



Embodied Labor and Taste: Analyzing the Parotta in *Thalaivan Thalaivi* Through Bourdieu

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Abstract. A plate of food on screen is never just a mere source of sustenance. It represents labor, hard work and the numerous struggles embedded within systems of class, cultural identity and production. The cinematic representation of food, thus becomes a marker of class, labor and culture thereby transcending its position as just a marker of nourishment and health. *Thalaivan Thalaivi* (2025), a Tamil film directed by Pandiraj, starring Vijay Sethupathi and Nithya Menon, situates the parotta, an Indian flatbread made with maida or wheat and served hot with serving of salna, a spicy and flavourful gravy with meat added to it. Parotta becomes a central symbol of Tamil working-class cuisine in the film. The film follows Aagasaveeran, a skilled parotta maker who runs a hotel with his family. It follows how food serves as a bridge that brings Aagasaveeran closer to Perarasi in the initial stage of their relationship, despite Perarasi being from a more privileged background. Through the protagonists, the film explores how shared food experiences blurs rigid class hierarchies. This paper will explore the parotta through Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, habitus and taste as proposed by him in his renowned works *The Forms of Capital* (1985), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Distinction of Taste* (1984) and *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). The parotta, central to the film, is an embodiment of embodied cultural capital in the way it is skillfully folded through multiple layers, an inherited skill. The making of parotta and its consumption by a select group of people is a habitus, a representation of the life of the Tamil-working class. Taste becomes a bridger of contrasting social classes between Aagasaveeran and Perarasi. Parotta becomes a culinary artefact connecting across social divides illustrating how even the simplest of food items carry layered meanings. This study will demonstrate how even

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ordinary acts of cooking and consumption are ingrained with deeper meanings revealing class structures while contributing to discussions in food studies and film studies.

Keywords : Parotta, Cultural Capital, Bourdieu, Thalaivan Thalaivi, Food, Class

1 Introduction

As Lidia Bastianich, chef and restaurateur says, “Food is culture. Food is an identity, a footprint of who you are” (Bastianich). Food is never just a culinary symbol; it is more than that. It represents an individual’s social standing revealing personal as well as collective identities. In global and Tamil film contexts, food is often used as symbols of class and culture. It symbolizes labor, community, and a mediator between higher and lower hierarchies thereby reflecting the privileges and struggles embedded within classes. Across the world, food is not just concerned with biological functioning but also as markers of class and hierarchies. Food, when shown in films, becomes a sensory element that connects with society. Indian cinema uses food to capture the realities of social inequalities. In the film *Kaka Muttai* (2024), pizza represents the upper-class food palate, which cannot be attained by those lower in the class hierarchy. It also becomes a symbol of longing, especially of the lower class, thereby highlighting the gaps in who has access to what food and who does not. The film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2023) intentionally uses repetitive scenes of cooking, preparations before cooking like chopping the vegetables to critique the gender inequality faced by women in the domestic sphere. What is eaten, the place of eating, who eats what and what the food represents become important questions when food comes into the picture. Tamil cinema usually has the tradition of rooting its narratives within the working class and regional identity. Within this cultural landscape, the film *Thalaivan Thalaivi* (2025), features parotta as a culinary symbol that does more than just being a warm and comforting bread made from maida. It becomes a culinary artefact that becomes one with Aagasaveeran and his identity. Set in Madurai, Aagasaveeran’s hotel actively functions as a one-stop-eat-all space where all the working-class people visit to not only have their daily share of parottas but to also to leave the mess with a full eaten stomach without getting their pockets empty. Perarasi, grows a liking for Aagasaveeran after tasting his parotta for the first time. Michael Pollan, an American journalist and Professor who explores the relationship of food with humans, in his book *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (2008) states that, “Food is also about pleasure, about community, about family and spirituality, about our relationship to the natural world, and about expressing our identity.” (Michael Pollan 8). These lines resonate well with how

parotta acts as a medium of connection between Aagasaveeran and Perarasi. To further understand parotta's role in the film, this paper draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework comprising three theories, namely, cultural capital, habitus and taste. In his works, *The Forms of Capital* (1985), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Distinction of Taste* (1984) and *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), he draws emphasis on how an individual's way of dressing, what an individual eats and how an individual speaks are all laced with social significance. It reflects how simple acts like eating and speaking are inherited by an individual and tied to class and upbringing. Applying Bourdieu's concepts to the film, constructs food not only as a source of sustenance but also explores it as a marker of socially embedded practices. Aagasaveeran's parotta making skills became a cultural capital, a skill he embodied by being who he is, a 'parotta master'. The art of kneading and folding the soft dough covered in oil becomes a skill in itself, inherited through years of practice. The continued dedication toward his skilled area of expertise over the years represent his habitus, which is shaped by his lived experience within the working-class milieu. Perarasi's habitus is a stark contrast to Aagasaveeran's as both of their realities are shaped around different upbringings and class structures. Food is a multifaceted cultural symbol. This can be evidently seen through parotta as a marker of class in the film *Thalaiivan Thalaivi* (2025). By engaging Pierre Bourdieu's frameworks of cultural capital, habitus and taste, this paper will examine how the film situates parotta not just within the culinary context but also within the context where food is more than just something that is served on a plate. Parotta becomes a social language, bridging cinema and society as well as a visual symbol that redefines class boundaries.

2 Review of Literature

Across disciplines like sociology, anthropology and literature, food has been looked upon as rich metaphor for identity, culture and belonging. Claude Levi-Strauss, an anthropologist, in his book *The Raw and the Cooked* (1966), analyses how preparation and consumption of food become a set of signs that reveals deeper societal structures reflecting broader systems of social classifications. Similarly, in *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* (1961), Roland Barthes states how food becomes a language that communicates an individual's class and ideology. These earlier works on food, study the relationship of food with humans and society thereby elevating the position of food from a basic necessity to a social language representing class, hierarchy, ideology and social standing. In *The Forms of Capital* (1985) he identifies three forms of cultural capital that are interrelated, namely, embodied cultural capital wherein an individual embodies

certain knowledge, skills and behaviour from being part of a particular group, objectified cultural capital where one's position in society is expressed through their preferences in material things (watches, clothes, food), and institutionalized cultural capital where one's association with academic institutions or professional credentials reveals their position in society. Pierre Bourdieu's insights on food in his work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Distinction of Taste* (1984) unlocked a new perspective of food being linked to taste and class. In his book, he argues that taste is not a purely aesthetic preference but more of a social conditioning where an individual prefers a distinct set of food depending upon their social standing in society. This expression of their taste preferences can be seen as an expression of their habitus. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu emphasises on habitus as the internalized choice that is being expressed in terms of taste. In the context of the culinary world, embodied cultural capital can be visibly seen through an individual's ability to prepare, consume and interpret cuisines. In a paper titled, "The Cultural Politics of Food Choices: Class and Culinary Identity", Ezhisavani D. (2025), applies Bourdieu's theories to demonstrate how food choices are tied to social class. "Bourdieu's Cultural Capital in Relation to Food Choices: A Systematic Review of Cultural Capital Indicators and an Empirical Proof of Concept", a research paper by Kamphuis, et al. (2015), argues that individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds possess incorporated cultural capital such as nutrition knowledge leading to healthier food choices. Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds lack this knowledge often leading to an imbalanced and unhealthy consumption of food. "Analysis of Cultural Capital and Identity Formation in the Animated Movies «The Incredibles», «WALL-E», and «Ratatouille», Based on Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital", a research paper by Mirzaei, Mohammadzadeh, and Safoora (2024) analyses how cultural capital is represented in select animated movies through characters reflecting different social dynamics. "The Food Culture of the Tamil Region", a research paper by Arunan (2022) focuses on food culture in the Tamil region and how it is tied to labor and social hierarchies. He highlights food as a marker of people's values and a factor to understand who they are and where they originate from. While existing scholarly articles and research papers have examined food as a symbol of culture and social class, there is a distinct lack of research where food is examined within the context of Tamil-working class especially in Tamil cinematic representation. The above mentioned reviews of scholarly articles studies food as a collective element from different contexts but there remains a significant gap in analyzing a singular food element. There is limited scholarship on the analysis of a single food item like the parotta as a symbol of class and culture. In conclusion, this analysis of existing scholarship shows how food has been discussed in collective and not singular terms. By narrowing the focus to a singular food item, this study aims to analyse parotta as a singular marker of culture and class situated within the Tamil working class and Indian cinematic context. It reveals how the layers of the parotta are not only made up of maida but also realities of class and social structures.

3 Research Methodology

The study will employ a qualitative and interpretative research approach as it analyzes parotta as an embodied capital and marker of culture and class. It draws upon Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, taste and cultural capital. The movie *Thalaiivan Thalaivi* (2025) will be analysed, with special focus on scenes involving parotta and how it fosters human relationships and also highlights class and culture. As a qualitative study, it will rely more on interpretative analysis rather than numerical or statistical data thereby situating the analysis within food studies, film studies and sociology.

4 Analysis

Parotta is an Indian flatbread found in every hotel across Tamilnadu. It is made with maida and an excessive amount of oil and kneaded till it becomes a stretchy dough. It is then cooked on a hot iron pan till it becomes crispy. This quintessential food item is consumed in large quantities by working class people. The film *Thalaiivan Thalaivi* (2025) uses parotta as the marker of culture and class and also as an element that brings together the protagonists Aagasaveeran and Perarasi. The film involves multiple scenes which show the parotta making process, along with the preparations of different variants of parotta including the kizhi parotta, kothu parotta, and the famous Aagasaveeran parotta made with minced meat. This analysis will explore parotta through Bourdieu's frameworks of cultural capital, habitus and taste. It will analyse how parotta serves as more than just a source of food but also as a marker of embodied labor and cultural capital. Cultural capital is referred to as "embodied state" which is usually in the form of "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu 243). It means bodily language and skills that have been mastered over years of practise and hardwork. When certain actions are performed continually over a period of time, it becomes an embodied skill. This can be seen in the way Aagasaveeran's hands and body work together while making the parotta. From the way he mixes the batter to achieve the right consistency of the dough, tosses the dough and to the way he cooks it on top of the oil tawa shows how his body has memorised every bit of the parotta making process. It displays the habitus of Aagasaveeran which is "the product of history" (Bourdieu 82). produced by "individual and collective practices" (Bourdieu 82). This display of parotta making skills is what Bourdieu calls "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" in his work *The Forms of Capital* (1985). The art of mastering and embodying a skill as

Bourdieu says requires “an investment of time” (Bourdieu 244). This implies how the act of preparing the parotta is not a skill that was acquired overnight but through years of rigorous practise. It requires patience and dedication. The body transforms itself into a vessel carrying cultural pride and memory. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital cannot be transmitted spontaneously but requires “an investment of time” (Bourdieu 244). The parotta can be seen as the tangible result of years of practice and investment of time. Every flip of the parotta is contained with years of hardwork and endurance. Bourdieu argues that embodied capital becomes “an integral part of the person, into a habitus, cannot be transmitted instantaneously” (Bourdieu 245). It shows how embodied labor, over a period of time, becomes one with an individual’s identity. In the film, Aagasaveeran is primarily known for his reputation as a ‘parotta master’. His parotta making skills and culinary expertise in parotta is so well known that people associate him with parotta every time they talk about him. His identity as a ‘parotta master’ cannot be separated from him. Aagasaveeran hails from a working-class family that runs a hotel for a living. They don’t run elite or commercial food outlets but rather a modest hotel located in Madurai that serves South Indian food at affordable prices. The hotel becomes a social hub where food and class intersect. People from the working class regularly visit the hotel. The environment and class that Aagasaveeran is born into shapes the class of conditions which decide who he is, what he likes and why he prefers certain things in a certain manner. This structure, which is “constitutive of a particular type of environment, produce habitus” (Bourdieu 72). The parotta becomes a marker of South Indian culture and a marker of class. In the film, the hotel run by the protagonist is a means of living. But the protagonist holds this means of living in the highest regard thereby accepting it as part of him. For him, the means of living is artistry, a skill he has mastered from every aspect. This example resonates well with Bourdieu’s argument that habitus is a “subjective system of internalized structures” (Bourdieu 86). Aagasaveeran has internalized his means of living as a disposition, an act he inherently performs because it has become an inseparable part of him. This shows how parotta becomes a food item that embodies habitus. In the film, Perarasi tastes the parotta after Aagasaveeran offers it to her when they meet for the first time. Her tasting the parotta is a notable scene because after tasting her liking towards him increases even more. The film shows Perarasi and her family consuming parotta regularly after Aagasaveeran comes into their life. Her food preferences start including parotta thereby altering her taste. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu 6) Perarasi’s newly developed liking for parotta redefines her identity. By choosing parotta, she moves away from elite culinary norms thereby redefining her identity. “Taste is a practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall-and therefore to befit-an individual occupying a given position in social space” (Bourdieu 466). The culinary practice of the protagonist in the film is not a result of cookbooks, accurate measurements or culinary training but a result of lived awareness of the balance and flavour. This expertise is a product of the habitus that is internalized within him. The

“mastery of distributions” (Bourdieu 466). originates from his “intuit” (Bourdieu 466). which enables him to prepare a hearty, spicy, and filling meal for all his customers. “Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied, helps to shape the class body.” (Bourdieu 190). In *Thalaivan* Thalaivi (2025), Aagasaveeran’s taste is aligned toward parotta with spicy salna. This preference to parotta is not just a casual preference but a result of his embodied existence. Parotta here represents the working-class labor and taste is turned into an indicator of one’s class which in return shapes an individual’s position in society. There are multiple scenes in the film where Aagasaveeran eats the parotta sitting on the floor on a banana leaf with different gravies to accompany the parotta. This shows how creation and consumption happens simultaneously in the hotel. Parotta becomes more than just food, it becomes a metaphor of taste in the working-class milieu.

5 Conclusion

The study analysed the film *Thalaivan* Thalaivi (2025) and how it captures the parotta as a powerful metaphor representing a triad of Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical frameworks, namely, cultural capital, habitus and taste. The film presents a singular food item as a marker of culture and class. Through intricate scenes showcasing the making of parotta, the film demonstrates the culinary expertise that goes into the making of the South Indian flatbread made from maida and oil. Through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu, this study underscores how even food and spaces related to food including the individual preparing the food become important factors in determining one’s class and social standing. The concepts, cultural capital, habitus and taste translate into a visual medium through the film. This shows how cultural capital is not confined to academic or formal education but also seen in the case of manual labor and how it is embodied into the working-class milieu. The use of parotta in the film shows how food is never just a source of nourishment and has deeper layers of meaning to it. It demonstrated how food can act as a social as well as a cinematic symbol. Each layer of the flaky parotta represents embodied skill, taste, endurance and patience acquired through years of culinary practice. The relationship between Aagasaveeran and his job as a parotta master can be seen as an example of how his occupation became a part of identity, a title that defined him. In conclusion, this research affirms that food in cinemas acts as a sociocultural text. It becomes a signifier of culture, class, and social hierarchy. Parotta becomes an emblem of embodied capital, taste and habitus. The act of eating, choice of food and the individual who is eating, becomes a subtle way through which individuals assert their identity thereby redefining and restructuring class structures.

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