

Sociological Approach in the Tamil Film *Indian*

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Abstract

Shankar's 1996 Tamil film, *Indian* critically examines the widespread corruption in India through a sociological lens. The narrative centres on Senapathy, a former freedom fighter who turns to vigilantism to combat corruption after witnessing its pervasive effects on society. The film contrasts his steadfast moral convictions with the unethical actions of his son, Chandra, a businessman driven by greed, illustrating the generational clash between traditional ethics and modern materialistic ambitions. By adopting a realist perspective, *Indian* portrays corruption as a deeply entrenched issue affecting governance, law enforcement, and everyday life. It delves into themes of justice, power structures, and institutional failure, emphasizing how bureaucratic inefficiencies disproportionately impact ordinary citizens. The film raises thought-provoking questions about whether radical actions are justified when legal systems fail to uphold justice. Moreover, *Indian* critiques postcolonial India's inability to honour the values fought for during the independence movement, contrasting patriotism with contemporary moral decline. By weaving together themes of identity, ethics, and justice, the film remains a powerful social critique. It encourages audiences to reflect on individual and institutional roles in fostering an equitable society while questioning the effectiveness of traditional justice systems in addressing corruption.

Keywords: Corruption, Vigilantism, Sociological Perspective, Ethics and Justice and Social Reform

Introduction

Most people prefer films to books nowadays. While books were once the main form of entertainment, technological advancements have transformed novels into films. The film is now considered an important art form. To fully appreciate literary approaches, one should explore not only novels, short stories, and poems but also films. A prime example is *Indian* (1996), directed by Shankar.

Through *Indian*, Shankar exposes the pervasive issue of corruption in India and its impact on ordinary people. The film showcases the director's sociological approach by realistically portraying societal problems and characters. Shankar's meticulous research and analysis of real-life incidents are evident in the film's narrative. By creating awareness about corruption, films like *Indian* contribute to addressing societal issues.

Film as an art form is a complex, multifaceted medium that combines visual imagery, storytelling, sound, and motion to create experiences that can evoke emotion, provoke thought, and communicate ideas. It is often considered one of the most powerful art forms because of its ability to engage multiple senses and convey narratives in dynamic ways.

Film is a storytelling medium that draws from literary traditions. Screenwriting involves crafting dialogue, plot, and character arcs, much like in literature. However, film allows for a unique blend of visual storytelling and narrative, where meaning can be conveyed without words. This makes film a powerful narrative art form that can tell complex stories in ways that other media cannot.

Film often serves as a mirror to the society that creates it, reflecting cultural values, norms, and conflicts. As a cultural artifact, film can offer commentary on social issues, challenge the status quo, or explore philosophical questions. This sociological dimension makes film an important form of cultural expression and an influential art form in shaping and reflecting public consciousness.

In contrast to formalism, realism in film theory prioritizes content and the accurate representation of reality. Realist filmmakers seek to present life as it is, often focusing on everyday events, ordinary people, and authentic settings. This approach treats film as a window into the world, making it an artistic form of social documentation.

"Film is a reflection of society, both present and past."

— Spike Lee

The sociological approach to literature, as it might be explored in Gioia's anthology, looks at literature as a product of its social context. This approach involves analyzing texts not just as isolated works of art but as reflections of the cultural, economic, political, and historical conditions

in which they were produced. It seeks to understand how societal issues such as class, race, gender, and power dynamics influence literature and, in turn, how literature shapes social values and ideologies.

The anthology often includes introductory materials and critical questions that encourage readers to consider the social and historical contexts of the works. For example, how does a particular story reflect the gender roles of its time, or how does a poem respond to economic conditions?

Many of the texts in the anthology deal with themes of social justice, inequality, and power dynamics. A sociological approach might focus on these themes, analyzing how characters and plots illustrate larger societal issues.

Stories and plays in the anthology often depict the struggles between different social classes, or how individuals navigate systems of power. The sociological approach can be used to explore these depictions and their implications for real-world social structures.

Discussions of race, ethnicity, and identity are central to a sociological reading of literature. The anthology includes works by diverse authors, allowing for an exploration of how literature reflects racial and cultural identities and tensions.

S. Shankar is an acclaimed *Indian* film director and producer, primarily known for his work in Tamil cinema. His films are known for their high-concept themes, visual grandeur, and extensive use of special effects. Shankar's movies often focus on social issues, corruption, and futuristic technology, making him one of the most commercially successful directors in Indian cinema.

Sociological approach in the Film *Indian*

Shankar, after completing his diploma in mechanical engineering from Central Polytechnic College, worked in a typewriting company before entering the film industry. He started his career as a screenwriter in drama stage shows and gained experience in the film industry as an assistant director. In 1993, he made his directorial debut with *Gentleman*. His films often tackle social issues like corruption, poverty, and injustice. He uses his platform to raise awareness about these

problems and inspire viewers to take action. Most of his films are based on social issues. The 1996 film *Indian* created a new mindset among the people.

Senapathy, a brave fighter for India's freedom, knows how to fight. After seeing how bad corruption is in India today, he starts fighting back against dishonest government people and others who take advantage of the system. He thinks that corruption is the biggest problem facing the country.

At the same time, the movie tells the story of Senapathy's son, Chandra. Chandra is a dishonest businessman who makes money in bad ways. The movie shows a big difference between the father and son. The father believes in old-fashioned honesty, but the son only cares about getting rich.

The story gets exciting when the father and son start fighting against each other. In the end, because the father sticks to his strong beliefs, something terrible happens. The movie also shows us scenes from the father's life when he was fighting for India's freedom against the British.

While Senapathy is fighting against bad people, the police are trying to catch him. But he's too smart and quick for them. The biggest problem comes when Senapathy finds out his own son is also doing bad things. He tries to make his son change, but the son won't listen. This makes the father very sad and angry.

In the end, Senapathy has to do something terrible. He kills his own son because he believes it's the only way to stop corruption. The movie finishes with Senapathy disappearing, but he calls the police to say he's still alive. This makes people wonder if he will keep fighting against bad things.

The director's ideology is to use the film to showcase the extent of societal corruption prevalent in the past and its ongoing impact. The film explores the perspective of a free fighter whose family has been adversely affected by corruption. It highlights the suffering endured by ordinary people due to such malpractices. The director poses a thought-provoking question: What if corrupt government officials were eliminated to deter future corruption?

This film delves into societal issues of the 1990s and aims to create awareness about the realities of that time. Despite being in the 2020s, corruption has not diminished but instead intensified, with government officials and politicians as primary culprits. India has witnessed numerous corruption scandals, including the 2G Spectrum Scam (2008), Commonwealth Games Scam (2010), Coal Allocation Scam (Coalgate) (2012), Bofors Scandal (1980s), Vyapam Scam (2013), Satyam Scandal (2009), Fodder Scam (1996), Adarsh Housing Society Scam (2010), and Telgi Stamp Paper Scam (2002).

Corruption is a pervasive issue in India, as highlighted by director Shankar's film *Indian*. Bribery is rampant at all levels of government, from village-level officials (VAOs) to top bureaucrats (IAS officers). This entrenched corruption diverts public funds intended for development, leading to crumbling infrastructure, inadequate healthcare, and poor education. Moreover, it disproportionately affects the poor by siphoning off funds meant for poverty alleviation programs.

The consequences of corruption are severe. For instance, the lack of sincerity and honesty among government officials often results in tragic accidents.

Corruption siphons off public funds earmarked for vital sectors like infrastructure, healthcare, and education, leading to crumbling roads, underfunded hospitals, and poorly equipped schools. It diverts vital funds intended to lift people out of poverty, leaving the most vulnerable without access to life-saving healthcare, quality education, and decent housing.

It tilts the scales of justice in favor of the elite, leaving ordinary people vulnerable to unfair trials, biased investigations, and limited access to equal opportunities in public life. It often leads to delays in infrastructure projects, such as the construction of roads, bridges, and public facilities. This affects people's daily lives, mobility, and access to services.

This movie highlights the glaring disparity that exists between the wealthy elite, who benefit from widespread corruption, and the oppressed people, who suffer the terrible effects of it. Senapathy is a vigilante who was once a freedom fighter and now represents the burgeoning uprising against this systemic injustice. His narrative path emphasises how ingrained injustice

can give rise to extreme disobedience. According to the movie, corruption is a widespread social problem ingrained in the fabric of the country, not just a personal defect.

It explores the economic gap in further detail as a haven for wrongdoing. The film underscores the systemic nature of corruption by portraying politicians and bureaucrats as wealthy power brokers who take advantage of their positions for personal gain, while the poor are compelled to bribe for basic services. This picture presents a more comprehensive criticism of capitalist systems in which the working class is exploited as a result of wealth being concentrated in a small number of hands.

Structural functionalism posits that social institutions are designed to maintain societal equilibrium. However, the film starkly contrasts this ideal by portraying Indian institutions as corrupt and dysfunctional. This systemic breakdown is depicted as a catalyst for Senapathy's vigilante actions, highlighting how institutional failure can ignite social unrest.

The movie criticises the political and legal systems for failing to uphold justice, arguing that instead of serving as enablers of order, they are now obstacles. Senapathy's vigilantism might be interpreted as a desperate attempt to re-establish equilibrium in a society that is going through institutional collapse from a functionalist standpoint. Even if his acts are harsh, they force the audience to consider whether extrajudicial actions taken in response to systemic failure are legitimate.

Senapathy's identity is profoundly shaped by his heroic past as a freedom fighter. His encounters with corrupt officials and the suffering of ordinary citizens force him to redefine his role in society. The film delves into the complexities of moral identity, tracing Senapathy's evolution from revered war hero to a feared but morally conflicted vigilante. His transformation underscores the malleability of identity in the face of societal pressures.

The film emphasises how morality is socially constructed by drawing a contrast between Senapathy's strict moral code and the widespread corruption in his environment. This demonstrates how moral standards are subject to change based on cultural norms and personal experiences. Senapathy's violent deeds are portrayed as a moral conundrum, casting doubt on the

absoluteness of ethics and prompting enquiries about the propriety of drastic measures inside a corrupt system.

It taps into India's collective memory of the freedom struggle, making it central to Senapathy's identity. His character embodies the idealism of the pre-independence era, which stands in stark contrast to the disillusionment of the present. By depicting the corruption of the modern state, the film critiques the betrayal of the freedom fighters' values. This reflects a broader societal concern about the erosion of cultural ideals amidst modernization and globalization.

It contrasts Senapathy's adherence to traditional moral values with the pragmatic, often compromised ethics of contemporary society. It critiques the erosion of ethical standards, particularly within governance and public service, as a consequence of modernization. Senapathy's character is portrayed as both heroic and tragic, caught between the idealism of the past and the realities of the present.

It presents a disillusioned portrait of post-independent India, where the promises of freedom remain unfulfilled for the masses. Senapathy, a representative of the older generation of freedom fighters, embodies the hope of a just and equitable society. However, the film is critical of the postcolonial state's failure to realize these aspirations, instead highlighting its descent into corruption and inefficiency.

It can also be interpreted as a critique of neocolonialism, exposing how the remnants of colonial power structures persist in post-independent India. Despite political freedom, the film suggests that economic and political control remains concentrated in the hands of an elite few, mirroring colonial patterns of exploitation. This portrayal aligns with broader critiques of postcolonialism, highlighting the perpetuation of inequality and injustice through the replication of colonial power dynamics.

The film's setting in urban India highlights the connection between rapid urbanization and the spread of corruption. As cities expand and bureaucracies grow, so do opportunities for corruption. The film portrays the city as a site of moral decay, where individuals are alienated from traditional values and are more susceptible to unethical behavior. This reflects broader concerns

in urban sociology about the social consequences of rapid urbanization, including the erosion of community bonds and the rise of crime and corruption.

The film, while primarily focused on corruption and justice, also intersects with gender dynamics. Female characters are often portrayed within traditional gender roles, occupying supportive or victimized positions, which can be critiqued for reinforcing patriarchal norms. However, the film also presents women as moral compasses, embodying purity and integrity in a corrupt world. Senapathy's wife, for instance, represents traditional values and serves as a moral anchor for the protagonist, though her role remains largely confined to the domestic sphere.

"Corruption is an evil that eats at the heart of a nation."

- Jawaharlal Nehru

"The most common form of corruption is probably the exploitation of public office for private gain."

- Edmund Burke

Conclusion

The film's message continues to hold significant relevance in contemporary debates surrounding corruption and justice. As India struggles with persistent issues like political graft, bureaucratic inefficiency, and growing inequality, *Indian* stands as a poignant cinematic critique of the historical and cultural foundations of these challenges. The film not only highlights these systemic issues but also raises complex questions about potential solutions, especially when the very institutions designed to protect society are entrenched in the same flaws they are meant to combat.

It further complicates its social critique by exploring themes of nationalism and cultural identity. Shankar raises pertinent questions about the essence of *Indian* identity in contemporary times, especially as traditional values seem to wane. Senapathy's character embodies this tension,

adhering to traditional ideals while expressing disillusionment with the modern era. His journey reflects the broader national discourse on balancing cultural heritage with the pressures of modernization.

Indian delves into the complex ethical challenges faced by individuals operating within a corrupt system. Senapathy's transformation from freedom fighter to vigilante epitomizes the moral dilemmas that arise when justice is inaccessible. The film provocatively explores the blurred lines between justice and revenge, forcing viewers to question the legitimacy of vigilante actions as a response to systemic failures.

At its core, *Indian* interrogates the concept of moral responsibility. By presenting Senapathy as both hero and anti-hero, the film compels audiences to examine their own complicity in a corrupt system. While acknowledging the potential for individual change, it also warns against the perils of extrajudicial actions. Ultimately, the film advocates for a collective reckoning with corruption, emphasizing the need for systemic reforms to address the root causes of this societal ill.

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