

Mediated Transmissions and the Construction of the Disenfranchised Malaysian Tamil Child in the Film *Jagat*

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Abstract

This article explores the filmic mediated transmissions of Malaysian Tamil working class childhood in the Malaysian Tamil feature film, *Jagat* (2015) as a significant platform for accessing and understanding the experience of Malaysian Indian children largely underrepresented in general scholarship of the community. We do this mainly through focusing on the perspective of the film's main child protagonist. Film scenes and images are interpreted through a methodology incorporating the four-pillared Indian ideological concept of *mātā*, *pitā*, *guru* and *daivam*. We argue that the film highlights how the harsh realities confronting Malaysian Indian working-class families can greatly hinder the influence of parents, elders, role models, and religion in guiding children's development during their formative years. Through its various filmic constructions of a working-class Tamil childhood, *Jagat* serves to highlight the vicious cycle of social marginalization that takes seed early on. Such comprehensive understanding of the journey of disenfranchised Malaysian Tamil children is crucial for raising awareness and fostering empathy. This broader perspective may help shift the narrative from blame and accusations, which often focus solely on Indian gangsterism as an adult problem.

Keywords: Malaysian Indian child, working-class Malaysian Tamils, Tamil ideology, Malaysian Indians, Malaysian Tamil films, Indian gangsterism

Introduction

Numerous scholarly investigations have been conducted on the marginalized Malaysian Indian working-class community. Early discussions focused on the immigration and settlement patterns of Indians to Malaya to work in the coffee and rubber plantations (Sandhu 1967;

Arasaratnam 1979), class and social problems resulting from economic imbalance among the community (Ampalavanar 1981; Stenson 1980; Selvaratnam 1984), and subsequently the displacement of Indians after the closure of the estates. The rise of social problems as a result, including joblessness, school drop-outs, and gangsterism, emerged from the challenges faced due to economic imbalance among the community (Jayasooria 2016; Wilson 2003; Ramachandran 1995; Marimuthu 2016). Recent scholarship has also delved into the reasons for teenage school drop-outs among the Tamil community and the allure of a life of gangsterism (Ramasamy 2004; Durairaja, Saat, and Kamaluddin 2019; Chettiar 2022). Yet, most of these scholarly conversations foreground adult experiences rather than explore the formative years of childhood, which would have been largely shaped by the backlash of families displaced from the plantations.

Scholars have tied the core reason for the displacement of a vast majority of Malaysian Indians to the National Economic Policy (NEP) in Malaysia. Though designed to reduce poverty and achieve economic equity among ethnic groups, the policy has had mixed effects. While it succeeded in lowering overall poverty, it also resulted in the economic and political marginalization of Malaysian Indians (Ramasamy 2004; Gomez and Saravanamuttu 2013). The NEP exacerbated urban poverty among Malaysian Indians and led to many of the poorest being confined to the informal sector and urban slums (Gopal and Karupiah 2013). The snowball effect of the NEP led to an overall marginalization of Malaysian Indians from mainstream development, stretched across all sectors in Malaysia. This affected opportunities in vocational, pre-university, and higher educational institutions, state-sponsored scholarships, job openings, selections and promotions in both public and private sectors, and many other areas, including

general business opportunities (Sikri 2013; Karmveer Singh 2013; Anbalakan 2015; Teo 2021; Maartandan, Ahmad, and Pakirnathan 2024).

According to Kuppuswamy (2010), Malaysian Tamil participation in the civil service declined drastically, from 40% in 1957 to just 2% in 2007. Similarly, Raman (2009) stated that even those with appropriate academic qualifications found it difficult to be employed. In contrast, the implementation of the National Development Policy (NDP) did not encourage the growth of Malaysian Tamils. The Malaysian Indian Blueprint (2017) highlights that a higher percentage of Indian youths have only lower secondary education compared to Malays and Chinese. Specifically, 9% of Indians aged 20–24 and 13% of Indians aged 25–29 have only lower secondary education, compared to lower percentages among other ethnic groups. Additionally, Indians are overrepresented in low-paying sectors, with significant numbers employed in manufacturing, wholesale, transportation, sales, services, and machine operation roles. Moreover, Indian pupils have higher dropout rates at both primary and secondary school levels, with 13% dropping out of primary school and 8% dropping out of secondary school. These high dropout rates have persisted over decades, reflecting a significant educational challenge within the Malaysian Indian community. Yet, at the end of the day, the children and teenagers remain statistics, serving as fodder for research.

According to Willford (2009), historical and cultural factors tend to break and divide Malaysian Indians of various socioeconomic backgrounds. While the majority of these existing scholarly conversations on the plight and status of the Malaysian Indian community are valid and certainly justified, our aim is to extend the dialogue by stepping away from the overt concentration on colonialism and governmental policies of working-class Tamil communities to highlight the overshadowed figure of the Malaysian Indian child. The issue of Malaysian

Indian identity within the field of literary and cultural studies generally centres on adult experiences, emphasizing topics such as diaspora, Indian ethnic identity, belonging, and home (Tang 1996; Wicks 1998; Wilson 2003; Sharrad 2004; Pillai 2007). This raises the question: Who is the Malaysian Indian child from the working-class community, and where does he or she fit within the larger scheme of things?

The answer may very well lie in a Malaysian Tamil feature film, *Jagat*, directed by Shanjey Kumar Perumal, produced in 2015 and set in the early 1990's in Pengkalan Hulu, Perak, Malaysia, and that remains the only movie that foregrounds a Malaysian Tamil child protagonist from the working-class. In examining young protagonists in Malaysian Indian films, it became clear that while there are works featuring Malaysian Indian youth, our focus was specifically on the male child, given the larger social concerns surrounding Indian gangsterism in Malaysia and its predominantly male dimension. Within this frame, *Chemman Chaalai* (Gravel Road), directed by Deepak Kumaran (2005), though produced earlier, was not applicable to our study as it centres on a teenage girl and represents working-class Tamil Malaysian life from a female perspective.

Our central argument is that the film *Jagat* highlights, through various cinematic constructions, how the harsh realities confronting Malaysian Indian working-class families can greatly hinder the influence of parents, elders, role models, and religion in guiding a child's development and advancement during their formative years. Set in the early 1990s, *Jagat* skilfully depicts the challenges faced by a child from a working-class Indian minority race. Its title is crucial in being emblematic of the central concern of the film for the term "Jagat" is a nativized Tamil version of the Malay term *jahat* which carries the meaning of being naughty, bad, wicked, or evil. The film stands as a stark and painfully honest cinematic depiction of life

among children from the most disenfranchised of the Malaysian Indian community, holding up a mirror to the repercussions of economic hardship, particularly on these families. Yet, it juxtaposes this with a strong subtext of internal communal oppression (Tappan 2006), especially within one Tamil family, steeped in the sociocultural dynamics of the Malaysian working-class context.

In a personal message, Shanjey Perumal explained that *Jagat* was originally intended as a black comedy but became much darker; he further described it as his autofiction, partly drawn from personal experience, and shared ideas for possible sequels (S. Perumal, personal communication, 2021). *Jagat* certainly reflects these dark undertones in what is arguably one of the most insightful cinematic probing into the complexities of the life of a child from the Tamil working class community in Malaysia. However, scholarship on the film has remained scarce, with most responses being film reviews. One film review however, a sensitive exploratory piece by Nurzali Ismail (2018) stands out, amidst reviews of the mainly popular writing genre, as it highlights the overall vulnerability of life among the disenfranchised Indian working class of Malaysia and the ultimate allure of a life of crime when no other choice appears forthcoming. After painstakingly cataloguing the various ways in which abject marginalisation occurs as a result of “skewed development and wealth distribution policies, ethnocentrism and ignorance” (Nurzali 2018), a crucial question posed at the end of the review, “Who is *jagat*?” is one that can be interpreted several ways. One could ask who is really *jahat* or wicked, the ones who fall prey to crime in a socio-cultural system that has failed these unfortunate individuals? One could also pause to reflect on who is this young boy who is the central child protagonist in the movie? It is this latter question that leads us to mull further on the reason for the silence over the film, whether due to its depiction of a painful subject matter

of an ethnic minority, that is presented in a linguistic minority or merely a lack of empathy towards their plight, when the sentiment of *jagat* obscures its many founding reasons. Most significantly, we are drawn to the child protagonist as the film delves into the roots of *jagat* for the working-class Tamil community. We do this primarily due to the lack of attention to marginalised working-class Tamil children within the broader spectrum of scholarly conversations on Malaysian Indian identity in literary and cultural studies. Our study seeks to intervene in these conversations, addressing a significant gap in the discourse and foster awareness of how Tamil family dynamics and the attendant Tamil tenets of Guru (teacher) and God are crucial in determining the paths disenfranchised Malaysian Indian children take and the extent of opportunities they can access. However, this is not a sociological study but rather one that probes into the semiotics of Tamil childhood through the lens of creative production. Our argument is that films, much like literary texts, are communal fictions. Hence, we look at how films about the Malaysian Indian community such as *Jagat* can be viewed as communal fictions that can provide significant insights that can help create awareness and understanding of the experience of marginalized children from the community, which remains largely understudied.

The analysis will draw on details of scenes from the film that mediate the intersection of imagination, culture, ideology, and even economics of Malaysian Tamil working class childhood through the perspective of its main protagonist, twelve-year-old Shankar @Apoi. The incorporation of the Tamil socio-cultural framework is crucial given that the film is produced in the Tamil language, and with a narrative that centres on a child from a Malaysian Tamil working-class family. Classism is especially foregrounded through the depiction of the living conditions of Apoi and his family. Their home is a modest lot house situated within an

estate, a spatial marker of working-class identity. The interior is sparsely furnished, with only essential items such as a refrigerator and a television, both of which highlight the family's prioritization of necessity over comfort or aesthetic display. Maniam, Apoi's father, relies on a bicycle for transportation, a detail that underscores his limited economic means and situates him within the lower strata of society. In one particularly striking scene, Maniam uses a string in place of a belt to secure his pants. This act of improvisation coincides with a radio broadcast from the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), promising the eradication of poverty among Indians. The juxtaposition of Maniam's lived reality with the political rhetoric creates a powerful irony, exposing the dissonance between official narratives of progress and the persistent material deprivation experienced by marginalized communities. These class markers in turn play a role in the family dynamics and its effect on the child from this socially deprived household. However, as much as class is an important factor, the primary focus of the movie is on the journey of the young child, Apoi and his relationship with his immediate family: his parents, as well as a select few male relatives and teachers. Given that the family depicted is Tamil in both socio-linguistic and cultural contexts, we foreground a quintessentially Tamil ideological construct related to children and the family: *mātā* (Mother), *pitā* (Father), *guru* (Teacher/Guide), and *daivam* (God).

Scholarship on Malaysian Indian cinema and cultural identity highlights the centrality of Tamil cultural values in shaping diasporic experiences. Ravindran (2006) demonstrates how transnational Tamil cinema provides a space for Malaysian Tamil audiences to negotiate cultural identities, with films reflecting family and societal values that resonate with everyday practices of the diaspora. Mahalingam (2023) extends this discussion by examining the Malaysian Tamil community's role in sustaining Tamil language, literature, and cultural

identity, noting the contributions of civil society and religious groups in preserving cultural values through education and religious texts.

Pillai's early work situates diasporic literary imagination within Tamil cultural frameworks, showing how texts such as K.S. Maniam's *In a Far Country* reconfigure identity through symbolic forms like the *kolam* (Pillai 2000). Her later study highlights modern ecclesiastical interconnections, emphasizing how Catholic Tamil Nadu and its diaspora in Malaysia retain and rearticulate cultural identity through religious mobility and transnational belonging (Pillai 2017). Together, these studies reveal that cinema, literature, and community practices collectively sustain cultural identity and values within the Malaysian Indian diaspora.

Building on these insights, our analysis turns to the cinematic text itself. Consequently, the film's artistic articulation through cinematography is foregrounded over prescriptive narratives of oppression, whether colonial or policy-driven. While such structures are undeniably central to the social realities of the Malaysian Indian working class, they circulate broadly within wider sociological discourses and frequently eclipse the aesthetic dimensions that form the focus of our analysis.

These aesthetic choices are presented in tandem with the child protagonist's immediate environment and familial support, interpreted through the lens of the Tamil socio-cultural tenets of *mātā* (Mother), *pitā* (Father), *guru* (Teacher/Guide), and *daivam* (God). We argue that this ancient concept is still influential as pillars of support that hold the Tamil family together. In fact, this very phrase 'mātā pitā guru daivam' is used in one of the scenes in the film where a teacher uses it to admonish the protagonist Apoi, reiterating it twice. What is the extent of the influence of this adage in the life of the disenfranchised Tamil child as portrayed by the protagonist Apoi in *Jagat* and how does it impact on or impede his progress? More importantly,

how do cinematic images and forms present a mediated transmission of the Tamil cultural symbolic overtures of *mātā pitā guru daivam* in the film *Jagat*?

Despite generational changes, core cultural values, including belief in God, continue to be deeply interwoven with Tamil life. Yet, not all children are privy to such strong pillars of support from their elders, and this appears to be most rampant in families living on the margins, especially those from downtrodden working-class contexts. Apoi's life trajectory is shaped primarily by the conditions of his environment and his aspiration for acceptance, particularly from the male elders within his family circle whom he primarily looks up to as his *gurus*. His experiences are further marked by the presence of a harsh *pitā*, an almost absent *mātā*, and only fleeting glimpses of *daivam*. In our ensuing discussion of *Jagat*, we demonstrate how the film exposes the ways Apoi's disenfranchised Tamil childhood, deprived of these foundational pillars of support, lead to adverse repercussions, while also highlighting how the cinematic narrative renders visible the emotional costs of such deprivation.

Jagat opens on a dramatic note with the scene of the child protagonist, Apoi, clad in the standard Malaysian school uniform, angrily storming through what appears to be a rural path, quite possibly a plantation. In the background, a temple is visible, metaphorically suggesting the child walking away from, rather than towards, *Daivam*, which would usually be the norm when seeking solace in times of trouble. The camera then pans to the child walking up a hill and finally ends with him sitting alone in an extremely barren setting, where the landscape is filled with dried grass interspersed with stony ground.

Even more symbolic is the fact that Apoi faces a sky that resembles a white cloth, evoking John Locke's image of a child as a blank slate, whose later behaviour is shaped by experience. The film then transitions into a flashback of events leading to this pivotal moment.

In the discussion that follows, the roles of *mātā* (Mother), *pitā* (Father), *guru* (Teacher), and *daivam* (God) in Apoi's life are traced, foregrounding the "significant mediated expression(s)" (Kolker 23) of these elements as they construct a disenfranchised Tamil childhood.

Dissipated Daivams

As noted above, one of the very first scenes we are introduced to reveals the child walking away rather than to a temple and its *daivam*. The film extends this allusion to a dissipating *daivam* in the first scene that emerges in flashback, as we are led to trace Apoi's journey. We see Apoi standing inside his house watching the procession of the Goddess Amman proceeding past him. The setting of the scene symbolically emphasises the estrangement of the boy from *Daivam* in a number of ways. The first is that he is not a participant, but merely a spectator. Then there is the metal gridded mesh of the front gate of the house, which accentuates the notion of a barrier between Apoi and *Daivam*. This is further foregrounded by the wooden plank in the middle of this very gate, further emphasising barriers between him and *Daivam*. Lastly is the fact that while the procession is vibrant in colour and in sound, with the devotees in bright yellow garments, chanting and ringing devotional bells, Apoi's surroundings as he stands inside the house appear mostly in darkness. Yet, the close-up shots on his expression, shows him smiling as he partakes in the vibrant scene. Of particular importance is that if we take a closer look at the metal gridded gate there is a section that is missing or damaged that metaphorically mediates Apoi's breaking through and connecting with the procession yet this childlike joy is fleeting. As he turns his head to watch them go past his house, the camera trains towards the figure of his father coming in the opposite direction of the procession. Immediately, we see a change in the facial expression of Apoi as it turns almost grim as the camera concentrates on his intent gaze. As Kolker notes, "the gaze is turned into both a narrative

device—a way to tell us about hatred and fear—and a reflection of the cinematic act itself” (Kolker 287). Apoi’s gaze in this scene becomes a narrative device that foreshadows his fear of his father that is followed through by his action of immediately abandoning his pose at the front gate and rushing inside to make it seem like he was studying. This metaphorically transmits to a dissipated Daivam that loses its ground to Pitā, as we are introduced to Apoi’s father, Maniam. Interestingly Maniam pays no attention whatsoever to the procession as he crosses paths with it.

The Pernicious Pitā

One of the first things Maniam does as soon as he enters their house is to check the television set to see if it had been turned on. When he finds evidence that it had indeed been on, he immediately punishes Apoi by pulling on his ear which transmits in turn the cultural nuances seen as traditional Tamil (and also perhaps Asian) parental punishment style. The scenes that unfold present the symbolic overtures of Maniam as the pernicious and controlling Pitā, an exceedingly strict and overbearing father.

At this point, we feel it is pertinent to draw on the categorisation and definition of various types of fatherhood as discussed by Inhorn, Chavkin and Navarro (2016). Two are especially relevant to Maniam, the first being controlling fatherhood and the sub-categories of “resourceful fathers who foresee and pre-empt their children’s disobedience,” and “alienated fathers who become isolated and lose connectivity with their children” (351-352). These are followed by two other typologies that Maniam fits into, being “the father as-provider”, in his primary social role of economic provider for the household and to a certain extent, “a father-carer”, a typology that refers to fathers who are in charge of buying food, managing finances and earning money, as well as “disciplining and undertaking the intimate and mundane aspects

of care work in relation to their children” (Inhorn, Chavkin and Navarro 7). In most of the scenes however, it is the aspect of discipline that overshadows the transmission of Maniam’s fatherhood. The symbolic overtures of Maniam as the controlling Pitā are reiterated in a number of scenes. In the first scene where he touches the television set to ascertain whether Apoi had been watching television programmes against his instructions, we see the image of the father who foresees his child’s disobedience. When he then proceeds to pull his son’s ears as punishment, we see the enactment of the father who uses physical force against his child to counteract his disobedience. The next scene develops this trope further of the controlling father or Pitā, for after meting out his punishment on Apoi, Maniam proceeds to go through Apoi’s homework. When he finds that the teacher was dissatisfied with his assignment (based on a series of harsh red ticks across the pages of his exercise book), Maniam subsequently throws the book at Apoi, a scene that expands the mediated transmission to further the trope of the violent father. Apoi tries to explain that the reason for the red ticks was due to the fact that the teacher was dissatisfied with his interpretation of the assignment on the topic “My Imaginary Pen.” He had written about the Flying Pen which the teacher finds to be unacceptable. This then leads to Maniam instructing Apoi to refer to the work of his classmates who had got it right. Apoi however is resistant. In the scene that unfolds, there is an exchange of words and conflict between father and son which leads Maniam to throw the book further emphasizing the image of a controlling violent father in the face of disobedience.

In a subsequent scene, Maniam again displays the behavioural characteristics of the controlling and violent father while simultaneously curtailing Apoi’s creativity as evident previously. This is in reference to Apoi having created a jacket that was the replica of that worn by the popular celebrity Michael Jackson in response to participating in a talent show at school.

When Maniam sees what Apoi has created, his immediate reaction is to destroy everything. He not only rips apart the jacket that Apoi had painstakingly created, he also tears down Apoi's artwork that were displayed in the room. This act emphasizes not only the controlling and violent father but also a father who is disconnected from his child's creative talent. As a result of Maniam's actions, Apoi is unable to participate in the talent show in his school which he was looking forward to. The devastating effects on Apoi are transmitted visually in a poignant scene where he is shown attempting suicide in his school compound by wrapping a plastic sheet on his head, while in the background, we hear the schoolteacher calling out the names of the students participating in the school's talent show.

The next scene depicts the altercation when Maniam comes across Apoi and his friend, and mistakenly assumes that his son is smoking a cigarette when he was actually only holding it for his friend. Assuming the worst, Maniam drags him off by the ear. However, as much as the unfolding of the various scenes above align closely with the vocabulary of the controlling father as advocated by Inhorn, Chavkin and Navarro (2016), we should also consider the reasons behind Maniam's actions from within the context of the working-class father from a disenfranchised minority community in Malaysia. In a significant scene, we encounter Maniam at a coffee shop, partaking in drinks with his friends and where we subsequently learn of the reasons for his authoritative attitude towards his son. Maniam refers to the displacement of the Indian community from the plantation sector and his frustration in the overall effects. He explicitly states that he believes education is the only tool which has the power to break the "adimai sangali" (chain of slavery) that has kept the Indians marginalised as they moved to the cities. He then refers to his two brothers as an example, one a substance abuser and the other fallen prey to gangsterism and expresses his hopes that his son will not follow the same

trajectory as his brothers and that he should instead work towards becoming a successful person. Unfortunately, all of these are not relayed to his son, thus revealing a closed off relationship between Pitā and Magan (son). Where is the mother in this, one may ask? While the father dominates most of the scenes in the film, the mother we will see is an almost fleeting presence with almost no active role nor voice, thus in many senses an ephemeral mātā.

Ephemeral mātā

In the film, Apoi's mother, Mangai, appears primarily in her role as the quintessential wife more than she does as Mother to Apoi. Mangai's filmic representation reflects the concept of male utility of the female character (Zamboulingame 72) where all of her actions are in relation to the needs of the (adult) male characters. It also carries with it the salient cultural unconscious of "the silence of the Manusmriti, that ancient text of Vedic social laws and rules, which is more vocal about women's wifely qualities of chastity and subservience to the husband (Dietrich cited in Nandy, 2017). Throughout the film, Mangai mainly interacts with her husband and exchanges very few words with her son. In the first scene when Maniam reaches home, Mangai can be seen taking the tiffin carrier from Maniam, an act that also visually transmits the idea that she has prepared his meal for the workplace. She then proceeds to tell him that she has prepared his tea, reminds him to buy sugar and finally informs him that she is preparing hot water for his bath. All of these are clear visual mediated transmissions of Mangai in her role as wife rather than mother. The silent mother is instead visually magnified in the scene where Maniam pulls Apoi's ears for watching television, for Mangai can be seen silently watching from the bathroom as she pours the hot water for her husband's bath, distanced from and uninvolved in her son's punishment. Given the Tamil cultural overtures of the film, the visual transmissions of Mangai are metaphorically filtered through the spectrum of the epic

Hindu wife. This is emblematic of what Khumallambam (2016) asserts, where “of all the roles a traditional Indian woman plays in the society, the role of a wife is very important as the ideal woman is represented by Sita, the quintessence of wifely devotion, the epitome of a true traditional wife” (26). In most of the scenes that she appears in, Mangai is seen preparing meals, serving the meals to her husband and brother-in-law and clearing the table after the men have completed their meals. While the act may reflect traditional roles, the Tamil context is cinematically underscored through the semiotics of food. The camera lingers on the preparation of *thosai*, a traditional Tamil breakfast dish, foregrounding both cultural identity and gendered expectations of domestic labour. In another scene we can see her lighting the Hindu altar and praying while the men are sitting at the dining table. All of these in combination are significant in their mediated transmissions of Mangai’s traditional Tamil womanhood.

There are very few scenes of her with Apoi, and of these, there is only one particular scene that reveals some close physical relation between mother and son, where she combs his hair, yet her gaze is away from and not engaged with her son, emphasising distance yet again. In another punishment scene, she hits Apoi as he resists and attempts to strike his father. Thus, even here, her alignment is clearly with her husband and not her child. This is duly emphasised when Apoi attempts to seek solace with her after the incident, while she ignores him. All of these serve to emphasise the absent or distanced *mātā* in Apoi’s life. It should be noted that there was not a single scene in the movie which presents Mangai, Maniam and Apoi as a complete family involved in joint activities. In most scenes, they are filmed separately. *Mātā* and *Pitā* appear to be closely aligned with each other, while the child is kept at a distance, except when he is punished. On this note of discipline and punishment, we now move on to the last aspect of teacher or Guru.

Guideless Gurus

Given that the film *Jagat* focuses on the life of twelve-year-old Apoi, the concept of education and gurus are quite predominant in the film and in light of this, we reflect on the mediated transmission of the types of gurus in the film and whether they succeed in guiding him out of the darkness into the light. There are a number of characters who play the role of guru, four being actual schoolteachers while the other two are his family members who are his paternal uncles he looks up to. We begin with the schoolteachers. Of the three schoolteachers, two of them epitomize a guru leading the child into the light as they engage and listen to Apoi. The first is the Arts teacher. In one of the very first scenes set within the school environment, Apoi approaches his Arts teacher as he was disappointed to be given a low grade for his artwork and enquired the reason for it. The scene is visually mediated in soft muted tones that emphasizes the nurturing and sympathetic gaze of the teacher as it intersects with the curious and hopeful gaze of the child. The teacher makes an effort to explain the rationale behind the grade as Apoi's artwork was out of context. Apoi instead reasons that he felt he had fulfilled the expectation of the task. Instead of reprimanding Apoi, the teacher concedes to changing his grade as he takes his view into consideration.

This is reflective of a nurturing guru guiding his pupils into light rather than darkness. Unfortunately, the presence of this teacher is short-lived as he informs Apoi that the Art subject will no longer be taught as the school syllabus focuses on exam-oriented subjects henceforth. The other nurturing guru is the teacher who organises a talent show for Apoi's class and asks each of them to take on the role of a famous personality that they admire. While the rest of his classmates named Malaysian leaders and South Indian poets, Apoi names the American

entertainer Michael Jackson. While his classmates laughed, the teacher counteracts this by commending Apoi for his creativity in a choice outside of the norm.

However, as we have already discussed above, his father destroyed the pseudo leather jacket that Apoi painstakingly created. Thus, Apoi's creativity and talent is curtailed in both instances, firstly by a school syllabus that does not favour the arts and subsequently by an authoritative Pitā who disapproves of his artistic focus. The next teacher we encounter is rather tyrannical, in charge of the subject of Mathematics. While the other two were nurturing, this particular teacher constantly reprimands and punishes Apoi.

In one of the first scenes between them, we encounter yet again the aspect of the hostile and angry gaze. This is when Apoi is asked to recite the multiplication table. When Apoi failed to deliver the right answers the teacher reprimands him and accentuates his failure in direct opposition to the Arts teacher encountered earlier who engaged sympathetically with Apoi. Antagonized by his teacher's response, Apoi chooses to counteract by asking why one could not use a calculator instead. This immediately leads to his punishment by being forced to kneel in repentance.

The mediated transmission of the hostile gaze emerges once again in a subsequent scene when the teacher notices that Apoi is distracted during his lesson and uses his cane to strike Apoi's table in warning. He then drags him out of his chair by pulling his ear lobe in the same punishing manner as his father earlier and proceeds to test his knowledge of the ninth multiplication table. When Apoi fails yet again, the teacher scorns Apoi and disparagingly predicts his failure in his upcoming major school examination which demotivates him further. In the final interaction between the two, Apoi successfully recites the multiplication table and when he receives no word of praise nor encouragement, he challenges the teacher's knowledge

of a higher multiplication sum. Angered by what he sees as recalcitrance, the teacher stresses the importance of obeying the teacher. The teacher is depicted walking angrily to Apoi while reciting the adage “Mātā, Pitā, Guru, Daivam” and proceeds to strike him with the cane. The scene ends with the camera training on the building of the school with the audio overlay of the harsh strikes of the cane. All three scenes involving this third guru accentuate the mediated transmission of both a hostile gaze and tone from the teacher.

There is however another character who plays the role of guru in Apoi’s life outside the context of the school and this is his paternal uncle Bala who guides Apoi in memorizing the multiplication table by applying the mirror-image technique. Apoi’s mirror-image technique for memorising multiplication tables in *Jagat* is both a literal learning strategy and a symbolic device. It shows his creative way of coping with academic pressure, while also reflecting the film’s broader critique of rigid education systems. He finds conventional rote learning difficult, especially with multiplication tables. To cope, he writes or visualises the tables in reverse, almost like mirror writing. This unusual method reflects both his creativity and his difficulty in fitting into the rigid educational system. The technique isn’t just about mathematics. Rather it symbolizes how Apoi sees the world differently, and how marginalized children often develop unconventional strategies to survive academically.

Bala is a complex guru figure because he was involved in a street gang and substance abuse. However, he is the only family member who engages with Apoi and attempts to guide him away from going down the same path of darkness that he has chosen. The scenes in which we see Apoi with Bala are always filmed by the water, symbolic mediated transmissions of the comfort and solace that permeates the overall atmosphere of their engagement. Unfortunately, the guiding light of Bala is soon extinguished when he falls victim to drug peddlers who laced

the powder with crushed glass and sold it to him. At the same time, there is another paternal uncle, Dorai, similarly involved in gangsterism, who goes by the street name Mexico and lives in the same household as Apoi. Dorai becomes a significant figure for Apoi from the moment he unties him from the tree that his father had bound him to as punishment in the scene discussed previously. As they walk away, Dorai can be seen with his arm around Apoi's shoulder, a scene that visually transmits the symbolic gesture of comfort as well as guidance. Dorai subsequently takes Apoi to a Chinese restaurant immediately after he frees him from his bonds. To use the argument of Kniazeva and Venkatesh (2007) on the symbolic overtures of food, the scene of the meal metaphorically connects the two individuals and dispels tension (424) and subsequently becomes a symbol of inner stability (432). However, a few scenes later Apoi witnesses Dorai violently assaulting another man and given that in an earlier scene he was portrayed watching the movie of a Southern Indian popular cult action hero figure, Rajinikanth, Dorai symbolically becomes a real-life substitute for a screen hero, a different form of Guru or guide.

This becomes the turning point in Apoi's life as he progresses towards the very path that Bala had warned him against. He begins to mimic Dorai's way of dressing and eating, becoming violent with his schoolmates, and ultimately following another street gang member Chicago when both Bala and Dorai had specifically warned him to stay away from. From this point, Apoi is shown to begin modelling himself after such masculine role models, darker gurus, emulating a certain type of culturally hegemonic masculinity—that men have to be tough and stoic, brave, the breadwinner, and hero. At one point in the film, he overhears Mexico crying in the room, and his expression conveys a striking sense of betrayal and disappointment. The film itself shows a society where even young girls are taught to admire and respect boys

who use violence to fight back (such as the schoolyard bullying scene). But this is only because other avenues for social advancement and growth have been cut off for him: creativity, the use of logic and critical thinking (education) that could provide alternative forms of a more positive masculinity.

Chicago will eventually become the antagonist not only for Apoi's uncles but also in the context of the male figures who play an influential role in Apoi's life. While Bala and Dorai expressively try to draw Apoi towards the light, Chicago does the opposite. Dorai eventually decides to leave the life of gangsterism and in a symbolic scene, is shown returning to the house and partaking in a purification ritual where Mangai pours water on him before he enters the threshold.

According to Hindu custom, this ritual is to cleanse a person of all negative influences and Mangai expressively states that as she completes the ritual. Ironically the camera pans to the scene of Apoi being ridiculed by his school friends and being beaten up. The juxtaposition of these two scenes symbolically enforces the estrangement of the child from Mātā and Pitā almost as if the negative forces cleansed away from Dorai are transposed to Apoi, as mediated in the sequence of the film's ending. Dorai leaves the street gang and is willing to be beaten as its price. The scenes are ironically juxtaposed with scenes of Apoi involved in a fight with a group of boys and beating them up. When Dorai is next featured, we see him with a huge smile on his face even though it is bloodied with the camera panning him to clear blue skies and puffy white clouds, visually mediated transmissions of hope and light as he leaves a life of violence. In direct contrast, his nephew proceeds further into darkness as we return to the opening scene of Apoi angrily storming up the hill and sitting contemplatively amidst a barren landscape. The camera then pans to Chicago approaching him and offering him a cigarette which Apoi accepts

and the film ends on this highly symbolic scene that foreshadows Apoi going down the very path both his uncles painstakingly tried to guide him away from, duly accentuated by a flock of crows flying past and a darkening sky. The scenes leading to the conclusion of the film reflect how Apoi's "physical world becomes 'architected' in time and expresses itself materially as a landscape, on the surface of things, in the language of film" (Bruno 16).

Conclusion

In the end, *Jagat* does indeed lead one to reflect on who is really *Jagat*, and that behind each wayward child, teenager and ultimately criminal adult Malaysian Indian lies the webbed corridor of harsh realities that beleaguer many Malaysian Indian working-class families much like Apoi's. Through each audio-visual mediated transmission of the various constructions of Apoi as a disenfranchised Malaysian Tamil child, the film serves to highlight the vicious cycle of social marginalization that takes seed early on in childhood. Each scene traced above emerged closely integrated with the realities of the Malaysian Indian working-class family, especially in terms of living conditions, financial constraints, and the struggles for upward mobility. The filmic narration and construction of the sociocultural setting of Apoi's story take us through the initial hopeful moments of personal agency and creativity towards an overwhelming sense of marginalisation and subsequent retaliation. Though the preliminary scenes in the film do reveal some of Apoi's childlike innocence, humour and mischief, they are far and few between as the severity of his circumstances dominate. The fact that the film opens and ends with a child in a barren setting serves only to emphasize the futility of working-class Malaysian Tamil children caught in a vicious cycle of social marginalization.

The Pitā that we encountered throughout was authoritative and violent, the Mātā estranged and virtually absent, one Guru an extreme disciplinarian while the other two were complex figures who failed to deliver the child from darkness, all of which were accentuated by a distant Daivam. Such a comprehensive understanding of the journey of disenfranchised Malaysian Tamil children from the working-class sector is crucial for raising awareness and fostering empathy. This broader perspective may help shift the narrative from blame and accusations, which often focus solely on Indian gangsterism as an adult problem.

The film's ending leaves matters open ended and gives the viewers the impression that Apoi might follow Chicago (his uncle's friend) due to the negative influence of the dark guru. The film also rationalises gangsterism as an outcome of hero-worshipping Tamil movie icons, returning us to the beginning of Apoi's past where he is shown watching films featuring Rajinikanth, the celebrated South Indian actor. Rajinikanth is revered and idolised for his portrayals of violently defeating enemies and for the distinctive style that defines his performances. Since the film centres on a disenfranchised Tamil child—a focus visually reinforced in the poster of the film, presenting the image of the young protagonist in a sleeveless shirt typically worn by schoolboys, our analysis highlights the trajectory of Tamil childhood, and the resounding absence of mothers, fathers, gurus, and gods as aesthetic markers of that experience. As much as issues such as gangsterism and other social ills are undeniably relevant, the film poster itself underscores this through the image of Apoi poised with a cigarette and a lighter. Yet our objective is not to foreground these social problems, which could form the trajectory of another study, but rather to draw out the aesthetics of absence—the missing presence of mothers, fathers, gurus, and gods in the life of a child. It is this absence, framed through the child and the home, that remains integral to the focus of this article.

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ⁱ In the context of this article, the term working class refers to Malaysian Indians involved in industrial or manual labour i.e. factory workers, estate workers, laundry operators among others. The other significant term is 'child'. According to the Malaysian Child Act 2001, a child refers to a person under the age of eighteen years old. However, 'child' as used here refers to primary school children from the age range of seven to twelve years old.