

Forced Migration Memory and Its Repercussions: A Cultural Analysis of the Tamil Film *Parasakthi*

Vaishnavi G

Full-time Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, Loyola College, Chennai, India.
vaishnavigurusamy440@gmail.com

Dr. Arockia Anto Anita

Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor, Department of English, Loyola College, Chennai, India.

 <https://doi.org/10.26572/tc2613522>

Reviewed and accepted version first published on August 5, 2026

Abstract: The Burma migration in Indian history was marked by displacement, loss, and extreme precarity, as migrants faced bombardments, forced evacuation, poverty, and social marginalization during their return across the Bay of Bengal. It remains a powerful cultural memory reflected in literature and film. This study examines how *Parasakthi* (1952) represents migration from Burma through the frameworks of cultural memory and media narratives, situated within colonial and postcolonial cultural theory. It argues that the film reveals a key problem: the transformation of lived migrant suffering into ideologically mediated narratives shaped by colonial histories and postcolonial concerns. *Parasakthi* portrays the wartime dislocation of a Tamil family from Burma (Rangoon) and reflects the plight of Burmese Indians during World War II. The film narrates social collapse and survival while functioning as a repository of migration memory in Tamil cinema. Its Burma returnee character becomes a proxy for exile, fractured belonging, poverty, and social injustice in a postcolonial context. Adopting a cultural studies perspective, this paper shows how melodrama, courtroom rhetoric, and emotionally charged dialogues operate as media constructs that reinterpret and circulate migration memories across generations. Thus, *Parasakthi* functions as a cinematic text and a site of memory that documents diasporic Burma migration while rearticulating it within the ideological discourse of postcolonial Tamil modernity, social reform, and identity construction.

Keywords: Film Studies, Burmese Tamil Diaspora, Refugee Crisis, Cultural Memory

Introduction

Parasakthi (1952), directed by the duo of Krishnan-Panju and scripted by M. Karunanidhi, is one of the earliest examples that Tamil cinema has to offer. It integrates elements of melodrama, politics, and social commentary, all set against the backdrop of a family's dislocation due to the war. The movie starts off depicting a Tamil family with connections to Rangoon (Burma) and Madurai, and the story weaves through the various stages of family separation, return, loss of socio-economic status, and legal battles. It is one of the few films recorded as the debut of the actor Sivaji Ganesan and a major milestone in the use of politics in Tamil cinema. The worth of the movie is not just political. The movie also features a rich history of a World War II traumatic tear, synonymous with the history of the Indian population in Burma during the year 1942. Through the lens of the Tamil audience, the movie turns a painful historical event into a memorable story.

The 1942 Burma exodus is considered one of the largest and most painful forced movements in the entire history of South Asia. With the advance of the Japanese army and the wartime bombardments that targeted and destabilized Burma, many Indians either fled or were evacuated in great peril. Historians such as Hugh Tinker, and more recently, Emma C. Meyer, Chrisalice Ela Joseph, Vinod Balakrishnan and Annima Bahukhandi, show that this movement should not be considered a marginal episode of history. It was a major event that shaped the empire, the refuge, and the sense of belonging. It showed the precarious nature of colonial citizenship and how, in times of war, communities that were migrant, laboring, and trading could be rendered expendable. This history, in the cultural sense, is often fragmented, dispersed in memoirs, oral histories, journalism, and uneven scholarly attempts at recovery.

This paper considers the significance of *Parasakthi* in the context of Burmese Tamil migration, transforming a historical experience into a public cultural memory. It does not stop at a purely realist reconstruction of wartime events; it reconstitutes displacement within a melodramatic syntax of suffering, loss of kin, moral outrage, and social accusation. In this way the film makes the migrants' pain a collective, rather than an isolated, tragedy. The narrative of the returnee from Burma, in this case, makes it possible to speak of exile, poverty, widowhood, hunger, religious hypocrisy, and the social injustices that prevail in Tamil society after colonialism. The story of migration is, therefore, not a detail from the narrative; it is the film's emotional and ideological core.

Viewing the film within the cultural framework allows one to appreciate how the cinema becomes a vehicle for memory. Cultural memory experts like Jan Acumen and Astrid Erll note that the media, symbols, narrative repetitions, and institutions allow collective memories to endure. *Parasakthi*, for instance, socially memorializes the displacement of Burmese Tamils, integrating displacement into its dialogues, performances, spectacles, and courtroom addresses. This film's long afterlife in Tamil cultural history indicates that it transcends the mere depiction of migration. Instead, it captures, transforms, and revitalizes memory for successive generations. For this

reason, this paper analyzes *Parasakthi* as a cinematic artifact that narrates, politicizes, and integrates Burmese Tamil migration memory into the discourse of Tamil modernity.

The origins of *Parasakthi* can be traced back to the history of Indian migration to colonial Burma. During British colonial rule, Burma became an important destination for Indian migrants seeking employment and opportunities as laborers, merchants, clerical workers, financiers, and service sector employees. By the early 20th century, Indian migrants made up a significant portion of colonial Burma's workforce, particularly in the commercial hub of Rangoon in Lower Burma.

Indian migration to Burma has been studied in detail by Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti and others, and it has been noted that these migrations resulted from empire, demand for labor, and the shift of colonial capital along the Bay of Bengal. The 1931 census recorded over a million Indians in Burma, reflecting the magnitude of this transnational colonial venture. Disruption was violently faced in 1942. The fear, hunger, and disease were brought on by the Japanese invasions, aerial bombardments, the collapse of western authority, and the mass return of desperate hundreds of thousands of people to India. Tinker describes the mass movement of people as a forgotten long march. More recent historians have moved the debated focus of the forced movement of people and the failure of the bureaucracy, and the imbalanced relief efforts to the front of the crisis. Meyer points out that those who managed to reach India were called evacuees and later repatriates, a terminology that reflects how the state renamed people who were on the move for its own administrative purposes. Joseph and Balakrishnan contend that the mass movement of people relocating to India after the Japanese invasion should be included in the history of refugees, as it illustrates how the history of displaced people is often unrecorded and seldom remembered by the public.

In this context, *Parasakthi* goes beyond the family melodrama form and represents a postwar cultural phenomenon. Being a 1952 film, it was made only a decade after the exodus, and so it would have spoken to an audience for whom the Burma migration was still a lived experience. Around this time, Tamil cinema had also started to engage with street speaking, social reform, and Dravidian politics. Scholars of Tamil cinema have identified a marked increase in the use of films as vehicles for ideological advocacy, particularly with respect to caste, language, religion, social justice, and other related issues. The Burma-returnee narrative in *Parasakthi*, therefore, linked wartime dislocation with the social marginality of the Tamil community.

Review of Literature

The literature pertinent to this discussion covers three disciplines: migration history, cultural memory, and Tamil cinema. In migration history, Chakravarti offers the first account of the Indian minority in Burma and the narrative of his rise and fall. Tinker's classic essay captures the 1942 exodus and depicts a major episode of suffering and endurance. In more recent works, Meyer, Joseph, Balakrishnan, and Bahukhandi extend this horizon in focusing on the evacuee, refugee, archive, repatriation, and the politics of historical silence. These studies are valuable in demonstrating that the Burma

exodus was more than a military or administrative event; it was also a crisis of memory and a sense of belonging that was unevenly preserved in the public culture.

Memory is framed socially. This idea originated from Maurice Halbwachs. A more recent example is Jan Assmann, who distinguishes communicative memory from cultural memory. While communicative memory is passed down through generations and everyday interactions, cultural memory is expressed or frozen in a medium, structure, or in other symbolic forms. Erll builds on these ideas by suggesting that literature and film are both forms of cultural memory, and that memory always involves circulation, remediation, and narrative structure. Erll and Assmann both claim a role for media and archives in saving traces of the past. These scholars help us to read cinema as an active vehicle for memory rather than a passive record of the past.

The most dominant scholarship on *Parasakthi* in Tamil cinema studies has concentrated on the political and ideological readings of the film. In one of the most influential essays on Tamil cinema, *Parasakthi* is seen as an event in Tamil political history and demonstrates how it was an inspired film of the DMK. In the work of Hardgrave and Sivathamby, the film is situated within the broader nexus of Tamil cinema and political communication. In the work of Baskaran, Velayutham, Pillai, Rajadhyaksha, and Willemen, they place *Parasakthi* within the history of Tamil cinema, the tradition of dialogue-oriented performance, and the political mass cinema. This scholarship richly details the film's significance in relation to Dravidian politics, anti-clerical discourse, and the rise of Karunanidhi and Sivaji Ganesan as major public figures.

Despite the criticisms, something remains. Most critiques focus on *Parasakthi* as a singularly Dravidian political text, a rationalist film, or a notable work in Tamil dialogue. Very little focus has been directed towards the film's starting point in Rangoon (Burma), the representation of dispersal in wartime, and its memory representation of the migration to Burma. The film's narrative of migration is almost always recognized as a background element of the plot instead of being examined as the cause that renders the later social collapse comprehensible. This paper attempts to show that the film's engagement with the politics of migration trauma, articulated as collective memory through melodrama, oratory, and courtroom narration, is perhaps most pronounced when the trauma of migration is recast as collective memory.

Theoretical Framework

The paper explores cultural memory using the theories of Jan Assmann. Assmann creates a dichotomy of memory: communicative and cultural. The former survives through day-to-day interpersonal communication, while the latter survives through the memory of texts, rituals, monuments, and media. Cultural memory is not just a repository of memory, but instead is the active and selective reconstruction of memory of the past in a way that facilitates the needs of the present. This idea is furthered by Astrid Erll, who states that literature and film do not simply present memory, but operate as the means through which the active and selective reconstruction of the past occurs. Erll's theory of memory as an active and selective

reconstruction of the past is useful in the analysis of *Parasakthi*, as the film represents the Burma exodus through the lens of separation, displacement, and accusations of public shame. The film is a means of stabilizing and preserving memory, assisting in the public dissemination of a private memory. The memory of the film, beyond the private experience of the immigrants, is memorialized through public repetition as part of the shared memory of the Tamil people.

Methodology

The research utilizes a qualitative, interpretive approach in cultural studies and film studies. Specifically, it performs close reading of narratives, characters, dialogues, staging, and symbolic motifs in *Parasakthi*. Rather than quantitatively testing a hypothesis, the paper examines the production of meaning within the bounds of a cinematic paradigm. While the film serves as a primary text for analysis, the research methodology is interdisciplinary. It integrates the history of the displacement of Burma with the film's constituent elements and the history's translation into collective emotion.

Discussion

The first movement of the film is most vital. By placing the brothers in Burma (Rangoon) and the wartime interruption and family separation, the film clarifies migration as the first fracture in the story. The crossing from Burma to Tamil Nadu is not depicted as a seamless homecoming; rather, it is the start of dispersion, misrecognition, and loss. In mnemonic terms, Burma is both a geographical entity and a social world that has evaporated. The home that migration once promised as a site of prosperity is inverted into a memory of catastrophe. This explains why the return from Burma in the film is not restorative. It is characterized by dislocation, fractured kinship, and the impossibility of resuming a mundane existence.

Kalyani's character is also important to the film's memory of migration. Although she is in Tamil Nadu, her suffering is informed by the family's dispersal during the war. She narrates her experiences, as well as the loss of housing and the extreme vulnerability to sexual exploitation, not as individual misfortunes, but as the result of a social problem caused by the family's dispersal. In this way, the film represents migration as a precarious, gendered experience. The social and historical violence marked on Kalyani's body is represented by the auctioned house, the dead husband, the threatened chastity, and the illegal abortion, all of which demonstrate a breakdown of the protective enclosure of family and morality. In this way, the film moves the focus of migration from crossing borders to a dispossessed condition of migration within society.

Memory objects include the temple and courtroom scenes. With religious abuse as an example, the priest scene shows how the abuse of the migrant family illustrates the case against religious and abusive authority. Witnesses make courtroom private pain testimony public. Gunasekaran does not simply defend the individual case; he narrativizes the case of the displaced, the unjust, and the institution. A public sphere and melodrama scholar, Ravi Vasudevan, helps us understand the importance of such scenes. Personal loss is the medium of social critique, and the courtroom is the stage

where the public performance is an emigration wound. The therapy of final reunion and the first welfare home are not eliminations of trauma, but re-channeling of it to a positive social program. In this sense, remembrance is positive; it is the memory of suffering that is ethically decent and must change the world.

The analysis indicates that there is more to the understanding of *Parasakthi* than just the political or family-melodrama perspective. Its strength lies in how it mediates public memory of Burma migration. The wartime returnee is not represented merely as a victim of history. He is a witness whose testimony exposes and critiques class, religious, and postcolonial structural neglect or absence. The film, in this sense, translates the history of displacement into social commentary of broad reach. The film also showcases an additional potential of Tamil Cinema, that of an Archive of a particular region's history. By bringing the 'Burma Exodus' to the popular realm, *Parasakthi* works as a memory that is neglected and understated in both popular and scholarly accounts. The significance of *Parasakthi* in Tamil cultural history also shows how cinema can sustain an ailing history through emotion, repetition, and performance. This justifies the film as a site to engage with the complexities of migration, memory, and identity in South Asian Screen Studies.

Conclusion

Parasakthi deserves to be recognized as a milestone for its cinematic portrayal of the migration of the Burmese Tamils in the Tamil cultural narrative. The film does not provide a documentary reconstruction; instead, it gives migration an enduring public form through melodrama, rhetoric, and social criticism. The narrative of the family scattered by the war in Burma and further broken by the deprivation in India intertwines transnational displacement with the collapse of the domestic order. In doing this, the film ensures that the migration from Burma is not remembered merely as a historical occurrence, but as an ethical and political concern.

The cultural memory theory, as the paper has shown, is particularly relevant for this case. According to the frameworks of Jan Assmann and Astrid Erll, *Parasakthi* is a medium that ensures the memory of exile travels through time and space and remains. It moves the Burma exodus from the fragile zone of communicative memory to the more secure space of cultural memory by constituting history through a series of scenes, speeches, and symbols that can be seen, cited, and interpreted repeatedly. This reading helps reposition Tamil Cinema in migration studies. The case of Tamil Cinema, especially *Parasakthi*, shows how cinema can serve as an archive of the people. It captures historical trauma, transforms it into collective emotion, and links it with social reform and identity-building. From this perspective, the film exemplifies not only a milestone of Tamil political cinema; it also exemplifies a cultural text that keeps the memory of Burma migration alive in the postcolonial Tamil modernity.

Works Cited

Assmann, Aleida. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge UP, 2011.

- Assmann, Jan. "Communicative and Cultural Memory." *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, Walter de Gruyter, 2008, pp. 109-18.
- Bahukhandi, Annima. "Phantoms of Silenced Pasts: Lessons for Today from the Forgotten History of Burmese Indians 'Exodus from Burma.'" *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2021, pp. 397-412.
- Baskaran, S. Theodore. *History through the Lens: Perspectives on South Indian Cinema*. Orient Blackswan, 2009.
- Baskaran, S. Theodore. *The Eye of the Serpent: An Introduction to Tamil Cinema*. Tranquebar Press, 2013.
- Chakravarti, Nalini Ranjan. *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community*. Oxford UP, 1971.
- Erll, Astrid. "Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory." *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, Walter de Gruyter, 2008, pp. 389-98.
- Erll, Astrid. *Memory in Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser, U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Hardgrave, Robert L., Jr. "Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK." *Asian Survey*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1973, pp. 288-305.
- Joseph, Chrisalice Ela, and Vinod Balakrishnan. "The Burmese Refugee Exodus of 1942: Making a Case for the Refugee Archive and Inclusive Refugee Policies." *Interventions*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2023, pp. 739-55.
- Meyer, Emma C. "After the Long March: Colonial-Era 'Relief' for Burma Indian Evacuees in Visakhapatnam District, 1942-1948." *Beyond Indenture: Agency and Resistance in the Colonial Indian Diaspora*, edited by Crispin Bates, Cambridge UP, 2023, pp. 295-314.
- Pandian, M. S. S. "Parasakthi: Life and Times of a DMK Film." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 26, no. 11-12, 1991, pp. 759-70.
- Parasakthi*. Directed by Krishnan-Panju, screenplay by M. Karunanidhi, performances by Sivaji Ganesan, Sriranjani Jr., S. V. Sahasranamam, and S. S. Rajendran, National Pictures/AVM Productions, 1952.
- Pillai, Swarnavel Eswaran. *Madras Studios: Narrative, Genre, and Ideology in Tamil Cinema*. SAGE, 2015.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, and Paul Willemen, editors. *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2014.
- Sivathamby, Karthigesu. *The Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication*. New Century Book House, 1981.

Tinker, Hugh. "A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942."

Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, vol. 6, no. 1, 1975, pp. 1-15.

Vasudevan, Ravi. "Dislocations: The Cinematic Imagining of a New Society in 1950s

India." *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 16, no. 1-2, 1994, pp. 93-124.

Velayutham, Selvaraj, editor. *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film*

Industry. Routledge, 2008.