Body As Infrastructure: Spatial Retooling and Insurgent Citizenship in VELAIKKARAN and Vada Chennai

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ABSTRACT:
Recent cinematic shifts in the new wave era have facilitated North Chennai films in moving away from the 'rooted stereotypes' of the past, re-spatialising them through the lens of insurgent realism. Filmmakers like Pa. Ranjith and Vetrimaaran transformed North Chennai from a site of uncertainties into a sovereign geography by replacing 'violence as spectacle' with 'violence as means of survival' . Here, the physical body does not merely inflict force rather it endures, labours, and asserts presence within a landscape that the state has attempted to erase. This is deeply rooted in what Jay terms 'scopic regimes', in which power and ideology dictate who is seen and how, thereby functioning as a platform for the formation of urban identities (Mitchell, 2003). In this paper, I argue that in the absence of state agency and functional infrastructure, the subaltern body serves as a somatic substitution, refiguring North Chennai from a site of slow violence into one of communal empowerment.

Keywords: Velaikkaran; Infrastructure; somatic feudalism

Introduction:

Historically, Tamil cinema has looked into North Chennai through a pathological gaze, positioning the region as an urban, violent ghetto that necessitates a protagonist from the South, to intervene and cleanse the space of the inherent rowdyism (Damodaran, 2020). While the neo-nativity films of the 1970s pastoralised the countryside and vilified the city as a metaphor for social decay (Damodaran; Sundar), the cinema of the post-liberalisation era (2000s - 2010s) initiated a representational shift. Films such as Dhill (2001), Thirumalai (2003), Ghilli (2004), Thirupaachi (2005) and Sivakasi (2005) juxtapose modern Chennai, offering freedom and economic mobility, against the peripheral ghettos of the North, which are segregated and require financial and moral improvement. In these narratives, the North is often depicted as filled with shady characters and dangerous spaces, making it a breeding ground for rowdyism where the hero lands to prove his masculinity. Consequently, North Chennai was reduced to a spectacle of danger, serving as a moral and physical hurdle for the 'modern' hero to overcome, thereby further legitimising its status as a site in need of external intervention.

However, a steady decline of the "mass hero" prototype in the 2010s signalled a pivotal transition in Tamil cinema, as the Tamil New

Wave turned towards dysfunctional, schizophrenic, and rustic heroes who were interested in micro-narratives of resistance rather than monolithic socio-political causes (Hariharan, 2013). Rather than romanticising the city, they focused on the complexities of urban existence. Films like "Chennai 600028" (2007), "Angadi Theru" (Market Street 2010), "Marina" (2012), and "Kaaka Muttai" (Crows Eggs 2015) did not just depict the city, they performed spatial excavation showing the harsh realities faced by the city's residents, particularly those who are marginalized by economic, social, cultural, and gender-related factors. Within this framework, the protagonist is reimagined as an organic, vulnerable figure operating in moral 'grey' areas and using the subaltern body as a primary site of agency to articulate communal pride and contest systemic injustice.

Through the analysis of Vada Chennai (2018) and Velaikaran, I examine how specific spatial actants, such as the 'community centre' and the 'radio station', interact with the subaltern body to transform the forgotten neighbourhood into a site of insurgent sovereignty. While both the selected films are set in North Chennai, they are chosen for their distinct characterisation of the subaltern identity. In Vada Chennai, Anbu and Rajan's bodies function as a spatial jurisprudence, enacting a ' right to the city' where the state's agency works to displace the residents. Whereas in Velaikaran, the labouring body of Arivu fights the failed systemic justice of the state against urbanism. When Anbu (Vada Chennai) assert sovereignty within the local neighbourhood, Arivu (Velaikaran) embodies a transborder subjectivity, navigating the binary between the industrial North and the corporate South. Ultimately, these films suggest that when the environment is weaponised against the subaltern, the body itself becomes the primary insurgent infrastructure of resistance.

Vetrimaaran's Vada Chennai follows the story of a carrom player, Anbu (Dhanush), who navigates from a somatic subjugation to territorial sovereignty after getting entangled in a gang war between Guna and Senthil, two local gangsters. Initially, Anbu's body is commodified through a pledge of loyalty to Guna, as he helps Anbu in escaping the state punishment for killing Jawa Palani. It functions as a form of somatic debt, which necessitates Anbu's entry into prison with the motive to kill Senthil. However, after an unsuccessful attempt, Anbu rejects this 'somatic feudalism' and desires to return to 'normalcy' by teaching carrom. This represents the somatic substitution, in which the subaltern body performs the state's traditional duties by providing education, social security, and employment pathways. Later, when the state attempted to displace the people for road construction, the individual agency of the subaltern body evolved into a collective 'territorial defence'. In doing so, the subaltern replaces the failed government with an embodied form of community infrastructure and protection.

In Mohan Raja's Velaikaran (2019), the subaltern agency evolves from localised survivors to transborder systemic disruption. The protagonist, Arivu, navigates from the slums of the north to the neoliberal corporate offices of the south. Thereby, he functions as a somatic auditor bridging the gap between the 'metabolic sink' of production and the 'scopus regime' of consumption. Arivu establishes a community radio station and successfully uses it to unite the labourers from the slum against the local gangster and, later, the corporate industry that was intentionally producing adulterated, toxic food products. The radio station functions as a communicative infrastructure, bypassing the corporate-controlled media to mobilise the subaltern collective. The collective mobilisation of the labouring body against the 'unethical' practices of the corporate world demonstrates that the subaltern body is an essential yet invisible infrastructure of the global south, capable of inducing a metabolic shutdown of the predatory world.

The contemporary studies have revealed that the establishment of North Chennai as a spatially distinct, masculine, and homogeneous violent urban ghetto has turned the neighbourhood into a dangerous space in need of rescue. It can be argued that the choice to set gangster films in

North Chennai, with plotlines featuring two rival gangs fighting for power in the locality, dark, violent crime scenes, and characters engaging in illicit activities, is part of the attempt to create the stereotype. Yet I argue that the subaltern body within these spaces should not always be read through the lens of criminality but also as a site of insurgent somatic agency. By positioning the body as the victim of the state's structural violence, the research attempts to uncover how the subaltern body emerges as the very infrastructure of urban resistance.

North and South: An Overview

To understand the insurgent agency in the select films, it is essential first to understand the asymmetrical urbanism that necessitates such resistance. The establishment of Fort St George by the East India Company in 1639 spatialized a racial binary of Whitetown and Blacktown, materialising the structural logic of colonial hierarchies. This spatial ordering legitimised a systemic infrastructural withdrawal from subaltern peripheries that continues to define the city's topography in the post-colonial era (Nield, 1979). While Whitetown was curated through institutionalised infrastructure, including underground piped water, advanced sewage and drainage systems, Blacktown was relegated to a state of planned precarity. Consequently, the colonial state constructed a discourse that framed the narrow streets and traditional courtyard houses of Indian merchants, artisans and other unskilled workers as sites of filth and disease, effectively peripherizing the subaltern as chaotic and congested. As colonial trade flourished, the elite British migrated farther south into suburban areas which attracted municipal investments, thereby, spatializing their class privilege. This transition made Blacktown the city's dense commercial centre, starved of residential infrastructure, creating an urban paradox: the North as an economic engine of the city while being discursively and physically removed as a site of civic life. This colonial blueprint of a sophisticated South and a neglected North became the foundational framework for post-colonial modern Chennai, effectively marginalising the North as a dumping ground for industrial externalities.

Following the colonial pattern, the global capital brought in by the liberalisation of the 1990s, instrumentalised North Chennai as a metabolic sink to fuel the 'global city' aspiration of the South. Specially, the transformation of the Ennore-Manali industrial belt into a dumping ground for petrochemical and power waste, and the discharge of high-temperature effluents from the North Chennai Thermal Power Plant into the Kosasthaliyar River, has decimated marine life. This does not merely represent environmental degradation but materialises as a form of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) against the subaltern ecology, effectively dispossessing the fishing communities of their traditional livelihoods. Conversely, the residential areas of the colonial period were rebuilt into a high-tech, technological, and luxury corridor, privileged by state policies that concentrated institutional growth in education, healthcare, and luxury services. As MSS Pandian notes, the south was curated for global consumption while the north was functionally relegated to the status of neglected backyard. This asymmetrical urbanism ensures that the 'New India' of the South remains isolated from the industrial externalities it generates in the North, which further widening the gap between the 'Global' and the 'Subaltern' city. Consequently, the lack of investment in urban development in the North manifested by showing characteristics of a "forgotten" neighbourhood in dire need of intervention (Saharan et al. 2017, 281). (Raman, 2018). This physical 'peripheralization' is mirrored in the cultural sphere as well, where filmic representations have historically made the North invisible or stigmatized. These representations tainted the identity of Dalit and fishing communities, reducing a complex labouring class to a monolith of criminality (Damodaran and Gorrige, 2020). By treating North Chennai as a spatial palimpsest of the colonial and postcolonial eras, contemporary filmmakers attempt to 'de-layer' it. They reclaim its narrative sovereignty over representation and challenge the decade of systemic neglect.

As discussed, the steady decline of the 'megastar' or 'post-Dravidian' cinematic formula (Gopalkrishnan, 2019) facilitated an aesthetic shift towards a 'New Wave' that rendered the marginalised visible. While films set in Madurai, including Kadhal, Veyil, Paruthiveeran, and Subramaniapuram, depicted rural marginal life, North Chennai emerged as the modern 'urban other' to the rustic Madurai imaginary (Krishnan, 2008). The films set in North Chennai focused on the complexities of urban existence at the intersection of space and subalternity. Films such as "Madras" (2014), "Irudhi Suttru" (Final Round 2016), and "Maanagaram" (Metropolis 2017) reflect the dynamism of society. Still, it also inadvertently comments on the societal structures and the types of individuals they engender (Shadian, 1977). This depicts a departure from the Robinhood archetype seen in iconic Bombay-centric gangster narratives like Nayagan and Baasha, to morally compromised gangsters driven to crime by North Chennai's socio-economic conditions.

Central to this reclamation is the shift from a voyeuristic, criminalised gaze towards an insurgent aesthetics of resistance. Panchapalusan (2014) argues that films like Madras bypass the traditional criminalisation of the subaltern and offer a holistic image in which micro-narratives of hip-hop, football and carrom signify cultural sovereignty. In this framework, the setting is not a background but a 'spatial actant' (Vasudevan, 2017) that dictates the characters' emotions, actions, and fates. Here, the community's sense of place functions as a critical lens through which the tension between dominant neoliberal ideologies and localised ethics is articulated (Lakshman and Suresh, 2017). Analysing the subaltern landscape, Joyner and Kumar contend that neoliberal visuals frame poverty in North Chennai as structural violence, a framing that the protagonist reclaims through resistance. By doing so, they reposition the subaltern body as an active agent capable of reclaiming a weaponised landscape through persistent somatic and spatial resistance.

While existing scholarship identifies symbolic resistance in North Chennai-based films, this study expands the scope to argue that the spatial actants do not merely represent resistance but also function as infrastructure. It fights against the state that has systematically withdrawn from the subaltern landscape leading to slow violence. The study employs a qualitative interdisciplinary approach, integrating textual analysis with Urban Political Ecology and Somatic Sociology. The objective of the study is to decode how the subaltern body is cinematically constructed as a replacement for failed urban infrastructure.

Analysis

Dalit and working class bodies have been treated as disposable infrastructure that is expected to bear dirt, danger and death, thereby rendering them vulnerable to state exploitation. In Tamil cinema, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the 'state' was largely portrayed as an embodiment of Dravidian ideology, committed to anti-brahminism and linguistic-cultural reformation. However, in the post-liberalization era, cinematic narratives increasingly depicted the state as diminished of their traditional roles to serve private capital (Pepper, 2016) thereby, failing the marginalized community while protecting the powerful (Joynes and Vijay Kumar, 2025). In the absence of traditional infrastructure, Simone argues that people's bodies, movements, skills, and social relations step in to do the work of the infrastructure. In Indian context, caste, class and urbanism determine which bodies are used, worn down, replaced and not mourned when they fail. These bodies become sites of adjustment and survival, labouring towards mobility and circulation through trust, care and kinship. The body, therefore, absorbs what Nixon terms "slow violence", which occurs gradually out of sight. It is an alternational violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all (Nixon, 2011) as it is a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, Yet, in Vada Chennai and Velaikaran, the subaltern body is not merely absorbing violence or infrastructural neglect. Instead, these films stage moments where the body occupies space, retools informal infrastructures, converts survival mechanisms into political instruments that confronts the state and capital directly. So the body is no longer what

the system consumes; it becomes what the system must confront.

Spatial Reclamation:

Contemporary Urbanization produces a "double process" (Bayat, 2019) of economic reality integrated into the global economy creating both wealth and opportunity as well as social exclusion, marginalization and informalization for the urban working class. Vada Chennai and Velaikkaran, radically reconceptualizes subaltern narratives of urban exclusion by reframing marginal spaces not as a dystopian failure but reclaiming it as sites of belonging. Historically, Tamil cinema has portrayed North Chennai as a "spatially distinct urban ghetto" (Damodaran, 2021) that is masculine, violent and homogeneous, where the experiences of the marginalised communities are ignored as individual failure rather than structural failure. Yet, these contemporary 'new wave' films reclaim the oppressed urban spaces and challenge the neoliberal portrayals through historical memory, anti-eviction struggle and self-governance. These three dimensions establish a dialectical relationship that constitutes Holston's "contributor right" (2019) and Lefebvre's "oeuvre" (1996), forming the fundamental logic of subaltern spatial reclamation. In Velaikkaran, Arivu challenges the territorial stigma by highlighting the historical origin of "Kolaikkara Kuppam" (Murderer's Settlement) as "Cooliekara Kuppam" (Worker's settlement) created during the colonial period to accommodate the labour force that physically constructed the city. Thereby generating an alternative narrative of the kuppam repositioning the slum dwellers from "illegal encroachers" to historical builders of the metropolis. Also, this reclamation is aurally and physically performed in the open track "Karuthavanlaam Galeejam", which points out to the systemic exclusion of the labour force that made the city from the formal legal border. By mobilizing on the collective historical, Velaikkaran materializes the marginalized landscape into sites of pride and historical consciousness creating an alternative understanding of the space. Vada Chennai elaborates on the spatial reclamation through territorial defence and communal autonomy. While, the film establishes the 'ooru' as the protagonist's 'hood strongly suggesting the sense of belonging, the spatial reclamation is reinforced through another interrelated dimension, collective organization (Dekel, 2020). The state's authority within the 'ooru' is mediated through local subaltern figures establishing an alternative structure of communal authority. The film timeline, spread over a decade, depicts the expansion of the 'ooru' along the coastal land, showcasing the residents' resistance to eviction or waiting for the government housing scheme. This resonates with Asif Bayat's notion of "quiet encroachment of the ordinary", where the marginalized population secure and defend urban space through everyday practices (Bayat, 2010). However, Vada Chennai extends beyond Bayat's framework of gradual encroachment. The residents do not merely occupy the space, as they establish enduring structures of authority that regulate social and spatial life. The subaltern body's assertion of control over 'ooru' is evident when the local MLA Muthu requested Rajan's help in vacating the settlement to facilitate a road construction undertaken for a global spectacle in preparation for the Pope's visit. Rajan, however, refuses to comply. He asserts the settlement as "his hood", which signifies more than territorial attachment. It constitutes a political claim over a space that the state seeks to appropriate. Emerging as the community's protector, Rajan successfully opposes the eviction by confronting both the political and police authorities. The film further established the community's autonomous structure of authority through Thambi, who acts as the community's advisor after Rajan's death. When the office officials arrived with Thambi to recover the goods looted by the residents on the night of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, the residents responded and returned them primarily to Thambi's instructions rather than those of the police, proving the legitimacy of informal community structure rather than formal state institutions. Further, the authority exercised by Rajan and Thambi in the context of an absent, ineffective or selectively present state institution makes the subaltern "people as infrastructure" (Simone, 2004). As a result, the ooru ceases to

function as an empty space available for state appropriation and instead emerges as a politically inhabited territory whose governance depends upon the collective presence and agency of its residents. This enables the subaltern community to convert its informal networks of economy into political instruments through which one can negotiate, resist, and eventually confront state power.

Spatial Retooling:

Beyond establishing authority within the ooru, the subaltern body operates as a conduit through which opportunities, resources and forms of social mobility are made available for the community. Arivu's (Velaikkaran) radio station and Rajan's (Vada Chennai) community center, are both such initiatives undertaken at the intersection of informal economy and community-directed developmental aspiration. While Arivu leveraged his alliance with Kasi to set up Kuppam 90.8 FM, Rajan derives his economic mobility from illicit proceeds from smuggling foreign goods. However, subsequently Arivu's radio station emerges as a counter-hegemonic apparatus that unmasks the evil intention of Kasi in keeping the slum dwellers dependent to maintain his power and successfully freeing them from the influence of Kasi. Similarly, the community centre is established with a vision of training local children to play carrom, which would eventually help them secure a government job under the sports quota. He envisions that individual mobility would contribute to the broader upliftment of the 'ooru', as those who obtain employment would improve the living conditions of their family and the community at large. This mode of community-directed welfare production resonates with Partha Chatterjee's notion of "political society" (2004), in which the improvement of community life is pursued not through state-led welfare programmes but through institutions created and sustained by local actors. These actors do not wait upon state-led welfare delivery. Rather, they transform themselves into quasi-governmental agents capable of fulfilling the state's expectations for the needs of informal urban settlements (Roy, 2005). The radio station and the community centre, therefore, illustrates how subaltern actors convert localized power into an instrument for producing social mobility, strengthening the material and political capacity of the ooru. In doing so, these actors transform informal authorities into political resources capable of fostering collective well-being.

The body is not merely resisting the state, rather it is performing the state's developmental functions by creating opportunities, distributing resources, reproducing community life, and sustaining the collective future. As Simone argues, in the absence of formal urban infrastructure, subaltern residents collaborate to produce social practices that make urban life navigable. The community infrastructure, including Arivu's radio station and Rajan's community, is both the result of spatial authority, social network and informal capital accrued by the local actors. This is what James Halston terms "insurgent citizenship", in which urban peripheries develop counter-practices that challenge the state not by confronting it but through alternative institutional forms. The 'ooru', here, becomes a site of counter-developmental sovereignty, allowing the subaltern body to produce welfare, distribute resources, and reproduce community life that is systematically foreclosed for the residents of informal settlements by formal institutions.

Body as the Infrastructure

Having transformed informal authorities into means of community development, the subaltern body becomes an insurgent political actor that challenges and confronts external attempts to control or displace the 'ooru' by demanding redistribution of the economy and recognition of the community's lived experience. Once the subaltern body converts the 'ooru' from the state of exception by the state into a site of self-governance, it acquires political consciousness to confront the capital and state forces directly. Arivu's trajectory in the film Velaikkaran shows the economic mobility as he joins a major FMCG company, Saffron and leverages his corporate access to secure jobs for his friends from the

slum. However, when he was made aware of the adulteration in his company, he stepped up to fight against the authority that was perpetrating structural violence against consumers. He claims that for labourers like them, loyalty should belong to the work they do, not to their employers, who keep them in the dark and deceive them into engaging in illegal activity. In Gramscian terms, this is the articulation of a counter-hegemonic collective will. Arivu is not an external figure, but a body formed from within the ooru, accumulating knowledge of the labour force and their moral dignity. He organizes massive silent protests to show the world that when labourers unite they make better decisions. The silence speaks of subalterns' unwillingness to talk in the idiom demanded by capital and asserting collective presence as the primary political language. Vada Chennai illustrates the confrontation between the state and the disposed body through the protest organized by Hameed, a bank employee against a road construction project that demands slum eviction. This intervention is subsequently extended by Anbu argument with the state agents, suggesting that the subaltern body no longer merely functions as an infrastructure of survival and development but also as a vehicle for political contestation. The skills, opportunities, and collective consciousness that is made available for the subaltern within the ooru, produces a subject capable of articulating grievances, mobilizing resistance, and demanding accountability from the state. Anbu's critique of displacement foregrounds what Fraser (1995) identifies as the dual dimension of injustice, that is, misdistribution and misrecognition. By drawing attention to the environmental degradation, economic marginalization, and social exclusion from decision making processes experienced by the residents, Anbu exposes the unequal distribution of urban development that benefits the south and leaves the north disposable. Simultaneously, Anbu's challenge to the dominant perception of the ooru as a space populated by "rowdies" highlights the cultural stigmatization that accompanies material dispossession. Through these claims, Anbu contests not only the redevelopment project but also the broader structures of power that render the community disposable. His counter-public narrative refuses stigmatization and legitimizes the claim to the space, thereby, simultaneously claiming for redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1995). This resonates with the formulation of the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968), which highlights the right of the inhabitants to participate in the production and transformation of urban space. The resistance in both Velaikkaran and Vada Chennai do not seek for inclusion in the existing order but rather contests the legitimacy of the order itself including the corporate hierarchy, state that displaces communities, and labor exploitation.

In conclusion, the subaltern body which was rendered disposable by the state evolves from a mechanism of governance and development into what Holson (2008) describes as an insurgent form of citizenship, asserting political claim from a space historically excluded from formal structures of power. These insurgent citizens form an infrastructure for the systematically excluded urban life by producing new normative frameworks, new claims, and new political subjectivity that expand the terrain of democracy. Therefore, the body becomes infrastructure not merely to survive state neglect but to intervene in and reshape the very processes of urbanization that threaten its existence.

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