

## Exploring the Intersection of Historical Memory and Cultural Post-Memory in *Ponniyin Selvan 1 & 2*

---

*Gazania Eden T and Vinata Sai*

### **Introduction**

“Memory is a way of holding on to the things you love, the things you are, the things you never want to lose.”

Kevin Arnold (L.D., 2018)

Catering to the dynamic human being, a complex process called memory takes place at both the micro and macro levels. At the micro level, it has to do with neural activity, and at the macro level, it has to do with cultural activity. Cultural activity through society’s arts, rituals, and folklore maintains the memory of culture across generations. The protector of cultural memory is often historical memory. Historical memory is often shaped by oral traditions, monuments, and literature. Ranging from Sangam-era heroism and colonial resistance to Dravidian movements, historical narratives are retold and reconstructed in myriad ways. These narratives of myths and history are sustained in turn by cultural memory. This paper looks at the engagement of culture with historical memory because each is maintained and sustained by one another. *Ponniyin Selvan - 1* and *Ponniyin Selvan – 2*, both these films are a carrier of cultural memory and historical memory, and this paper intends to draw attention to the same.

### **Objectives and Methodology**

The objective of this paper is to study how historical memory and cultural memory intersect in a film like *Ponniyin Selvan*. The interpretive framework of this paper stems from memory studies, which considers

fiction as “part of a social, cultural, and historical intertextual web, a distributed memory” (Simi Raj & Parui, 2025). This way, the *Ponniyin Selvan* series acts as one of those memory boxes that, when opened, has an abundance of culture and history in it. Gathering the distributed memory of this historical fiction abundant with cultural memory and showing the influence it has on the Tamil audience, because of the medium in which it is relayed, is what this paper does. To do this, ‘narrative analysis,’ ‘New Historicism,’ and ‘ideological analysis’ that explore the cultural messages of the story are taken. Further, ‘cultivation theory’ is also considered when looking at the influence films have on the Tamil audience.

## Discussion

It’s been a century and thirty years since the first moving picture was presented to a live audience by the Lumiere brothers (Science Media Museum, 2020). The influence of films started then and is inescapable now. Films are even capable of creating a hyperreality where the line between reality and fiction blurs. This amount of influence on a human being’s perception and brain is quite intriguing. We shall see in this essay how far this influence has taken Tamil culture and history.

## Ponniyin Selvan as a historical and cultural narrative

“To recreate the plot of *Ponniyin Selvan*, he (Kalki) had visited Sri Lanka twice and assimilated the nature, the temples, Buddhist thoughts, sculptures, and culture of those people. He accompanied S. Gopalan on the tour to visit many places that were once under Chozha’s region.” So, a lot of research has gone into this historical narrative. Mani Ratnam’s plot, although trimmed here and there, bases every detail without diluting the history and culture of what Kalki intended the story to have. Mani Ratnam’s film, although twice removed from what realistically happened, is only once removed from Kalki’s art. So, the history as shown in the film is taken as a reference point because this paper is narrowed down to the influence *Ponniyin Selvan*, the two-part film, has on the Tamil audience. These reference points are taken hold of and fact-checked.

Set in the Chola dynasty of the 10th century, *Ponniyin Selvan* is a two-part Tamil historical film directed by Mani Ratnam. The film is based on Kalki's literary magnum opus, *Ponniyin Selvan*. The film brings to life the grandeur of the Chola dynasty through its history, culture, and an imagination that is consistent with the two. This is why Ken Follett says, "Historical fiction helps us imagine what history books leave out—the emotions, struggles, and dreams of ordinary people." (OPENAI, 2025). This job of capturing emotions, struggles, and dreams is done well both by Kalki and Mani Ratnam in different mediums, which is why the life of the narrative stays true to its essence.

The film opens with a description of the historic Chola lineage. A mention of the real 'Battle of Chevur' (Craig, 2017) happens throughout the film, where Aditya Karikalan, son of Sundara Chola, beheads Veera Pandiyar. This is not mere fiction. Inscriptions from centuries ago prove the same. 'An inscription about Aditya II uses the epithet "Vira Pandyan Thalai Konda Adithha Karikalan," which means Aditya Karikalan, who took the head of Vira Pandyan.' (Craig, 2017).

Sensing a conspiracy and a subsequent civil war, Aditya Karikalan sends Vallavaraiyan Vandiyathevan, a brave, witty warrior-friend, on a mission to deliver messages to his father, Sundara Chola, and his sister, Kundavai. The characters so far mentioned are all historic figures. Vandiyathevan (who is also a historic character) is masterfully exploited by both Kalki and Mani Ratnam in order to complete the narrative, which would otherwise lack coherence. The character of Vandiyathevan is half history and half fiction, which, as told before, helps the narrative present itself as a coherent and full-fledged epic. His being one among the famous chieftains of the Chola dynasty is recorded (Gokul, 2008), and this is what adds historic value to the character of Vandiyathevan in the movie.

Major characters like Nandini, Poonguzhali, Oomai Rani, and a clever, charismatic Vandiyathevan are all fictionalized to suit the plot. Their doings in actual history are little known in the case of Vandiyathevan and purely imaginary in the case of Poonguzhali, Oomai Rani, and Nandini. These fictionalized characters are not about falsifying the history

of Cholas; rather, they are all characters used to heighten its reality.

The naval capabilities of Cholas, as depicted in the novel and the films, are also historically proven,

“H. B. Sarkar [31], after discussing the so-called ‘Leiden grant’ of Rajaraja Chola (980-1014), delves into the inscriptional evidence of the Cholas, which asserts the conquest of Kadaram even by Virarajendra Cola (1069-1070), implying that the movement of Cholas or representatives of Cholas had been there for nearly 100 years from Rajaraja to Rajendra reign. Quoting Tibbets [32], Sarkar points out that Cholas knew SEA more than the Arabs. (Ramakrisna Rao, 2025)

This is shown in all its glory in the film, especially when Arulmozhi Varman is taken under arrest on a ship from Sri Lanka. Later, a mysterious figure saves Arulmozhi Varman from sinking in the narrative too, which accentuates the scene all the more.

Historical texts are often co-texts of historical fiction; this is what New Historicism says. Therefore, Kalki’s reference to books like “K.A. Nilakanta Sastri’s *The Cholas*, in Two Volumes, T.V. Sadasiva Pandarathar’s *Pirkala Chozhar Charittiram* (History of Later Chozhas),” and “*Chozhar Varalaaru* written by R. Rasamanikanar” (Sofiya, 2024) is fact-checked. Kalki was able to capture wars, characterize historical figures, and mold them to fit into his magnum opus because of the aforementioned historical texts that he used. This benefited Mani Ratnam in crafting the written fiction into a film, which had a wider impact on the audience. It led the Tamil community to reminisce about a past that had relevance and relatability. Because the book has been in the public domain for years now, it has generated a plethora of imaginary sequences in the minds of the readers. One of the ways to explore the world, the past, the present, and the future is by reading. Therefore, when millions of imaginary sequences of the same story are generated, it leads to expectations that are grander than what is possible within the scope of the Indian film industry. This might lead to disappointment in the art that is created. Despite that, when the moving pictures imagine history on behalf of the viewers, who are at least new

to the narrative or Cholas' history itself, a fresh influence about their own identity is created.

This identity does not just end with history alone; the rich culture captured in the film weaves a beautiful texture into the film, which in turn fosters the identity of Tamils in another way. Religion and spirituality, art, literature, architecture, agriculture, and festivals are all part of an overarching entity called culture. Through the film's nuanced way of throwing insights into the same, lies the success of this influential film. The interactions between Azhwarkadiyan, Vandiyathevan, and the common people in the film show us how different religions and spirituality coexisted. From Akkaravadisal (that is still being served at Srirangam and other Vishnu temples) to the little details about Buddhism having its influence on Arulmozhi Varman's administrative ethics, the film has got the nuances right. Therefore, the peaceful diversity that the film showcases is delightful to watch. Pilgrimages and river worship (like the Ponni River) are integral to spiritual life, which is also shown in the film.

Art in the form of music and dance keeps the audience in touch with that of the Cholas' glorious and rich past. Festivals like Krishna Jayanthi are seen patronized by the royal Princess Kundavai in the song "Raatchasa Maamaney" (Ratchasa Maamaney, 2022). Such patrons help a culture thrive. The song '*Ponni Nadhi*' (Ponni Nadhi, 2024) gives us a spectacle of the green, fertile, and breathtaking landscapes. Tamil Nadu's unique festivals surrounding agriculture, like Aadi Perukku (Ponni Nadhi, 2024, 0:34), that is shown in the song, brings authenticity to the portrayal of culture. The river flows majestically; the agricultural land stands in all its glory, hinting at the golden age of the Cholas when people were happy and thriving:

"I must see the River Ponni,  
Before the sun goes down,  
I must admire the lovely beauties,  
Silent as the breeze,  
Crossing barren lands,

Crossing dusty lands,  
 Crossing parched lands,  
 ...  
 O land, as I lie upon your chest,  
 Desires stir in me,  
 Will time turn in my favor...?" (Ratnam, 2022, 0:11:14)

The “Devaralan Aatam” (Devaraalan Aatam, 2022) from the film that strikes Vandiyathevan with awe is yet another element of culture that is delightfully done because of the way its dark, intense, and haunting. This brings back a form of performance that was long dead. It was more like resurrecting a culture that went extinct.

“Aazhi Mazhai Kanna” (Aazhi Mazhai Kanna—Lyrical, 2022), which is orchestrated serenely by A.R. Rahman, evokes a sense of devotion and tranquility. This song is worded with Thiruppaavai Pasuram 4 that was originally written by Andal, the female Tamil poet. The song is an outstanding example of the deep-rooted temple culture of the Chola period. Usually, the beauty of women is kept as or occurs as the theme of a poem; here, a man’s beauty is versified, comparing Lord Krishna to the life-giving monsoon rain. *Ponniyin Selvan - 2* begins with this soulful song drawn from the Chola’s past. The translation of this song from the subtitles of the film goes like this:

“O Lord of Bountiful Rain,  
 Do not hold back,  
 Dive into the ocean,  
 Take your fill and soar to the sky.  
 Let your body turn dark like the king of the universe.  
 Held in Padmanabha’s embrace,  
 May you dazzle like lightning,  
 May Your thunder echo like his sacred conch,  
 Fly like a hail of arrows from his sacred bow,  
 Moisten the world with abundant rainfall,  
 Let us celebrate” (Ratnam, 2023, 0:02:36).

The Chola-era architecture that is replicated by Thota Tharani in his production designs has taken Chola temples as examples. Thota Tharani says, “One major direction is the temples. Those are the best references we can get” (Behind the Sets of PS-1 Ft. Thota Tharrani, 2022, 0.56). The intricacies were also perfected in the sets such that the film immerses the viewers in its architectural splendor. Hereby, music, dance and architecture from the Chola’s past are all recalled.

### **Ponniyin Selvan as a memory-narrative**

The Chola empire is remembered as one of the greatest dynasties of India. The remembrance occurs even on a contemporary day like this because of films like *Ponniyin Selvan 1 & 2*. This movie acts as an important memory vessel for the contemporary audience. History that was once in the form of documents found its way to fiction, and it is never the same again; that is, it is easily remembered. The cultural aspects of ancient Tamils, on the other hand, are reconstructed in the minds of the viewers by way of moving pictures.

The archival history and cultural practices of the Tamils could have easily been forgotten, either because people have no time to look at the past or because they lack relevance. So, when given in a capsule called entertainment, it is not just cold, hard facts; they breathe with robust emotions, dreams, betrayal, revenge, and ambition. These emotions, dreams, betrayal, revenge, ambition, etc., are fictional framings in this context, but these are the very entities that penetrate the fissures of historiography and help history and culture to live. The art forms, religious practices, architectural knowledge, wars, and maritime excellence of Cholas still live in their reconstructed form because of this film. It is reconstructed because every recall of the past is an incomplete recall; there is no perfect recall. “The gaps in (several acts of) recall are filled with imagination” (Parui, 2020). This is how memory behaves. For instance,

“...episodic memory is continuous with a capacity I call ‘actuality-oriented imagination.’ Because of the deep epistemic affinities between episodic

memory and actuality-oriented imagination, it makes sense to think of them as cognitive processes of the same kind” (Munro, 2020).

So, even in a normal process of memory, imagination plays an important part. This is congruent with that of a fictitious narrative that reflects reality. Therefore, the imaginative part of *Ponniyin Selvan* cannot be brought down for ‘actuality-oriented imagination.’ All it does is heighten reality for it to live. So, historical memory and cultural post-memory of the Cholas stay put together. The reason for this is repetition. Repetition of memory keeps it from getting forgotten. “The repeated retrieval of information from memory has been shown to produce better long-term retention than a single retrieval attempt” (Roediger et al., 2009). So even for someone ignorant of the glorious past of the Cholas from history classes, for instance, the repeated exposure to the film itself can create historical memory and cultural post-memory.

This film, because of its massive scale, has a strong impact score; this lets the generations that come later inherit the past through it. The audience coming back to it again and again is due to the popular format of moving pictures in which it is presented; therefore, the repetition factor of post-memory remains valid. This inheritance lets the generations to come, or in fact, the contemporary generation like us, reimagine a significant past filled with rich history and culture. Post-memory takes its compulsive form that is worthy of discussion because of this. The post-memory created here is too precious. This is why fiction like this holds a significant place in the passage of time.

### **The influence of *Ponniyin Selvan*, the movie**

“Popular movies grab and hold our attention. One reason for this is that storytelling is culturally important to us, but another is that general narrative formulae have been honed over millennia and that a derived but specific filmic form has developed and has been perfected over the last century. The result is a highly effective format that allows rapid processing of complex narratives.” (Cutting, 2016)

This makes films and cinema-going ubiquitous. To conduct ‘Cultivation Analysis,’ Gerber suggests four steps to keep in mind: a. message system analysis b. assessing exposure time c. investigating people’s views about the world d. establishing relationships (Mosharafa, 2015). Message system analysis is to analyze the standing-out content of the film. With *Ponniyin Selvan*, history and culture stand out. The songs “Raatchasa Maamaney,” “Ponni Nadhi,” and “Devaralan Aatam” have all crossed 52, 37, and 24 million views on YouTube. “Ponniyin Selvan - 1 is the second highest-grossing film in Tamil Nadu; Ponniyin Selvan - 2 finds itself in the tenth position (Jatinder Singh, 2023). These amount to the increased exposure time of the audience. When it comes to investigating people’s worldviews about the films they like, their attention retention, their knowledge of history, their cultural awareness, and their aesthetic sense, they are seen in the review videos taken outside cinema halls straight after the film ends. For example, a commoner says, “It is not a mere movie; it is history” (Ponniyin Selvan Public Review, 2021, 01:07). Yet another says, “It is not artificial like Baahubali but realistic” (Ponniyin Selvan Public Review, 2021, 01:22). This establishes a relationship between the perspectives viewers have and the resultant post-memory that is created for this generation.

## **Conclusion**

Films not only create post-memory but also keep it alive. For it to be alive, the medium in which it is expressed should be influential. Years of perfecting the filmic form have made the medium incredibly influential. One can whip out a mobile device and repeat the scenes or music of *Ponniyin Selvan 1 & 2*. Repeated exposure helps in recall; this repeated exposure is also long-term because the film is going to be forever there on its several streaming platforms. Repeated, long-term exposure gradually shapes people’s perception. This is what ‘Cultivation Theory’ expounds. All the theories that this paper demands are used. Yet, this paper is limited to the movie that it has chosen to analyze. This paper can be furthered in the analysis of other films that have the potential to create post-memory.

## Works Cited

- “Aazhi Mazhai Kanna-Lyrical.” *Youtu.be*, 8 May 2022, [youtu.be/nx1IAiivUjk?si=MN2XbyMpyOQwkGTn](https://youtu.be/nx1IAiivUjk?si=MN2XbyMpyOQwkGTn). Accessed 8 Feb. 2025.
- “Behind the Sets of PS -1 Ft. Thota Tharrani.” *YouTUBE*, 21 Sept. 2022, [youtu.be/SIIeS3O6c4A](https://youtu.be/SIIeS3O6c4A). Accessed 8 Feb. 2025.
- Craig, Danny. “Parantaka Chola II - Battle of Chevur and Assassination of Aditya Chola II.” *Indiancontents.com*, Blogger, 22 July 2017, [www.indiancontents.com/2017/07/parantaka-chola-ii-battle-of-chevur-and.html](http://www.indiancontents.com/2017/07/parantaka-chola-ii-battle-of-chevur-and.html). Accessed 6 Feb. 2025.
- Cutting, J. “Narrative Theory and the Dynamics of Popular Movies”. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 23, 1713 - 1743. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-016-1051-4>, 2016.
- “DevaraalanAatam.” *Youtu.be*, 28 Oct. 2022, [youtu.be/PaTBeGcDfHg?si=\\_4zSC5rmYsM9CrPk](https://youtu.be/PaTBeGcDfHg?si=_4zSC5rmYsM9CrPk). Accessed 7 Feb. 2025.
- Gokul. “Vallavarayan Vanthiyathevan.” *Ponniyin Selvan Varalaatru Peravai*, 28 Mar. 2008, [ponniyinSelvan.in/53/articles/vallavarayan-vanthiyathevan](http://ponniyinSelvan.in/53/articles/vallavarayan-vanthiyathevan). Accessed 6 Feb. 2025.
- Jatinder Singh. “Top Highest Grossing Films at Tamil Nadu Box Office: Rajinikanth Starrer Jailer Second Edging Past Vikram.” *PINKVILLA*, Pink Villa, Sept. 2023, [www.pinkvilla.com/entertainment/box-office/top-highest-grossing-films-at-tamil-nadu-box-office-rajinikanth-starrer-jailer-second-edging-past-vikram-1240470](http://www.pinkvilla.com/entertainment/box-office/top-highest-grossing-films-at-tamil-nadu-box-office-rajinikanth-starrer-jailer-second-edging-past-vikram-1240470). Accessed 9 Feb. 2025.
- L.D. “My Wonder Years.” *KeepIt112*, 24 Oct. 2018, [medium.com/keepit112/my-wonder-years-17562b1c2a45](https://medium.com/keepit112/my-wonder-years-17562b1c2a45).
- Mosharafa, Eman. “All You Need to Know About: The Cultivation Theory.” *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: A Arts & Humanities - Psychology*, vol. 15, no. 8, 2015, [globaljournals.org/GJHSS\\_Volume15/3-All-you-Need-to-Know.pdf](http://globaljournals.org/GJHSS_Volume15/3-All-you-Need-to-Know.pdf). Accessed 9 Feb. 2025.
- Munro, D. Remembering the Past and Imagining the Actual. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 12, 175 - 197. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-020-00499-1>, 2020.
- OPENAI. “ChatGPT.” *Chatgpt.com*, OpenAI, 6 Feb. 2025, [chatgpt.com](https://chatgpt.com).
- Parui, Avishek. “A National Webinar on ‘Memory Studies: Research Possibilities’ by Dr. Avishek Parui.” *Youtu.be*, 6 June 2020, [youtu.be/JoypEZrXTBM](https://youtu.be/JoypEZrXTBM). Accessed 8 Feb. 2025.

“Ponni Nadhi .” *YouTube*, 2024, [youtu.be/14nAMb8bYSk?si=nvtYIjWEP7tpJr9l](https://youtu.be/14nAMb8bYSk?si=nvtYIjWEP7tpJr9l). Accessed 7 Feb. 2025.

*Ponniyin Selvan - 2*. Directed by Mani Ratnam, Amazon Prime, 2023.

“Ponniyin Selvan Public Review .” *Youtu.be*, 30 Sept. 2021, [youtu.be/sDA7BRNW6do](https://youtu.be/sDA7BRNW6do). Accessed 9 Feb. 2025.

Ramakrisna Rao, K. V. “The Shipping Technology of the Cholas.” *Sangam.org*, 2025, [sangam.org/2007/10/Shipping.php?uid=2610](https://sangam.org/2007/10/Shipping.php?uid=2610). Accessed 7 Feb. 2025.

“RatchasaMaamaney .” *YouTube*, 21 Oct. 2022, [youtu.be/IjvQeKQRfIk?si=N509O8sPdL\\_rnvC5](https://youtu.be/IjvQeKQRfIk?si=N509O8sPdL_rnvC5). Accessed 8 Feb. 2025.

Roediger, Henry & Zomb, Franklin & Butler, Andrew. (2009). The Role of Repeated Retrieval in Shaping Collective Memory. *Memory in Mind and Culture*. 138-170. 10.1017/CBO9780511626999.009.

Science Media Museum. “A Very Short History of Cinema.” *National Science and Media Museum*, 18 June 2020, [www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/very-short-history-of-cinema](http://www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/very-short-history-of-cinema).

Simi Raj, Merin, and Avishek Parui. “View of ‘They Shared Those Bits of History’: Reading the Tainted as a Transnational Memory-Narrative.” *International-Journal-of-Anglo-Indian-Studies.org*, 2025, [www.international-journal-of-anglo-indian-studies.org/index.php/IJAIS/article/view/246/215](http://www.international-journal-of-anglo-indian-studies.org/index.php/IJAIS/article/view/246/215). Accessed 6 Feb. 2025.

Sofiya, W. M. *History vs Fiction: A New Historicist Reading of Kalki Krishnamurthy’s Ponniyin Selvan*. no. 10, 2024.