and relationship-based values in Tamil middle-class life.

Urbanization and Space

Parking uniquely foregrounds the issues of urbanization faced within Tamil Nadu's burgeoning middle class, using the innocuous topic of car parking as a dramatic metaphor for the larger socio-spatial dilemmas of urban life. In cities experiencing rapid urbanization, where population density and the number of vehicles continue to increase, the scarcity of physical space is increasingly visible. The parking struggle in the film captures many public, social, and subjective frustrations and tensions that arise in urban areas when private property bumps into public need under conditions of spatial constraint.

The tension between Eshwar, a new car owner, and his landlord exposes the way urban development compounds competition over more than just commodities, but also the space in which urban forms are created. There was a shared notion of competition for 'space-ness', revealing the politics of location where the middle-class individuals and families are hungry not just for commodities, but also for place-ness in a contested socio-economic field. As such, the car is a symbol of upward mobility that also mediates further disputes over urban spatial relations.

Parking also disrupts the fragile social tranquility that exists in densely populated environments. What starts as a petty dispute over a parking spot turns into a self-perpetuating cycle of distrust, retaliation, and legal action. This dynamic is a manifestation of the tensions that urban presence can manifest between people, and a familiar commentary on how urbanization can rupture ties between community members and diminish social bonds. The film's representation resonates with the everyday experiences of many urban Tamil middle-class residents, for whom finding

space for a car, a house, or an economic source cannot be disentangled from questions of identity, status, and the condition of belonging.

By positioning the automobile as the subject of the spatial and social tensions, *Parking* provides more than just nuanced commentary about how urbanization transforms not only physical spaces but also emotional and social landscapes for Tamil middle-class residents. It evidences the paradox of urban conditions, and that increased economic viability and material accumulation race against increased competition for space and social value.

Cultural and Regional Context

To comprehend the portrayal of cars in the 2023 Tamil films *Soppana Sundari*, *Lucky Man*, and *Parking*, these representations must be situated in the cultural specificities of middle-class residents in Tamil Nadu. The images of car ownership reflect the local cultural context, as individual, family, and collective middle-class identity and aspirations in Tamil Nadu continue to develop alongside market norms of consumer culture. The film's context of cars as status symbols reflects the ongoing and growing cultural context of consumer culture in Tamil Nadu, where cars serve practical uses but are also viewed as a reflection of the consumer culture, where vehicle ownership reflects personal achievement and social standing. The consumer culture of Tamil Nadu regarding vehicles is rooted in economic growth, urbanization, and the overall availability of financing options for vehicles, which has changed the experience of achieving vehicle ownership for many middle-class families.

In addition to the authenticity lent by the vehicles as status symbols, the films also utilize specific car models and brands that would have had contextual relevance to middle-class viewers in Tamil Nadu. The types of vehicles predominantly shown in these films are compact, functional, attainable, and mass-market vehicles purchased used from local dealers (e.g., Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai, Tata), not only correspond to actual vehicles favored by middle-class individuals in Tamil Nadu, but they also symbolize to the viewer the context of desirable vehicle ownership. This attention to detail not only grounds the narratives in recognizable realities but also signals filmmakers' sensitivity to regional tastes and socio-economic contexts.

Additionally, the films incorporate local landscapes and urban spaces to highlight the characters' deep connection to these environments. Whether it is the busy roads of Chennai, the overly narrow streets of suburban neighborhoods, or the socially diverse suburbs with their branching roads, these locations serve as spaces that reflect the characters' social aspects in the context of their realities. These urban/suburban places reflect the lived experiences of Tamil Nadu's middle class, who inhabit spaces that are both crowded with social class and their local urban environment. Experiences

of the temporal and spatial within locations of class distinctions and navigating hierarchical social scales are evident in these suburban areas.

The settings' spatial and cultural particularity enable rich socio-economic narratives to emerge, communicating the realities of local life while also showing how place and culture mediate the particular meanings of cars, and, by extension, mobility. The combination of culturally specific consumer symbols and local settings allows for stories that resonate strongly for local audiences that frame the idea of aspiration to move up the socio-economic ladder, while recognizing the complex realities of middle-class life in Tamil Nadu, where cars are both real symbols of importance and potentially less-than-complex status objects in their own right.

Filmmakers' Perspectives

Interviews with the directors of *Soppana Sundari*, *Lucky Man*, and *Parking* suggest a conscious and deliberate effort to include cars as central story objects. The filmmakers demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of how cars functioned as meaningful symbols for Tamil Nadu's middle-class audience; in their professional lives, they have become intricately entangled with the meanings cars have for people's greater social and emotional worlds. We see cars emerge as much more than rational, material objects; cars operate in inherently complex ways. They understood the cars in their films not only as aspirational and progressive literal objects, but also as potential sources of tension and conflict within families and communities.

For example, the director of *Soppana Sundari* explained that he used the car to explore both hope and vulnerability, illustrating how economic aspirations could either bring families together or tear them apart, depending on the characters' values. In *Lucky Man*, the director explores how the car symbolizes a sense of flux for the main character, highlighting the uncertainty of middle-class stability in the current context. The directors see the car as a tangible indication of success. However, it is also a tenuous asset capable of unleashing individual and social turmoil when it is lost or put in jeopardy.

The *Park* director talked about how the decision to focus on the struggle over a parking spot was inspired by real urban conflicts visible in rapidly urbanizing cities in Tamil Nadu. In this sense, the car is an extension of the self, an indicator of status, and, ultimately, a source of conflict that exposes the pressures of the stressed-out urban middle class in negotiating space, status, and relationships. Throughout the interviews, a strong sentiment recurs: that cars occupy a central place in Tamil middle-class cultural imagination, and the filmmakers had a duty to present the hope of progress alongside the danger of materialism and competition.

By foregrounding these perspectives, the filmmakers have made it clear their intention to engage with viewers and audiences through recognizable symbols that

foster empathy and reflection. Most importantly, the filmmakers' artistic decisions to situate mobility as a site of conflict and resolution provide a way to understand the possibilities of middle-class existence. Cars became a flexible narrative form able to express the hopes, anxieties, and contradictions of contemporary Tamil society.

Conclusion

The representation of automobiles in Tamil cinema of 2023 underscores their symbolic significance as a reflection of middle-class aspirations and social dynamics. *Soppana Sundari*, *Lucky Man*, and *Parking* illustrate how contemporary Tamil films utilize cars in a multifaceted manner that captures the intricacies of middle-class life. In all of these films, cars convey aspirations, anxieties, and tensions that reflect the structural social and economic realities of Tamil Nadu. Tamil cinema continues to employ the conspicuous use of cars as a symbolic mechanism to provide commentary on its society's cultural and economic environment. Additionally, these portrayals address both a local audience and serve as commentary on the changing socio-economic landscape of Tamil Nadu. Future studies could provide additional insights into how these narratives shape attitudes towards consumers and potentially contribute to the economic growth of Tamil Nadu.

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