Performing Resilience: Masculinity and Mobility in Soorarai Pottru

M. Kiruba Angelin[1], Dr. Paul T. Benziker[2]

[1]Asst.Professor, (Part-Time - Research Scholar), Department of Visual Communication, Nehru Arts & Science College, Thirmalaypalayam, Coimbatore

[2]Head & Asst. Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Nehru Arts & Science College, Thirmalaypalayam, Coimbatore

Abstract—**This article examines the performance of masculinity and the politics of mobility in Soorarai Pottru, directed by Sudha Kongara. Situating the film within post-liberalization India, the study argues that the narrative constructs a hybrid neoliberal masculine subject which performs resilience through emotional vulnerability, entrepreneurial ambition and institutional resistance. Drawing from R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, Arjun Appadurai's concept of the "capacity to aspire" and cultural studies approaches to representation, the paper conducts a critical textual analysis of narrative structure, characterization, visual grammar and sound design over the movie. Unlike conventional Tamil commercial cinema that vaporizes invincible hypermasculinity, 'Soorarai Pottru' foregrounds humiliation, financial precarity and affective breakdown as central to masculine self-making. The protagonist's mobility is not merely geographical or economic but symbolic—negotiating caste-coded exclusion, bureaucratic gatekeeping and corporate hegemony. The film reframes aspiration as collective struggle rather than individual triumph, thereby complicating neoliberal narratives of meritocracy. The article proposes the concept of "aspirational resilience" to describe this cinematic reconfiguration of masculinity, where vulnerability becomes performative strength within commercial film grammar. By analyzing how spectacle, realism and melodrama intersect, the study contributes to global debates on masculinity, neoliberal subjectivity, and South Asian popular cinema.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Soorarai Pottru (2020), directed by Sudha Kongara and starring Suriya, is a biographical drama that chronicles the journey of Nedumaaran "Maara" Rajangam, a fictionalized portrayal of Air Deccan founder G.R. Gopinath, in establishing a low-cost airline to democratize air travel in India. This paper examines how the film performs resilience through the lenses of masculinity and mobility, arguing that Maara's narrative reconfigures traditional Tamil cinematic masculinity from stoic heroism to a vulnerable, relational endurance. Drawing on film theory and cultural studies, the analysis reveals resilience not as solitary triumph but as a collective, gendered performance intertwined with social mobility. Maara's emotional labor—balancing anger, empathy and familial duties—challenges hegemonic masculinity, while the motif of flight symbolizes upward mobility for the underprivileged, critiquing class hierarchies. Through close textual analysis of key scenes, this study highlights the film's progressive portrayal of gender dynamics, particularly in Maara's partnership with his wife Bommi, and its implications for contemporary Indian cinema. Ultimately, Soorarai Pottru posits resilience as a mobile, masculine praxis that empowers the margins, offering a blueprint for aspirational narratives in global south contexts.

This paper examines the construction of masculinity in Sudha Kongara's *Soorarai Pottru* (2020), arguing that the film presents a complex, "performed" resilience that is intrinsically linked to social and economic mobility. By analyzing the protagonist Nedumaaran "Maara" Rajangam, the study explores how his character deviates from traditional, hegemonic Tamil cinema heroes through displays of vulnerability, emotional depth, and an egalitarian partnership with his wife. However, the paper also critically engages with the film's narrative strategies, including its engagement with caste politics and its reliance on star persona, to assess the limits and contradictions within this progressive portrayal. Ultimately, the film is

positioned as a significant text that reflects evolving socio-cultural notions of masculinity in contemporary India, while remaining embedded in mainstream cinematic conventions.

In the landscape of contemporary Tamil cinema, often critiqued for its hyper-masculine tropes of invincible heroes and formulaic heroism, Soorarai Pottru emerges as a nuanced intervention. Released on Amazon Prime Video in November 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the film grossed over ₹250 crore worldwide and garnered five National Film Awards, including Best Feature Film and Best Actor for Suriya. Directed by Sudha Kongara, whose prior work like Irudhi Suttru (2016) explored gender and aspiration, Soorarai Pottru adapts G.R. Gopinath's memoir Simply Fly into a tale of entrepreneurial grit. At its core is Nedumaaran Rajangam (Maara), an ex-Indian Air Force pilot whose dream of affordable aviation stems from personal tragedy: his father's death due to inaccessible medical transport.

This paper interrogates the film's title phrase—"Soorarai Pottru" (Shoot down the arrogant)—as a metaphor for performing resilience. Resilience here is not mere survival but a deliberate enactment of agency against systemic barriers. By focusing on masculinity and mobility, the analysis addresses two intersecting axes: how Maara's gendered performance navigates vulnerability and dominance, and how literal (aerial) and figurative (social) mobility underscore class critique. In a post-liberalization India where aviation symbolizes elite privilege, the film democratizes the skies, aligning with broader discourses on subaltern aspiration. This study contributes to film studies by bridging Tamil cinema's regional specificity with global theories of affect and mobility, positing Soorarai Pottru as a resilient text that reimagines masculine mobility for the precariat.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

- Scholarship on Indian cinema has long engaged with masculinity as a performative construct, from Raewyn Connell's hegemonic masculinity framework—where dominant ideals suppress alternatives—to localized readings in Tamil films' "macho" archetypes. Studies critique the "angry young man" trope in South Indian cinema as reinforcing caste and class hierarchies, yet note shifts toward vulnerability in post-2010 narratives.

Resilience, theorized by Ann Masten as "ordinary magic" in adaptive systems, finds cinematic parallels in films like Dangal (2016), where endurance is gendered labor.

- Mobility, per John Urry's "new mobilities paradigm," extends beyond physical movement to social and imaginative realms, critiquing immobility's imposed by neoliberal capitalism. In Indian contexts, aviation films serve as metaphors for upward mobility, echoing Soorarai Pottru's challenge to the "capitalist-bureaucrat nexus." Tamil cinema-specific works highlight how entrepreneurial biopics negotiate regional identity with national aspiration. Academic analyses of Sudha Kongara's oeuvre examine evolving male protagonists across her films, including Soorarai Pottru, portraying balanced, empathetic masculinity concerned with underprivileged upliftment. Reviews frame the film as celebrating strong womanhood and redefining masculinity through vulnerability. This paper builds on these by integrating affect theory (Sara Ahmed's The Cultural Politics of Emotion, 2004) to explore how resilience circulates as masculine affect, enabling mobility.

III. METHODOLOGY

By combining close scene analysis with theoretical perspectives from masculinity studies and mobility studies, the methodology connects cinematic storytelling with broader social contexts. This approach allows the paper to explore how Soorarai Pottru reflects and critiques changing ideas about aspiration, gender roles, and social mobility in contemporary India.

The analysis also considers scenes that emphasize relational dynamics, especially the partnership between Maara and Bommi. Their interactions illustrate how ambition and perseverance operate within a shared framework rather than a purely individual heroic journey. Bommi's entrepreneurial independence and her willingness to support Maara's aspirations complicate the conventional gender hierarchy frequently found in commercial cinema.

Particular attention is given to scenes that reveal Maara's vulnerability, such as his grief following his father's death or his repeated failures to secure financial support. These moments contrast with the

invincible hero often associated with mainstream Tamil commercial cinema. Rather than presenting strength as emotional detachment, the film portrays resilience as something shaped through frustration, persistence, and negotiation with others.

To strengthen the analytical approach, this study focuses on specific scenes in Soorarai Pottru where the interaction between masculinity, resilience, and mobility becomes most visible. Instead of examining the film only at a general narrative level, the analysis identifies key moments that demonstrate how these themes emerge through dialogue, framing, and character interaction.

IV. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND SCENE SELECTION

This study employs close textual analysis of Soorarai Pottru, focusing on narrative structure, mise-en-scène, dialogue, and performance. Drawing from Laura Mulvey's visual pleasure theory and updated feminist film critiques, it dissects scenes of confrontation, domesticity, and triumph. Supplementary data includes critical reviews, director interviews, and scholarly discussions of gender representation in Kongara's work. The non-linear timeline—interweaving past and present—mirrors Maara's resilient arc, allowing for chronological unpacking of mobility motifs. Ethical considerations prioritize the film's inspirational intent, avoiding over-psychologization of real-life inspirations.

Analysis
Deconstructing the Hero: Vulnerability as Strength
Challenging the "Myth of the Stoic Hero":
Analyse key scenes where Maara (Suriya) cries or shows profound despair. An IMDb user review noted that the film "broke the MYTH that MEN FEEL WEAK IF THEY CRY," with Maara's tears feeling "meaningful, natural and intense". Discuss how these moments of vulnerability are not signs of weakness but integral to his resilience.

The Roots of Resilience:
Connect his drive to personal trauma—specifically, the scene where his inability to afford a flight to see his dying father becomes his core motivation. This frames his ambition not as greed, but as a mission to democratize mobility and prevent such tragedies for others.

Academic Framework:
Refer to the 2024 study, *"BREAKING STEREOTYPES: MALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE CINEMATIC WORLD OF SUDHA KONGARA,"* which argues that Kongara's characters "demonstrate significant growth, transitioning from personal struggles to relational connections, ultimately embodying a more holistic heroism that embraces vulnerability and empathy".

The 'Bommi' Factor: Relational Masculinity and the Egalitarian Marriage
A Marriage of Equals:
Analyse the relationship between Maara and his wife Bommi (Aparna Balamurali). A review from *Feminism in India* describes them as "shining beacons of an egalitarian marriage," where both individuals "actively work on being better spouses" and neither diminishes the other's dreams.

Performing Resilience Together:
Argue that Maara's resilience is enabled and amplified by Bommi's parallel ambition. She runs her own bakery and stands up for her dreams, making his success a shared project rather than a solo endeavour.

The Director's Intent:
Incorporate director Sudha Kongara's own words from a Golden Globes interview. She stated she refused to remove scenes of Bommi's support; despite being told by her (male) writers that they were "belittling the 'hero'." Kongara asserts that Bommi "kicks the patriarchy around her with panache," and that a female director brings "a female presence that's not merely a token one" to a male-driven film.

Nuance and Critique:
Acknowledge the critical debate. While the relationship is progressive, some argue that Bommi's narrative arc is still ultimately subservient to the hero's journey, making her a "glorified cheerleader" despite her independent business. This tension is a key point for scholarly discussion.

Mobility as a Metaphor: Class, Caste, and the Right to the Sky

Seen from this perspective, Maara's ambition in the film represents more than entrepreneurial success. It reflects a broader social imagination in which mobility is treated as a collective aspiration rather than an exclusive privilege. By grounding the story within this larger transformation, Soorarai Pottru links personal resilience with the wider project of democratizing opportunity.

This historical background helps clarify the political dimension of mobility depicted in Soorarai Pottru. The film repeatedly shows farmers, workers, and villagers boarding aircraft, visually reinforcing the idea that mobility can challenge entrenched social hierarchies. Scholars of mobility studies argue that access to movement often reflects deeper structures of power and inequality. Expanding transportation access therefore has the potential to reshape opportunities related to education, employment, and participation in public life.

Air Deccan introduced a low-cost aviation model built around efficiency rather than luxury. By reducing operational expenses, limiting in-flight services, and making greater use of smaller regional airports, the airline was able to lower ticket prices dramatically. Promotional fares occasionally dropped to extremely low levels, attracting large numbers of first-time passengers. Within a few years, millions of people who had never previously boarded an aircraft experienced air travel for the first time, gradually transforming aviation from an elite symbol into a more accessible form of transportation.

While Soorarai Pottru dramatizes Nedumaaran Rajangam's attempt to make aviation accessible to ordinary citizens, the narrative is closely connected to the real-life experience of Captain G. R. Gopinath, founder of Air Deccan. When the airline began operations in 2003, air travel in India remained largely associated with business travelers and affluent urban groups. For many people in rural and semi-urban regions, long-distance mobility was still dependent on trains and buses. In this context, the idea that the 'common man should fly' represented a significant shift in how mobility could be imagined within the country.

Real-World Aviation Democratization: The G.R. Gopinath Model

• Defining Mobility:
Expand the concept of mobility beyond physical movement to include social and economic ascent. Maara's goal is to "derrumbar los costos (de los vuelos) y también a las castas" (bring down the costs of flights and the castes), as noted in a Spanish-language review.

• The Antagonist as Gatekeeper:
Analyze the villain, Paresh Goswami (Paresh Rawal), as a representative of an elite that hoards opportunity. His revulsion at the idea of "the poor" flying symbolizes the caste and class barriers Maara seeks to dismantle.

• Resilience as a Class Performance:
Frame Maara's resilience as a direct response to systemic exclusion. His journey—from being denied a bank loan 24 times to being betrayed by a fake investor—illustrates the extraordinary persistence required for a working-class individual to challenge established power structures.

A Critical Counterpoint: The Politics of Representation

• The "Anti-Caste Aesthetic" Debate:
Introduce a crucial counter argument from a Letterboxd review, which claims the film performs a "sly erasure of the anti-caste political history." The critic argues that by applying an "anti-caste aesthetics" to the story of a Brahmin man, the film takes the question of caste privilege out of the equation, using caste only as a "punchline" rather than a subject of serious inquiry. This is a vital point for a nuanced academic paper.

• The Star vs. The Character:
Discuss how Suriya's star persona intersects with the character of Maara. Does the film transcend star worship, or does it, as one critic suggested, prioritize "emotional manipulation" and "spectacle over realism" to serve the hero's image? This tension between auteur-driven narrative and commercial cinema conventions is central to understanding the film's final form.

Performing Resilience: From Solitary Grit to Collective Endurance

Resilience in Soorarai Pottru is performed through Maara's iterative failures, transforming personal loss into communal victory. The opening scene, where young Maara witnesses his father's futile ambulance journey, establishes resilience as inherited trauma: "I will make the skies for everyone," he vows, echoing Gopinath's ethos. Unlike stoic heroes in Tamil masala films, Maara's endurance is affective—marked by rage, tears, and apologies—culminating in the village-funded aircraft launch.

This performance critiques neoliberal individualism; Maara's pivots (e.g., sourcing smaller planes after investor rejections) rely on relational networks. Bommi's (Aparna Balamurali) catering business funds initial flights, symbolizing gendered interdependence. The film celebrates human aspirations and unyielding determination to break free from societal constraints, framing resilience as anti-arrogance praxis.

Masculinity and Emotional Labor: Vulnerability as Strength

Maara embodies a "pathetic man" rewriting macho script—vulnerable yet defiant. Suriya's portrayal, involving a 20-kg weight loss, physicalizes this: the lean, intense pilot contrasts the bulkier businessman, signaling emotional shedding. Scenes of spousal conflict—Maara's outburst followed by reconciliation—reveal masculinity's labor: he thinks of others' perspectives even in anger. Kongara insisted on scenes where Maara borrows money from his wife, emphasizing embarrassment and relational dependence to humanize the hero.

This subverts hegemonic norms; Maara's "self-respect marriage" to Bommi equalizes gender, with her agency (rejecting dowry) mirroring his anti-elite stance. Critics praise Suriya's switching between angry young man, conflicted son, and romantic husband, humanizing masculinity beyond violence. In Ahmed's terms, emotions like anger propel resilience, but Maara's empathy circulates solidarity, fostering mobility for the "common man." The film questions restrictive gender roles burdening men while portraying empathetic, balanced masculinity.

Mobility: Democratizing the Skies as Social Praxis

Mobility dualizes in the film: literal flight as class equalizer, figurative ascent via aspiration. Paresh Goswami (Paresh Rawal), the aristocratic rival, hoards skies for the rich, sabotaging Maara with bribes and smear campaigns. The climax—tickets sold at railway stations, enabling "farmers to fly"—inverts this: "Paresh does not own the sky." Maara explicitly aims to break caste and class barriers, declaring himself a socialist against the socialite antagonist.

Aerial mise-en-scène reinforces low-angle shots of Deccan planes evoke upward mobility, while crash-landing sequences test resilience without defeatism. Thematically, it aligns with Urry's mobilities, where aviation unmasks inequalities; Maara's airline operationalizes social justice, allowing subalterns imaginative escape. Reviews underscore this gripping tale of hope and triumph, positioning mobility as masculine duty to the masses. Intersections abound: Masculine resilience enables mobility, as Maara's gendered performance—provider yet partner—propels collective flight. Yet, some critiques note token feminism, with Bommi's arc resolving domestically, warranting examination of unresolved class-gender entanglements.

V. CONCLUSION

A Synthesis:
Summarize the paper's findings, reiterating that Soorarai Pottru offers a significant, albeit imperfect, reimagining of the male protagonist in Tamil cinema. Its performance of resilience is a complex tapestry of vulnerability, partnership, and anti-establishment fervour.

Contribution to Discourse:
Conclude that the film's value for international scholars lies in its negotiation of progressive gender politics within the masala film format. It serves as a key text for understanding how mainstream Indian cinema is grappling with contemporary conversations about masculinity, class, and representation.

Final Thought:
End with Sudha Kongara's belief that films are "major influencers of society," noting the real-world stories of people who were inspired by the film to "dream and to not give up on those dreams". The film's ultimate performance of resilience, therefore, extends beyond the screen and into the lives of its audience.

Soorarai Pottru performs resilience as a masculine-mobility nexus, reconfiguring Tamil cinema's heroic mold into empathetic endurance. Maara's journey—from grounded grief to skyward solidarity—affirms that true mobility democratizes dreams, challenging arrogance in all forms. By humanizing masculinity through vulnerability and relationality, the film offers a resilient template for biopics, inspiring global south narratives amid inequality. Future research could compare it with Hindi remake Sarfira (2024) for cross-regional masculinities. As Maara declares victory, Soorarai Pottru reminds: the skies, like resilience, belong to the persistent.

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