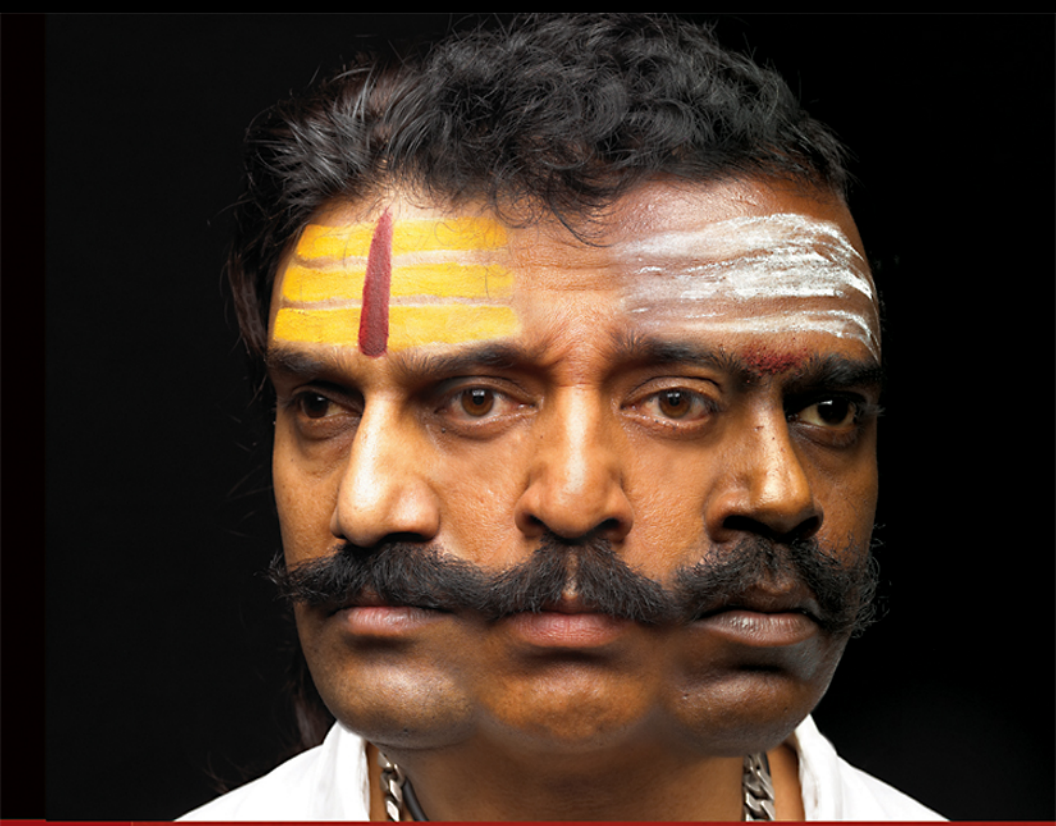

# TAMIL CINEMA

## The cultural politics of India's other film industry

Edited by Selvaraj Velayutham

# Tamil Cinema

Hitherto, the academic study of Indian cinema has focused primarily on Bollywood, despite the fact that the Tamil film industry, based in southern India, has overtaken Bollywood in terms of annual output. This book examines the cultural and cinematic representations in Tamil cinema. It outlines its history and distinctive characteristics, and proceeds to consider a number of important themes such as gender, religion, class, caste, fandom, cinematic genre, the politics of identity and diaspora. Throughout, the book cogently links the analysis to wider social, political and cultural phenomena in Tamil and Indian society. Overall, it is an exciting and original contribution to an under-studied field, which also facilitates a fresh consideration of the existing body of scholarship on Indian cinema.

**Selvaraj Velayutham** works in the Department of Sociology at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. His research interests include migration, transnationalism, and Tamil cinema and cultural studies. He has published works on South Indian diaspora, home and belonging, and living with diversity.

## Routledge Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia



The aim of this series is to publish original, high-quality work by both new and established scholars in the West and the East, on all aspects of media, culture and social change in Asia.

1 **Television Across Asia**
Television industries, programme formats and globalisation
*Edited by Albert Moran and Michael Keane*

2 **Journalism and Democracy in Asia**
*Edited by Angela Romano and Michael Bromley*

3 **Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia**
Copyright, piracy and cinema
*Laikwan Pang*

4 **Conflict, Terrorism and the Media in Asia**
*Edited by Benjamin Cole*

5 **Media and the Chinese Diaspora**
Community, communications and commerce
*Edited by Wanning Sun*

6 **Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema**
No film is an island
*Edited by Gina Marchetti and Tan See Kam*

7 **Media in Hong Kong**
Press freedom and political change 1967 2005
*Carol P. Lai*

8 **Chinese Documentaries**
From dogma to polyphony
*Yingchi Chu*

**9 Japanese Popular Music**
Culture, authenticity and power
*Carolyn S. Stevens*

**10 The Origins of the Modern Chinese Press**
The influence of the protestant missionary press in late Qing China
*Xiantao Zhang*

**11 Created in China**
The great new leap forward
*Michael Keane*

**12 Political Regimes and the Media in Asia**
Continuities, contradictions and change
*Edited by Krishna Sen and Terence Lee*

**13 Television in Post-Reform China**
Serial dramas, confucian leadership and the global television market
*Ying Zhu*

**14 Tamil Cinema**
The cultural politics of India's other film industry
*Edited by Selvaraj Velayutham*

**15 Popular Culture in Indonesia**
Fluid identities in post-authoritarian politics
*Edited by Ariel Heryanto*

**16 Television in India**
Satellites, politics and cultural change
*Edited by Nalin Mehta*

# Tamil Cinema

## The cultural politics of India's other film industry

**Edited by**
**Selvaraj Velayutham**

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2008
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."



*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*
Tamil cinema : the cultural politics of India's other film industry / edited by Selvaraj Velayutham.
p. cm. (Routledge media, culture and social change in Asia series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Motion picture industry India Tamil Nadu. 2. Motion pictures Social aspects India Tamil Nadu. 3. Motion pictures India Tamil Nadu. I. Velayutham, Selvaraj, 1968
PN1993.5.I8T28 2008
302.23′43095482 dc22 2007036110

ISBN 0-203-93037-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 978 0 415 39680 6 (hbk)
ISBN 978 0 203 93037 3 (ebk)

**For Amanda**
**and**
**in memory of Sathiavathi Chinniah (1970–2007)**

# Contents

# Figures

# Contributors

**Theodore Baskaran** is a film scholar. He has published in journals such as *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Deep Focus*, *Journal of the Indian History Congress*, and *Sea Gull Quarterly Studies*. He is the author of *Message Bearers: Nationalist Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India 1880 1945* and *The Eye of the Serpent: An Introduction to Tamil Cinema*. The latter won the National award for the Best Book on Cinema from the President of India. As Hughs Visiting Scholar, Baskaran taught a course in Film Studies at the University of Michigan in 2001.

**Sathiavathi Chinniah** until her recent untimely death was a doctoral student at the South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore. Using the films of K. Balachander as a case study, in her research, she combined textual analysis and audience readings to explore the representation of the poet Bharati's imagined female i.e. Putumaippen in Tamil cinema. Sathiavathi contributed an article titled 'Tamil movies abroad: Singapore South Indian youths and their response to Tamil cinema' in *Kolam*, an online journal. Her other areas of interest included the representation of religion and traditional dance in Tamil cinema.

**Vijay Devadas** lectures at the Department of Communication Studies, University of Otago, New Zealand. His research interests are in the areas of media, film and cultural studies, postcolonial theory and diaspora. He has written several articles on the Indian diaspora and postcolonial theory and is currently working on a research project investigating the socio-political and cultural implications of indigenous media development in Aotearoa/New Zealand under the auspice of a University of Otago Research Grant.

**Sara Dickey** is Professor of Anthropology at Bowdoin College. Her publications include *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*; *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Service and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia*, (co-edited with Kathleen M. Adams); and numerous articles on film-watching, fan clubs, politics, class relations and class identities in urban south India.

**Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr**. is Temple Professor Emeritus of the Humanities in Government and Asian Studies, The University of Texas at Austin. He is a specialist on Indian politics and social change, and has written extensively on Tamil Nadu. Among his publications are *The Dravidian Movement*, *The Nadars of Tamilnad*; and *Essays in the Political Sociology of South India*. He conducted research on politics and the Tamil film in 1969 70. His other publications include *India: Government and Politics of a Developing Nation*, and most recently, *A Portrait of the Hindus: Balthazar Solvyns and the European Image of India 1760 1824*.

**Preminda Jacob** is Associate Professor of Art History and Theory in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, USA. Her research focus is on the social and political aspects of public visual culture. She is presently completing a book manuscript entitled *Celluloid Deities: The Visual Culture of Cinema and Politics in South India*. She has published several articles from her research in this area, including 'Between Modernism and Modernization: Locating Modernity in South Asian Art', published in *Art Journal*. Dr. Jacob was educated in India and the USA.

**Rajan Krishnan** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. His present research can be best described as comparative anthropology of cinema in Italy and Tamil Nadu. Before joining the program, he was an active member of the Tamil little magazine milieu. He published many articles in serious journals in Tamil on a range of topics the most significant of which was his essay on Periyar E. V. Raamasamy published in 1992. He took active part in the film society movement and in experimental theatre groups, and was part of institutional research projects in Tamil Nadu.

**C. S. Lakshmi** is a Tamil writer who writes under the pseudonym Ambai. She is also an independent researcher in Women's Studies and is currently the Director of Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) based in Mumbai. Her Fictional work in Tamil has been translated in a collection called *A Purple Sea*. Her non-fictional work includes a book on Tamil Women Writers, entitled *The Face behind the Mask* and two books on musicians and dancers, entitled *The Singer and the Song*, and *Mirrors and Gestures.*

**Anand Pandian** is Johal Chair in Indian Studies and Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. His research concerns the cultural politics of modernity, nature, and selfhood in south India. He is currently completing a manuscript on the intersection between moral and agrarian cultivation in Tamil Nadu, and embarking on a second project that will explore representations of rural life and landscape in Tamil cinema. He is a co-editor of *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference* as well as numerous other articles.

**Kalpana Ram** is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Anthropology, Macquarie University where she teaches courses on India, performance, gender, phenomenology, and post-colonialism. She is the author of *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Village*, and co-editor of *Modernities and Maternities: Colonial and Postcolonial Experience in Asia and Pacific*; and *Borders of Being: Citizenship, Sexuality and Reproduction in Asia and the Pacific*. She currently is preparing for publication a book on women's experiences of reproductive disorder and spirit possession among rural Tamil Dalit women. She also publishes in the field of dance and post-colonialism. She and Selvaraj Velayutham have just edited a short film on *The Goddess in Tamil Cinema* for the Art Gallery of New South Wales's exhibition *Goddess: Divine Energy*.

**Selvaraj Velayutham** is an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Sociology, Macquarie University. His research interests are in the area of migration, transnationalism, diaspora, globalization, nationalism and Tamil cultural studies. He is the author of *Responding to Globalisation: Nation, Culture and Identity in Singapore* and has written several journal articles on Indian Tamil migrants, moral economies of migration and transnational affect. He is currently researching on the experiences of Indian temporary skilled migration to Australia.

# Acknowledgements

The idea for this book came out of a larger research project on transnationalism and Indian migration to Australia. I wish to acknowledge the funding support provided by the Australian Research Council for this project. I would like to thank all the authors for their support and contribution towards this book project and especially acknowledge Theodore Baskaran, Sara Dickey, Robert Hardgrave, Preminda Jacob, Rajan Krishnan, Anand Pandian, and Vijay Devadas for assisting me in the editorial process. I would like to thank Kalpana Ram for the opportunity and many enjoyable discussions we had, while putting together a film *Goddesses in Tamil Cinema* as part of the *Goddess: Divine Energy* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I am grateful to Vallatharasu Marimuthu, currently working in Chennai, for his help in obtaining the image for the book cover. Many thanks to the help and kind support offered by Peter Sowden, Tom Bates, Ulrike Swientek and Jean Rollinson at Routledge and the anonymous reviewers of the book. I would like to acknowledge Rajkamal Films International for granting permission to use an image from the film *Virumandi* for the book cover. I would like to pay a special tribute to my late grandparents Kalimuthu and Theivanai from Soorappallam. It was they who took me to watch my first Tamil film as a child in the town of Pattukkottai. I would like to also express my deep sense of gratitude to my parents Velayutham and Rajamani for their affection and kindness they have shown me all my life. And of course, to Amanda for her love, scholarly insights, stimulating conversations and most of all, for persevering with my impromptu renditions of Tamil film dialogues and songs, and film nights. I dedicate this book to her.

The article by Robert Hardgrave 'Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK' was originally published in *Asian Survey* (1973), 13 (3): 288 305.

A special acknowledgment must go to Sathiavathi Chinniah. As this book went to press, I heard the terrible news that Sathiavathi had died suddenly. She was a promising young scholar and passionate about her research, but sadly, she was yet to complete her PhD in the South Asian Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore. Her thesis topic was on

the representation of women in Tamil cinema with a specific focus on films directed by K. Balachander. Sathiavathi Chinniah's passing is a great loss to the field of Tamil cinema studies. I thank her for her contribution to this book, and her family for allowing us to publish the piece posthumously. May she rest in peace.

Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders for their permission to reprint material in this book. The publishers would be grateful to hear from any copyright holder who is not here acknowledged and will undertake to rectify any errors or omissions in future editions of this book.

# Introduction

## The cultural history and politics of South Indian Tamil cinema

*Selvaraj Velayutham*

South India is the largest producer of films in India.[1] Yet, for many Bollywood, the popular name given to the Mumbai-based Hindi film industry, is Indian cinema *par excellence*. That is, the idea of Indian cinema is profoundly determined, reproduced and articulated through the lens of Bollywood owing to its huge commercial success both in India and around the world (Velayutham 2006). The growing popularity and interests in Bollywood needs no further elaboration judging by the numerous events and film festivals devoted to this cinema. Even academic writings on the topic of Indian cinema tend to primarily focus on the story of Hindi cinema/Bollywood.[2] The cultural hegemony and dominance of Bollywood within the Indian film industry has both marginalised and erased the rich complexities and ethno-linguistic specific cinematic traditions of India.[3] With the exception of Bengali cinema and the work of Satyajit Ray, the other cinemas of India remain in its shadow. The Urdu, Marathi, Gujarati, Assamese, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil language film industries, often referred to as regional cinema, are both under represented and overlooked. The sheer enormity of the Indian film industry, and its complex and heterogeneous composition along ethno-linguistic identities and territorial lines, necessitate a more sustained and in depth study of each cinema, if we want to further our understanding of what is termed Indian cinema.

With this in mind, this book aims to introduce and present a theoretically informed study of one of India's largest, most prolific and increasingly significant cinemas: the Tamil film industry based in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The Tamil film industry is not only home to Tamil cinema but also regularly attracts other Indian language productions. It is well documented that when cinema arrived in British India in the late 1890s, it took root in the three major metropolises, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras (renamed Chennai). Films were immensely popular as many theatres and film halls began appearing in these cities. Equally, many Indian pioneers fascinated by motion pictures ventured into film production. The Tamil film industry begins about the same time as Hindi and Bengali cinema in the second decade of the twentieth century. Although it is less known and acknowledged, it is rapidly emerging

as a key player within Indian cinema. To date however, relatively little has been written on Tamil cinema.[4]

This book in part seeks to fill this scholarship vacuum and generate new knowledge and research interests in Tamil cinema. It brings together for the first time international scholars from academic disciplines such as cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, politics, media studies, women's studies, area studies and art history employing approaches such as textual, historical, discursive analysis and ethnography to the study of Tamil cinema and its relations to the social milieu. By specifically focusing on Tamil cinema and introducing other forms of film narratives and representations that are less recognised or differentiated, this volume seeks to challenge and complicate the synonymous relationship that exists between Bollywood and Indian cinema. In doing so, the book aims to present Indian cinema as a multiple, conflicting and contentious site of cultural production as well as to highlight Tamil cinema's distinct characteristics, and the synergies and disjunctures between and across the various Indian film industries.

## A brief history

Since its beginning in the silent era, Tamil cinema has grown into a multi-million dollar industry. Located in the Chennai district of Kodambakkam, Tamil Nadu's cinema city, it produces 150 200 feature films annually. It is often referred to as Kollywood, an amalgam of the words Kodambakkam and Hollywood. Tamil cinema has a long history comparable to other Indian language cinemas. Describing the significance of cinema in Tamil society, Baskaran (1996: ii) points out that 'over the seventy-nine years of its existence, Tamil cinema has grown to become the most domineering influence in the cultural and political life in Tamil Nadu'.

It would be both impossible and an injustice to outline the entire history of Tamil cinema in this brief introductory chapter. However, the two well-known Tamil film historians Theodore Baskaran and Randor Guy have written widely on this topic.[5] In Baskaran's (1981, 1996) *The Message Bearers: Nationalist Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India 1880 1945* and *The Eye of the Serpent: An Introduction to Tamil Cinema*, and Guy's (1997) *Starlight Starbright Early Tamil Cinema*, the only English publications available on the history of Tamil cinema, the authors offer an excellent account of the arrival of cinema to the Madras Presidency at the turn of the twentieth century; the early pioneers of the film industry who were instrumental in setting up production companies and studios; biographies of directors, producers, and actors; and synopses of major films over the years. Though there are other works on the history of Tamil cinema, these are mostly written in Tamil and have not been translated into other languages.

In 1917, London educated R. Nataraja Mudaliar produced and directed the first silent feature film in Tamil Nadu called *Keechaka Vadham*. An automotive dealer, Nataraja established the India Film Company Limited

and built South India's first film studio in Madras. He went on to make *Draupadi Vastrapaharanam* (1917), *Mayil Ravana* (1918), *Lavakusa* (1919) and *Kalinga Mardanam* (1920). Following in his footstep, Raghupathy Prakasa, the son of R. Venkaiah, a photographer turned cinema house operator, produced a number of silent feature films including *Bhishma Pratignai* (1921). Other early film pioneers were A. Narayanan who made *Dharnapathini* (1929) and *Gajendra Moksham* (1930), and Raja Sandow who made *Rajeswari* (1931), *Usha Sundari* (1931) and *Bhakthavatsala* (1931). According to the Tamil film historian Randor Guy (1997), title cards written in more than one language such as English, Tamil, Telugu and Hindi were used in silent films to explain the story and dialogue. The silent films were accompanied by live background music and usually Indian instruments such as the harmonium, tabla and, sometimes, the flute. These films made in Madras were screened all over India and in the neighbouring British colonies Burma, Malaya, Singapore and Ceylon.

According to the film historian Yves Thoraval (2000: 35), Tamil cinema made such a promising start during the silent era that by the end of the 1920s, through the establishment of new studios in Madras as well as other Tamil Nadu cities such as Salem, Madurai and Coimbatore, and the entry of technically trained film crews, it emerged as a veritable entertainment industry (in third place after Bombay and Calcutta). The expansion of infrastructure also enabled the Tamil film industry to become autonomous of Bombay and Calcutta by the time sound appeared in film. In fact, as Thoraval (2000: 35) observes, the end of the silent era also marked the birth of a new entity, 'South Indian cinema' embracing Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam cinema with Madras as the centre of production. Thus, the so-called first Tamil sound feature film *Kalidas* (1931) was directed by H. M. Reddy from Andhra Pradesh and featured dialogues in both Tamil and Telugu. The film tells the story of the Sanskrit poet and playwright Kalidas.

As soon as the talkies arrived, the Tamil film industry began to develop rapidly, ushering into cinema history a long list of successful and immensely popular actors, producers, directors, scriptwriters, music composers and singers. Media moguls such as S.S. Vasan, A.V. Meyyappan (AVM) and T.R. Sundaram, to name just a few, established film studios, production companies and cinema halls giving impetus to the growth of the industry. During the pre-war period, films embraced new genres in addition to mythologicals. Ellis Duncan's *Iru Sakodarargal* (1936), and K. Subrahmanyam's *Balayogini* (1937) adopted contemporary social themes such as family disputes and caste discrimination. Other films like *Mathurabhoomi* (1939) and *Thyagabhoomi* (1939) featured strong overtones of anti-British sentiments and Indian patriotism. However, during the Second World War, due to import restrictions on film stock, the British India colonial government encouraged filmmakers to produce propaganda films as part of the war effort to win the support of the Tamils against the Japanese who had already deposed the

British in Southeast Asia and were threatening to invade India. Films such as *Manasamrakshanam* (1944), *Burma Rani* (1945) and *Kannamma En Kathali* (1945) were about Tamil freedom fighters foiling Japanese war advances in British Burma and India.

The post-war period also saw the proliferation of Tamil movies that were on the one hand infused and influenced by Dravidian politics (see Hardgrave, and Devadas and Velayutham in this volume) and more generally melodramas and social themes. The key features of the period include major stars such as M.G. Ramachandran, Sivaji Ganesan; Gemini Ganesan, Savitri, Bhanumathi, Saroja Devi and Jayalalitha; film narratives highlighting and driven by moral imperatives associated with social ills, family breakdowns, good versus bad, overcoming of social difficulties, and subaltern struggles with films like *Vellaikari* (1949), *Nallathambi* (1948) and *Parashkati* (1952).

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, Tamil cinema was reinvigorated by the arrival of new and young talents as the stars of earlier decades faded away or entered retirement. These three decades saw the entry of the second generation of actors like Kamal Hassan, Rajini Kant, Vijaykanth, Saritha, Sri Devi and so forth in lead roles and major directors such as K. Balachander, Bharatiraja, Balu Mahendra, K. Bhagyaraj, T. Rajender and Mani Ratnam (see Thoraval 2000: 318 343). A popular genre that emerged during this period is what Sundar Kaali (2000: 170) terms Neo-nativity films that were 'characterised by an ideological investment centred on the rurality of its plot-events and roles'. Thus, the rustic hero, the village and its social milieu became the preferred site for numerous films produced in this period.

Since the 1990s, with the liberalisation of the Indian economy and the rise of an Indian middle class, Tamil cinema has shifted its orientation towards tapping into the sensibilities and taste cultures of this new film audience. The representation of modernity, progress, affluence and global consumerism is its major preoccupation (see Krishnan in this volume). For instance, the urban space and 'the city' now serve as the primary backdrop for most films. Films are centred mainly on themes such as romance (teenagers, college youths and young adults); institutional and bureaucratic inadequacies (hospitals, the police and politicians being the primary target); and the underworld (gangster flicks). In a sense, films are a lot more sensual, intense and explosive in their visual form and this is coupled with a high turnover of new and young actors within the film industry.

In 2006, the Tamil film industry celebrated its 75th anniversary and it continues to flourish as a reputable site of cinematic production in India.

## What is *Tamil* about Tamil cinema?

It is widely acknowledged that 'Indian' cinema is not a homogeneous or singular entity and any attempt to approach this cinema from a 'national' perspective is problematic (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994; see also Devadas and Velayutham in this volume). Indian cinema as a text and form is

multifarious but far too often adheres to a predictable narrative and fairly standard genre conventions. In their book *Indian Popular Cinema*, Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998) point out that the 'Indian-ness' of Indian cinema can be best understood by closely examining the genres and themes that are pervasive and unique to this industry (see also Pendakur 2003). There are several significant genres in Indian popular cinema and they include mythologicals, devotional, historical, romance, stunt (action), social, family dramas and a combination of these. Indian films are mostly melodramatic, have circular narratives, are formulaic, accompanied by music, song and dance sequences, fight scenes, exaggerated humour and are three hours long (see Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998: 23 33, 91 102). These readily identifiable characteristics of Indian cinema almost always from the vantage point of Hindi films indicate that there are certainly common elements that cut across all the Indian language cinemas.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that academic scholarship has tended to overlook the relationship between the various cinemas of India, and the role and contribution of regional cinema to Indian cinema as a whole. There is a need therefore to recognise Tamil cinema as Indian cinema or at least as part of Indian cinema to affirm the commonality as well as the heterogeneity of the cinematic forms within India. In a sense, this book aims to reclaim a space for Tamil cinema within the discourses and narratives on Indian film industry. The literature on Bollywood discusses this industry in and of itself and never as a node interlinked with other cinema nodes. What I am suggesting is that despite the regional differences, there has been an incredible amount of crossover and synergy between the film industries in India. One only needs to browse through Rajadhyaksha and Willemen's (1994) *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, to realise these relationships and interconnections. For instance, during the silent film era, films made in Madras were also screened in other parts of India. Even film producers, technicians, engineers and other specialists came from Bombay and Calcutta to work in Madras and vice versa. With the arrival of sound, again if we browse through the Indian filmography, we discover that dubbing and remaking of films were an integral part of Indian cinema history. Films made in Hindi were dubbed or remade into Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam and vice versa. It is worth noting that Tamil film studios such as Vijaya, Prasad and AVM for example have continued to produce Hindi films since the 1950s to the present (Thoraval 2000). Artists (production and acting) have worked across the various cinemas on a regular basis. For instance, Tamil actors Vijantimala, Sri Devi, KamalHassan and Madhavan have had huge success in Bollywood. In addition, Tamil cinema has also attracted, especially, female actors from other cinemas past and present such as Bhanumati from Andhra Pradesh, the Badmini sisters from Kerala, Saroja Devi from Karnataka and Simran, Sneha, Reema Sen, Sonia Agarwal Sonia and Aishwarya Rai from other parts of India. These synergies have helped to enhance and invigorate various aspects of the cinemas of

India. In recent times, Tamil cinema directors such Mani Ratnam, Ram Gopal Varma and Shankar have worked in Hindi, Malayalam and Telugu films. Indian film music composers like A.R. Rahman and most of the playback singers work across the film industries. Overall, it can be argued that the various film industries in India are not just self-contained production sites but are fluid and versatile in the ways they attract new talents. And these industries have been mutually benefiting from one another.

Having argued the networks and interconnections that exist between the various Indian film industries, it should also be pointed out that, despite the proliferation of writings on the subject of Indian cinema, very little attempt has been made to articulate some of the peculiarities and distinct features of each of these film industries. Frequently, these works tend to only outline the specific histories, significant highlights and players within the cinema concerned. But a close reading of the various Indian language films will reveal that many differences and nuances exist between them. They not only differ in their use of language (including regional variations), specific historical and cultural references, regional themes and styles but also the ways in which they relate to their diasporic audience and in terms of their global circulation.

As far as Tamil cinema is concerned, it has a number of distinct characteristics that are unique to this industry. First, it has to be said that language is a critical marker of distinction. Though Tamil is recognised as one of India's national languages it is not the *lingua franca* of India. The Tamil language is only widely spoken in the state of Tamil Nadu. It is a classical living language and belongs to the Dravidian language group. The ancient origin, roots and literary tradition of Tamil language have given impetus to the production of a powerful myth and trope of signification between language, identity, territory and 'Tamilness' (see Pandian 1995: 169 191; Ramaswamy 1997). As such, it is a language imbued with tradition and ethno-nationalism. As the historian Ramaswamy (1997) in her enthralling book on *Language Devotion in Tamil India* writes, for the Tamils 'the state of the language mirrors the state of its speakers; language is the essence of their culture, the bearer of their traditions, and the vehicle of their thoughts from time immemorial'. Such profound overtures and self-proclamations are not only found in the political culture of Tamil Nadu but also in Tamil cinema.

In cinema, the use of Tamil generates a symbolic, embodied and affective connection to 'Tamilness' and Tamil identity. Movie dialogues and songs often glorify and celebrate (often nondiegetically) the Tamil language, people, culture and identity. This locates both the film and the audience within a particular national imaginary and ethno-linguistic space which is Tamil and Tamil only. For instance, frequent articulation of *Tamil Nadu* (Tamil country) or *Tamilakam* (*akam* means home or interior) which refers to the land of Tamil language, culture, and/or people is a powerful signifier and as Pandian (1995) points out it evokes the imagery of internal psychic/emotional unity of all Tamils against the 'external other'. An important point to stress

here is that because of the specificities of the language, Tamil cinema always portrays the Tamils while Hindi cinema more often than not represents an 'Indian' without an ethno-specific identity. The characters of Bollywood cinema are supposedly pan-Indian. Moreover, Tamil cinema set in particular locations in Tamil Nadu usually employ the respective district inflections or Tamil dialects such as the Kongu dialect of Coimbatore, Thanjavur, Tirunelveli, Ramanathapuram and so forth.

At the same time, however, like the other well known regional cinemas of Bengal (Bengali), Andhra Pradesh (Telugu), Kerala (Malayalam) and Karnataka (Kannada), Tamil cinema, it must be argued, also has a distinct political and social content that sets it apart from Hindi cinema. The reverberation and articulation of Dravidian identity and Tamil nationalism are profound in Tamil cinema. A direct outcome of this is the particularisation of identity. Tamil cinema echoes a distinctly Tamil identity while Hindi cinema (Bollywood) is often regarded as emphasising a pan-Indian identity. The tendencies of separatism and linguistic nationalism asserted by the Tamils in South India are also a salient feature of the Tamil film industry. The founding of the Justice Party, spearheaded by Periyar E.V. Ramasami Naicker and his 'self-respect movement', was in many ways pivotal in laying the foundations and moulding the aura of Tamil cinema. Periyar's political slogan of 'no to God, no to religion, no to Gandhi, no to Congress and no to Brahmins' fostered the Dravidian movement. As Thoraval (2000: 318) points out, during the post-war period the cinema of Madras was marked by the

> increasing popularity, in parallel with the anti-British struggle for Independence, of an ethno-linguistic 'nationalism', anti-Hindi and anti-north (India), and as its corollary, the putting forward, in literature and on the screen, of the glories, languages and culture of the ancient 'Dravidians'.

Many of these sentiments were subsequently incorporated into the nationalist Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) founded in 1949 by the charismatic scriptwriter and playwright C.N. Annadurai. Others like M. Karunanidhi and M.G. Ramachandran also worked magic through their contribution and role in Tamil cinema. The DMK continued to strongly oppose the caste system (Sanskritic and Brahmanism) through the celebration of Tamil civilisation, culture and language using various artistic means such as stage dramas, poetry, literature, musicals and, most successfully, film (Perinbanayagam 1971; Sivathamby 1971, 1981).

The symbiotic relationship that exists between Tamil cinema and politics is in itself a fascinating study (see Baskaran 1981; Dickey 1993; Hardgrave 1970, 1971, 1973, 1975; Hardgrave and Neidhart 1975; Pandian 1992, 2000; Sivathamby 1981). All the Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu since the late 1960s have been involved in the Tamil film industry. They include C.N.

Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) and J. Jayalitha. This history of the close links between politics and cinema has meant that political and social commentaries and the assertion of Tamil nationalistic ideas (though not in the same vein as early separatists' discourse) continue to be propagated on the silver screen.

Along with the power of language, Tamil cinema is always about Tamilians. This is not to suggest that Tamil cinema does not partake in Indian nationalism or privilege an Indian identity but rather, even in those scenarios, India is conceptualised through and from a Tamil (male) subject position. For instance, Mani Ratnam's *Roja* and *Bombay* which were national hits begin with characters and places in Tamil Nadu caught at the centre of a national threat.[6] The marking of ethnicity and the place of origin is quite common in Tamil cinema. Films are normally set in Tamil cities and villages even if they are fictional. These settings present recognisable differences and a social milieu that is specific to Tamil Nadu. For instance, the construction of gender in Tamil society places particular emphasis on male and female bodies. Tamil masculinity is epitomised by the wearing of a moustache, physical prowess, authority, sexual virility and the capacity to control women. Clean-shaven male Tamil actors on screen are an exception, as opposed to Hindi cinema where it is a norm. Femininity or womanhood is resolutely contained in the virtues of obedience, righteousness, chastity and purity (see Lakshmi and Chinniah in this volume). In Tamil cinema, male and female gender identities remain fixed and unchanging.[7] It reproduces the patriarchal order privileging and normalising the position of men and the subordination and oppression of women. Similarly, the *veshti* (white loincloth) is the traditional attire of Tamil men and the sari among women. Though modern Indian and western outfits are also worn, these traditional costumes and style are employed to ground the identity of the characters in the film.

Indeed, Tamil cinema, like the other language cinemas of India, always tells a simple story with fanfare, melodrama and predictability. It is deeply moralising, self-righteous, and parochial and upholds the social order; it also seeks to entertain as well as maintain the dominant values of a Hindu Tamil society. But it often always 'only' speaks to a Tamil audience. Tamil cinema for a Tamil audience speaks volumes about being Tamil. Where Bollywood nominally transcends such particularistic identities, depicting mostly generic characters, Tamil cinema employs Tamil-Indian identities both as a matter of fact and strategically.

## Thematic overview

This volume on Tamil cinema is not an attempt to present a celebratory account of one of the most important but often overlooked film industries in India. Rather it offers a critical study of the social role, representations, cultural meaning and circulation of films of the Tamil film industry. The

chapters in this collection deal with a wide range of issues from different disciplines. Tamil cinema pervades every aspect of Tamil society and everyday life. As a form of popular culture, it provides not only entertainment to the masses but also an array of existential and ontological points of reference, from cultural identity to the production of norms, values and beliefs, and dissemination of dominant values. In this sense, the subjects addressed by Tamil cinema say as much about Tamil society, its people and culture as they do about Tamil films.

The volume begins with two chapters on the topic of gender. C. S. Lakshmi's chapter offer a critical insight into gender relations and identities in Tamil cinema. She points out that cinema has always celebrated and revered the 'good' Tamil woman, juxtaposing and intertextualising her with references from Tamil literature and poetry. For instance, the heroine Kannagi in Ilango Adigal's Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*, is considered the symbol of Tamil womanhood and fighter for justice, and is frequently invoked in cinema. The good Tamil woman, like Kannagi, is 'chaste, intelligent, motherly and divine'. The bad woman on the other hand is presented as having virtues that are diametrically opposed to the good woman. She is always portrayed as a temptress, wayward and deceitful. This apparent binary opposition between the good and bad woman in Tamil cinema is never masked or subjected to interrogation. Rather, as Lakshmi points out, the oppositions are presented in a straightforward and uncomplicated manner. Lakshmi's chapter clearly demonstrates how the binary of the good and bad woman is constructed and resolved neatly through the creation of archetypical social roles such as the daughter, the sister, the wife, the mother and so on who have an obligation to a male figure. Continuing with the same theme, the second chapter by Sathiavathi Chinniah posits a transformative reading of the *kata-nayaki* (heroine) from being a passive subject to a pleasurable object. The passive heroine seldom possesses an independent voice and could only speak in her capacity as the mother, sister, wife and girlfriend, and always in relation to the patriarchal male. Her passivity is reaffirmed by her peripheral and subservient role within the film narrative. The passive *kata-nayaki* as Chinniah points out was also represented as the traditional, sari-clad and docile protagonist. Going by appearance, the contemporary *kata-nayaki* is an object of sexual desire because she is portrayed as a modern, scantily clad and mischievous woman. Here the penetrating and voyeuristic gaze of the camera enables the male audience to devour the *kata-nayaki*'s body. However, despite the liberal interpretation of the appearance of the *kata-nayaki* and her role in recent Tamil cinema, Chinniah argues that she rarely transgresses the qualities of the good Tamil woman and inevitably remains subservient to the patriarchal order.

The religious or devotional film genre has a long history within Indian cinema. Hindu mythologies and epics were the main subject for films right from the beginning. To date, there are more than two hundred religious films made in Tamil, based on various Hindu epics and mythologies. Here

two subjects are unique to Tamil cinema. The first are films that are dedicated to Murugan (the second son of Shiva, revered as the Tamil god) and the other to Amman (an incarnation of Shakti). Amman worship is commonly found in South India and it is no surprise that Amman films are a commonplace in Tamil cinema. Here too there is a distinction between the well-known Sanskritic goddesses such as Kanchi Kamakshi and Madurai Meenachi found in the big cities and the village Amman of rural Tamil Nadu. Films based on the village Amman made their appearance in the 1970s privileging the 'little tradition' or 'folk Hinduism' (see Srinivas 1976 and Sinha 2006) the non-Sanskritic, informal and localised religious practices. The genre of Amman films mostly spoke to the village people and in particular to the subaltern women. More interestingly as Kalpana Ram argues in her chapter, 'Bringing the Amman into presence', the interstitial moment or point between Amman films and their audience is in itself a spiritual experience. The position of the camera, the portrayal of the goddess, the audience interaction and so forth blur the line between cinema spectatorship and worship. For many subaltern Tamil women, the powerful Amman of the cinema who ultimately kills the wrong doers, offers a sense of hope and social justice. Kalpana Ram explores this relationship using ethnographic field notes and analysis of some recent Amman films.

As pointed out earlier, Tamil Nadu politics and cinema are highly intertwined. The chapter by Robert Hardgrave one of the first scholars to write on this issue reprinted here, is an important historical piece that draws on interviews with film stars and politicians and film analysis to trace the rise of the DMK. The politicisation of Tamil cinema through the involvement of political figures in various capacities (scriptwriters, actors, directors, songwriters, etc.) and its use as an ideological tool by the DMK is a fascinating study. Hardgrave examines the way in which films stars like M. G. Ramachandran catapulted into politics through cinema.[8] This legacy continues to this day. Another pioneering Tamil film scholar, Sara Dickey, set out to research the relatively unexplored field of fandom, fan culture and class identity in Tamil Nadu almost two decades ago. In her work, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (1993), Dickey examined the socio-cultural context and dynamics of fan culture among MGR fans in the city of Madurai. The popularity of film stars has a far more spiritual dimension in its manifestations especially in South India. Film stars are not only revered but also worshipped as gods. It is not uncommon to see garlanded portraits of popular film stars placed on the family altar. In particular, the adulation and fanaticism that developed for MGR was profound and continues to exist even after his death in 1987. Returning to her field site in 2005, Dickey was struck by the level of intensity and reverence that fans still had for MGR. In her chapter, she explores the contemporary significance of the late MGR and his relevance to his fans in present day Tamil Nadu.

Tamil cinema also enters the public arena in two other ways. One is in its various larger than life manifestations as banners and cutouts right across

urban centres in Tamil Nadu and in print media. Preminda Jacob's chapter on the history and use of banner advertisements in Tamil cinema and the evolving production techniques and their aesthetic qualities provides a fascinating insight into a unique art form that is a spin-off of the film industry itself. The reader is transported onto the streets and is confronted by gigantic and colourful images that have an imposing physical and visual presence in urban spaces. Jacob argues that the gradual shift from hand-painted to vinyl printed banners and cutouts signals the coming of age of the Tamil film industry now reaching out to a techno-savvy and sophisticated audience. Film advertisements were quickly embraced by the public and they co-exist as an integral part of the film industry. This however is not the case with critical writings on Tamil cinema and that takes us to the second point. Theodore Baskaran, one of the foundational scholars of Tamil cinema, explores in his chapter how Tamil writers and scholars responded to the new medium of cinema since its inception. Baskaran points out that it wasn't until classical musicians entered cinema in the 1930s and the emergence of patriotic films that writers started to pay attention to cinema. This was largely due to the low-brow status of cinema within Tamil society.[9] However, during the post-war period, as cinema became more popular, a range of magazines were published carrying film reviews, discussions on dialogue and songs, and celebrity gossip. In terms of critical and scholarly engagement with cinema, Baskaran argues that academics only became interested in the subject rather belatedly in the 1970s. He suggests that these writings, especially film reviews and criticism, given their peripheral existence have not entirely influenced the film industry and he calls for more research and mainstreaming of Tamil film studies.

The chapter by Anand Pandian takes us to the Tamil countryside and explores the intersection between Tamil popular cinema and rural everyday life. Writing on the villagers in the Cumbum valley, an agricultural region west of Madurai, Pandian narrates the way in which cinema permeates their lives or rather how they live their lives through references from cinema. The Cumbum valley is in more than one way connected to the Tamil film industry. The region has produced several famous film artists and has been the location for a number of films. The representation of rural India in Tamil cinema, Pandian argues, is helping its interlocutors to reaffirm their sense of identity and belonging as they draw on songs and dialogues from movies to articulate their lived experiences. He adds, for many rural people in South India, like those in the Cumbum Valley, cinema is a powerful means of grappling with the challenges and imperatives of modernity. Conversely, the chapter that follows by Rajan Krishnan, provides a different perspective on Tamil cinema's treatment of Southern Tamil Nadu, a predominantly rural region. Krishnan notes that in recent times, movies set in the 'south' by inference south of metropolitan Chennai, the symbol of modernity, economic progress and civility portray this locale as backward, entrenched in caste politics and disputes, and unruly. The idea of caste which

remains a fairly elusive category in Tamil cinema (not always explicitly articulated and fairly limited) is a relatively understudied topic (see for instance Srinivas and Kaali 1998). But as Krishnan demonstrates, the Thevar caste has figured regularly in the movies in recent times. These 'southerners' are portrayed as a volatile, aggressive and backward group. This, he argues, is privileging Chennai as the forefront of civilisational and economic progress.

The last two chapters in the anthology continue to consider the question of territoriality and cinema. The co-authored chapter by Vijay Devadas and Selvaraj Velayutham focuses on Tamil cinema's articulation of nationalism and regionalism. While Bollywood is hailed as a cinema preoccupied with the idea of the Indian nation and indeed is regarded as India's national cinema, the role of Tamil cinema and its (dis)engagement with the national project remains undocumented. The authors present a range of examples of movies that propagated anti-colonial sentiments and the spirit of nationalism. Hand in hand, the emergence of the Dravidian movement and its political ascendancy in Tamil Nadu politics pointedly led to the valorisation of a Dravidian, Tamil identity. The authors argue that the ambivalent relationship that Tamil cinema has had between articulating a Tamil and an Indian identity is not a shortcoming on the part of the film industry but unsettles the notion of a homogenous Indian national identity a trademark of Bollywood cinema.

The final chapter explores the position of the Tamil diaspora in relation to Tamil cinema production and consumption. There are an estimated 70 million Tamils around the world. The Tamil diaspora pre-dates the European colonial period but reached its height through the British indentured and Kangkani labour system that brought tens of thousands of Tamils to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Mauritius, Reunion islands, South Africa, East Africa, Singapore, Burma, Malaysia and Fiji. It continued to grow in the post-colonial period driven by economic and humanitarian (in the case of the Sri Lankan Tamils) imperatives. This chapter investigates two related issues concerning Tamil cinema in the global context. One is a critical analysis of how diasporic Tamils are portrayed in Tamil cinema and a brief look at the diasporic Tamil film production. The other aspect is the global circuits and circulation of Tamil films. I argue that Tamil cinema is a growing *tour de force* within Indian cinema and has the ability to engage a global audience.

Each of these chapters in their varying ways offers insights into the social world and cultural politics of India's significant other film industry. As one of India's oldest and most productive film industries, Tamil cinema shares many similar traits with other cinemas of India but at the same time has distinct features of its own. However, the powerhouse that is Bollywood, and to some extent the legendary Bengali cinema, have been the much favoured film industry among scholars of Indian cinema. This anthology is the first that is dedicated in its entirety to the study of Tamil cinema and to give scholarly recognition to a major cinematic force in the arena of Indian cinema.

## Notes

1 The term South India is used to indicate the four Dravidian states, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. The sum of Tamil and Telugu language films produced in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh respectively account for more than 70 percent of India's annual cinema production. South India also has the most cinema theatres per capita of anywhere in the world. In Tamil Nadu alone, there are more than 2,400 theatre halls.
2 See for instance: Kaur and Sinha 2005; Torgovnik 2003; Dwyer and Patel 2002; Joshi 2002; Mishra 2002; Virdi 2003.
3 See for example Rajadhyaksha's (2003) essay on the 'Bollywoodization of Indian cinema' for a historical overview of the economic and cultural ascendancy of the Bollywood film industry.
4 See for instance the work of Gopalan 1996, 2002; Pandian 1992; Vasudevan 2000.
5 Yves Thoraval (2000) in his book *The Cinemas of India* has dedicated a couple of chapters to exploring the history of Tamil cinema.
6 It is ironic that Indian film scholars engaged with the Hindi and Telugu version of the film *Roja* because of its national popularity rather than the original Tamil version as there were discernible differences in the latter (see Dirks 2001; Vasu devan 1997; Chakravarthy and Pandian 1994; Niranjana 1994a, 1994b; and Sri nivas 1994).
7 This ideological imperative also applies to the question of sexuality where the normativity of heterosexuality is emphasized and other forms of gender iden tities and relationships that exist in reality are disavowed. Notions and indeed representations of homosexuality and transgender are largely absent in Tamil cinema.
8 See also Hardgrave (1970, 1971, 1975), Hardgrave and Neidhart (1975), Siva thamby (1971, 1981) and Pandian (1992, 2000) for further reading on the synergistic relationship between politics and Tamil cinema.
9 See for instance Pandian's (1996) discussion of Tamil cultural elitism and its relationship and engagement with cinema.

## References

Baskaran, Theodore. (1981) *The Message Bearers: Nationalist Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India 1880 1945*. Madras: Cre A.

(1996) *The Eye of the Serpent: An Introduction to Tamil Cinema*. Madras: East West Books.

Bharucha, R. (1994) 'On the Border of Fascism: Manufacture of Consent in Roja, *Economic and Political Weekly* 29(23): 1389 1395.

Chakravarty, V. and Pandian, M. S. S. (1994) 'More on Roja', *Economic and Poli tical Weekly*, 29(11): 642 644.

Dickey, Sara. (1993) *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. Cambridge: Cam bridge University Press.

Dirks, N. B. (2001) 'The home and the Nation: Consuming Culture and Politics in Roja', in C. Pinney and R. Dwyer (eds) *Pleasure and the Nation: the History, Poli tics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Dwyer, Rachel and Patel, Divia. (2002) *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*. London: Reaktion Books.

Gokulsing, Moti and Dissanayake, Wimal. (1998) *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narra tive of Cultural Change*. New Delhi: Orient Longman

Gopalan, Lalitha. (1996) 'Indian Cinema', in Jill Nelmes *An Introduction to Film Studies*. London: Routledge.

(2002) *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Guy, Randor. (1997) *Starlight, Starbright The Early Tamil Cinema*. Chennai: AMRA publishers.

Hardgrave, Robert. L. (1970) 'Film and Society in Tamil Nadu', *Monthly Public Opinion Surveys of the Indian Institute of Public Opinion* 15: 1 62.

(1971) 'The Celluloid God: M.G.R. and the Tamil Film', *South Asian Review* 4: 307 314.

(1973) 'Politics and the Film in Tamil Nadu: The Stars and the DMK', *Asian Survey* 13 (3): 288 305.

(1975) *When Stars Displace the Gods: the Folk Culture of Cinema in Tamil Nadu*. University of Texas at Austin: Center for Asian Studies.

Hardgrave, Robert. L. and Neidhart, Anthony, C. (1975) 'Film and Political Con sciousness in Tamil Nadu', *Economic and Political Weekly* 10: 27 35.

Joshi, Lalit Mohan (ed.). (2002) *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema*. London: Dakini Books.

Kaali, Sundar. (2000) 'Narrating Seduction: Vicissitudes of the Sexed Subject in Tamil Nativity Film', in Ravi S. Vasudevan (ed.) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kaur, Raminder and Sinha, Ajay J. (eds) (2005) *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema Through a Transnational Lens*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Mishra, Vijay. (2002) *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. New York: Routledge.

Niranjana, T. (1994a) 'Roja revisited', *Economic and Political Weekly* 29(21): 1299.

(1994b) 'Whose nation? tourists and terrorists in Roja', *Economic and Political Weekly* 24(3): 79 82.

Pandian, Jacob. (1995) *The Making of India and Indian Traditions*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall

Pandian, M. S. S. (1992) *The Image Trap: M.G.Ramachandran in Film and Politics*. New Delhi: Newbury Park.

(1996) 'Tamil Cultural Elites and Cinema: Outline of an Argument', *Economic and Political Weekly* April 13: 950 955.

(2000) 'Parasakthi: Life and Times of a DMK film', in Ravi Vasudevan (ed.) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Pendakur, Manjunath. (2003) *Indian Popular Cinema: Industry, Ideology and Con sciousness*. New Jersey: Hampton Press.

Perinbanayagam, R. S. (1971) 'Caste, Politics and Art', *The Drama Review* 15(2): 206 211.

Rajadhyaksha, A. (2003) 'The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian cinema: cultural nationalism in a global arena', *Inter Asia Cultural Studies* 4(1): 25 39.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish and Willemen, Paul. (1994) *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*. London: British Film Institute.

Ramaswamy, Sumathi. (1997) *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891 1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sinha, Vineeta. (2006) 'Problematizing Received Categories: Revisiting "Folk Hin duism" and Sanskritization', *Current Sociology* 54 (1): 98 111.

Sivathamby, Karthigesu. (1971) 'Politicians as Players', *The Drama Review* 15(2): 212 220.

(1981) *Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication*. Madras: New Century Books.

Soudhamini. (2005) 'Tamil Cinema: The Significant Other', in Johan Manschot and Marijke De Vos (eds) *Behind the Scenes of Hindi Cinema*. Amsterdam: Kit Publishers.

Srinivas, K. Ravi. and Kaali, Sundar. (1998) 'On Castes and Comedians: The Lan guage of power in Recent Tamil Cinema', in Ashis Nandy (ed.) *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*. London: Zed Books.

Srinivas, M. N. (1976) *The Remembered Village*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Srinivas, S. V. (1994) 'Roja in law and order state', *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 (20): 1225 1226.

Thoraval, Yves. (2000) *The Cinemas of India*. New Delhi: Macmillan India Limited.

Torgovnik, Jonathan. (2003) *Bollywood Dreams: An Exploration of the Motion Pic ture Industry and its Culture in India*. London: Phaidon.

Vasudevan, Ravi. (1994) *Other Voices: Roja against the grain*. 'Seminar' 423 (November): 43 47.

(2000) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Velayutham, Selvaraj. (2006) 'Beyond Bollywood: India's Tamil Film Industry', *TAASA Review: The Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia* 15 (1): 21.

Virdi, Jyotika. (2003) *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

# 1 A good woman, a very good woman
## Tamil cinema's women

*C. S. Lakshmi*

For those growing up in the fifties, the song from the film *Manamagal* (1951) that enumerated what a good woman was became a kind of theme song. Coming soon after the years of struggle for independence, this song telling a woman what her patriotic duty as a woman was nothing more than being a 'good' woman one could say, contained all the elements that went into the making of a Tamil woman. The woman who did not fall into the purview of the song was, of course, the bad woman. Good and bad women, in clear black and white divides, have been the obsession of Tamil cinema in a way. Not only are their physical features different but even their language, dress and body structures are different. The good woman embodies all that Tamil culture stands for where women are concerned. She is chaste, intelligent, motherly and divine. The bad woman is a coquette, a temptress and a loudmouth who finally gets her dues. Built into these oppositional black and white portraits are complicated symbols like the *thali*, turmeric, *kumkum* and widow-white. That is how the basic ground plan is drawn.

This paper attempts to understand how these images came about. The idea is not to look for positive or negative images, for such an attempt would add a 'truth value'[1] to the images which will take us to a totally different area of defining images. The purpose of this paper is more to look at these images in a way similar to that which Elizabeth Cowie suggests in one of her articles. Elizabeth Cowie says that the images have to be seen in terms of what different definitions and understandings are of what women and men are and what their roles are in society.[2] This paper tries to explore the core of these images and understand what they contain in terms of attitudes towards women in Tamil culture and the obsessions, compulsions and confusions that go with it.

### The good, the bad, the mothers, the whores

After its formation as a separate party in 1949, the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu needed a vehicle for projecting its identity, political claims and elaboration of Tamil culture. Cinema was the effective vehicle it chose. Apart from its rational and anti-exploitation themes, these

films constructed particular meanings of what women were in the emerging political climate. Mothers, sisters, educated women; vamps and widows were presented in stark bad versus good, pure versus impure contrasts, through dialogues, songs and visualisation. Tamil mothers were presented in a cleverly woven pattern of sequences that gave them the illusion of centrality while really being marginal. They are seen as controllers of their sons, and as sobering presences in the lives of their warrior sons; as the beloved who loved Tamil and Tamil culture, happy to lay their heads on the valorous shoulders of the warrior, poet or self-righteous husbands. The fact that two men emerged as the all-Tamil male heroes while no single heroine emerged as the essential Tamil woman is a pointer towards the fact that the male was firm, steady, rock-like and active; whereas the female was the element of secondary importance, manipulated, venerated and set aside. The Tamil woman of these films spoke alliterative dialogues; called her lover by his name; sang songs recreating the *kalavuneri*, but was constantly in danger of losing her *karpu*; had to deal with wayward husbands and wait for their return; and bring up her sons and daughters preparing them for battles and marriage respectively.

The mother versus the whore contrast was presented effectively in *Manohara* (1954) with the screenplay and dialogues written by Karunanidhi. *Manohara* was a successful play of Sambanda Mudaliar, known as the father of Tamil drama. It is the story of a king enticed by a woman who plots to take over the country by alienating him from his wife and son, who is the crown prince Manoharan. The real queen and son succeed finally and the temptress is punished. In his screenplay, Karunanidhi introduced elements that characterised the queen as the true Tamil woman. The temptress who has enticed the king also has a son but he is a coward implying that an impure woman cannot have a warrior for a son. Manoharan goes to war to retrieve the sword and the throne of his grandfather from an enemy king. His mother, the true Tamil woman, applies the vermillion mark to his forehead, sends him to war, and asks him to return as a victorious warrior who would bring joy to his mother. The temptress lacks such qualities. She tells her son who is pretending to go to war like Manoharan, that he must not go because his health will get affected.

Manoharan wins the war. His enemy's daughter comes to kill him but falls in love with him. Now Manoharan is the Tamil lover as he parries with her. 'Warriors have never won against lance-eyed women,' he says. He refers to her as a fruit 'My sword acts only in the battlefield. It does not hurt fruits.' Later he saves her from suicide 'From the storm of death, I have saved a creeper.' Those are the Tamil terms for women fruits, creepers, flowers. Manoharan returns with a sword, throne and a woman.

Manoharan's mother, the queen, commands him never to hurt his father and his mistress. Manoharan abides by his mother's commands. His mother the personification of a true Tamil woman worships her husband and puts up with everything even being called a whore by her own husband. But the

task of protecting her and proving her purity lies with her son. In a dramatic court scene, Manoharan declares:

> My mother is one from whom love arises; virtue resides in her; she is the image of kindness; she is the personification of chastity; she is the precious stone with no defects; she is as pure as gold

After a series of dramatic events, Manoharan is in chains and his mother commands him to fight, taking back her command asking him never to fight his father. She speaks against the temptress and her gang and swears by the purity of her motherhood, and the chains break:

> If it is true that the tears of mothers born in valorous clans have power, if it is true that Manoharan, who has never bowed before others is my son, let the chains break

Not just by these overt assertions of the Tamil woman, but also by subtle signs the screenplay reveals its true spirit. Manoharan is caught on the one hand in the power politics of being the crown prince and on the other as a warrior, Manoharan's major effort is to prove his mother's purity. The mother's purity and his courage have a one-to-one equation just as the temptress's impurity and her son's cowardice are equated. What is constantly being put to the test is the mother's character. The Tamil mother has not only to prove constantly that she is not a whore but she also has to prove that her mother is not a whore for otherwise her tears have no effect. The queen swears by the purity of her clan that gives power to her tears. The pure Tamil woman stands by her husband whatever battle he takes up. As such, women turn into collaborators in wars to win swords and thrones. The collaboration extends to several levels of existence. In the course of the story, Manoharan's wife gives birth to a child. This event is packed with cultural connotations  it is born in the jail on hay and, what is more, it is a boy. Although Murugan is considered the Tamil god, this event has all the elements of Krishna's birth. And the child being a boy is another sign to prove the character of Manoharan's wife's womb. If a child is born in a jail, on the hay, and its mother is from a clan of warriors, the child cannot but be a boy. No such dramatic build-up is associated with the birth of girls. This need to assert clan purity through the bodies of women is something that has continued to obsess the Tamils. The entire film is built on the conflict between purity and impurity with two women physically embodying these two notions.

In the film *Velaikari* (Servant Maid) (1949) for which C. N. Annadurai wrote the story and the dialogues, two women were presented in total contrast as good woman and bad woman. The good woman is poor, beautiful and the epitome of Tamil culture. The bad woman is rich, English-educated, interested in social work and insolent. The rich woman talks of women's

freedom and she is part of a women's association. She plays tennis and wears pants. The rich girl is a comment on the various women's organisations in the Tamil region at that time. The members of these organisations were not considered Tamil mothers although their concept of a woman was not all that different. These women were considered part-time social workers who lacked the finer human qualities in which Tamil women were nurtured. And all such women are brought back to the fold, if these films are to be believed, by a Tamil man.

The film *Ratha Kanneer* (1954) was also built on a similar framework with its dominant motif being the purity versus impurity theme. One of the staunchest supporters of the Self-Respect Movement, M. R. Radha, acted as the hero. *Rathak Kanneer* Tears of Blood is about a man educated abroad who has forgotten many elements of the Tamil culture. But one aspect of the culture he remembers is womanising and, on his return, he faithfully follows it. He becomes a gruesome-looking leper and requests his faithful wife Chandra to marry his friend Balu, who is a social worker. The tears of blood are supposed to be that of the oppressed wife. The film's dominant motif is the purity versus impurity one. The wife is the pure one and the dancer who entices him is the impure one. The wife thinks of herself as a *pattini*, a woman who is totally dedicated to her husband. The wife is used as not only a symbol of purity but also one of change. She has her pride and dignity and while she believes that as a wife she has to be totally faithful to her husband, at one point she also thinks of starting a new life with another man.

In a particular scene, she goes to the dancer's place to bring her husband back. When she pleads with her husband, he calls her a whore. Who is a *pattini* and who is a whore is a matter to be pronounced by someone else and the greatest insult to a Tamil woman is for her husband to invoke the exact opposite image and call her a whore. Since *Manohara*, whether a woman is a *pattini* or a whore has been the crux of all debates.[3]

A song in the film talks of women's exploitation by men. But how exactly women should respond to this exploitation is actually to be guided and decided by men. The film makes several points clear. One is that a woman who is oppressed by her husband must make a new life for herself. But this new life can only come from a good-hearted man. If not, she should take up a life of service for others. Another aspect the film is careful to guard is the virginity of the woman. The husband never sleeps with her and even at the end he literally forces her to marry the good guy, as she is unable to make the decision.

The film also alludes to the fact that what she is really yearning for is physical intimacy. In the classical style, she blames the moon for torturing her. At one point, she requests the husband's friend to start a new life with her but he being a true Tamil man cannot accede to this request. This is shown as her moment of faltering as she is driven by her own sexual needs. But the good Tamil man saves her from making a mistake. This particular sequence is shown as a sympathetic gesture towards women, but actually it

reveals doubts about a woman's capacity to remain 'pure', if she is not aided by a man who places her in marriage. The moment the guiding spirit of a man is removed, her sexual needs overcome her and she is on the path to 'impurity'. The sequence is also to assure the audience that her virginity is intact and even if married again her purity cannot be doubted and her *pattini* status won't be harmed.

Chandra's request and the friend's reply form the crux of this conflict between purity and impurity and its resolution:

> Chandra attempts suicide and her conscience tells her:
>
> ... If you want, surrender yourself to a young man and live. Why should you give up what the world has given you? Announce it to the world that to withdraw within oneself like a tortoise and begging men is the task of lowly people. Marry a young man who suits you and be happy. See a new world. Women like you can take a new path.
>
> (Balu arrives)
>
> What is this Chandra?
>
> I want to remarry, Balu.
>
> You belong to the women's clan that looks upon joy and sorrow equally. When your heart is full of worries, teach blind children; love orphaned children.
>
> I did show love that way. But I need a companion to take care of my loneliness.
>
> Companion you say? Nature has provided us so many companions. Look at the creeper there. Look at the bird. And there is the *mullai* flower blooming.
>
> I saw the creeper. It is trembling looking for a support. I saw the bird. It told me about happiness and flew away. I asked this *mullai* and it told me there is no happiness.
>
> ... What can I do about it?
>
> Give me support. If you will it, there can be a way. Let a new chapter begin in our lives.

Before Balu can reply and let the audience know how the issue is resolved, the husband enters accusing her of infidelity and adultery. At the end of the film, the husband allows her to marry and thus the question of her purity is resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Contrary to rational theories professed by the followers of Periyar, the film incorporated the idea of punishment for evil/sin and reward for goodness/purity. The man who womanises becomes a leper; the 'impure' woman he associates with dies in a plane crash. In her case, it is also a dual punishment because she is trying to get into a relationship with a Hindi-speaking gentleman from Bombay. The wife who waits, overcoming her loneliness and need for a companion is rewarded with marriage and a husband who is a social worker.

## Structured space, language modes and gender

*Parasakthi* (1952) was another film, which was a kind of manifesto of the DMK. And as such, the images of women and memories of Tamil culture it invoked are of great significance. The story revolves around three women characters. Two of the women are like two different aspects of Kannagi, while the third woman, who appears for a short time, is Madhavi, or the harlot. The film constructs its picture of the Tamil lifestyle and women's place in it in a layered manner. The obvious story moves in a particular way. The dialogues, songs and the visual presentation add several layers of meaning to the story.

The widowed sister sings a song with her husband after her marriage. He calls her the lamp that lights his married life and goes on to call her a fruit and virgin Tamil. In Tamil, the word fruit and virgin are similar except for one additional middle letter in the word virgin and they are often used together in alliteration. It is rather convenient for those who look upon women as edible virgins. Once widowed, the heroine's honour is constantly threatened. Local *goondas*, a religious person and a temple priest try to rape her. Unprotected by a man, she is open to the danger of losing her chastity. Several visual metaphors are used to evoke certain connotations that go with her widowhood. There is a long shot of her sitting under a tree. It is, of course, a barren tree. The heroine's helplessness is constantly stressed showing her in dark streets with street lamps shedding their dull light on her.

To mete out justice to all the characters concerned, the film culminates in the court where the widowed sister stands accused for attempting to kill her own child. The hero gives a long speech on social injustice and the 'new' woman he has met in the course of the film appears with the child saying the child was thrown into the boat she was in. The family gets together once again and the hero is appropriately dressed in western clothes to marry the radical girl.

The national movement and the Self-Respect movement had altered the geography of cities and smaller towns. Chennai, Madurai and Tiruchi especially were cities that saw many changes. Women had poured into the streets protesting against foreign rule, singing national songs, walking on the streets, going to jail and being received with garlands at railway stations on their release, proclaiming from platforms and demanding reforms and changes and political rights, organising marches against Hindi, meeting to give speeches on Tamil culture and travelling around and supporting either the nationalist cause or the cause of a language and culture. Women had been taken to court for supporting causes. The film reclaims this space and alters it. The streets, the court and the platform now become spaces from which men function. Women enter this space in marginal ways as vendors or in other unnoticeable ways. The streets suddenly become dangerous for them to move about unprotected by the men of the family. Some moonlit boat rides are possible but only in a fictionalised space. Tiruchi, where these boat rides

take place in the film, does have a river but whether women took boat rides there on moonlit nights by themselves is not recorded history. Creation of this fictionalised space is interesting for it is an uncontested space with no specific qualities to it.

The streets become fragmented spaces in the film, not leading anywhere. In particular, they are almost dead-end in character, looming large, gloomy and dangerous when the widowed sister walks on them; they turn into abandoned roadsides when the protagonist uses them as platforms to speak from; and when the sister sings sad songs, they appear with broken walls, overgrown shrubs and an occasional moon. Each specific space becomes the symbol of corruption and degeneration of a culture. The very first introduction to Chennai is with a beggar accosting the hero and the hero comments that the very first voice in Tamil Nadu is that of a beggar. Then the hotel where he stays is shown; it has degenerated into a place for procuring. And then comes the place of the dancer; this is another fictionalised space for there is no record of dancers performing in their houses to entertain customers in south India. Creation of this space is fraught with meanings. It is a space transported from the classics to modern times. In the Tamil epic *Silappadhikaram*, there is the dancer Madhavi who belongs to the Devadasi community. She has a relationship with Kovalan, the hero of the epic. Kovalan loses all his money to her. The space of Madhavi is recreated here and the dancer cheats him of his money, almost making us feel that even though the Tamil man has traversed centuries away from the epic *Silappadhikaram* he has only one way of being cheated!

A space to appeal for justice has existed in the Tamil culture in the courts of kings. Women like the epic heroine Kannagi have entered these courts independently and spoken for themselves. So have women in modern times during the struggle for national independence and during the anti-Hindi agitation. This court is turned into a space where an attack is mounted on an unprotected woman who needs a man to comment on the life of a woman. A space where women have spoken now becomes a space to be occupied by heroic men whose duty it is to protect and guard women so that they can lead a decent life. The safety is within the home, within walls to protect her chastity with men taking over the running of the world outside.

For structuring its language, the film chooses a variety of elements from the cultural past. It uses the language of the Tamil epics, of Tamil folk legends and folk theatre and poetry. The Tamil epics *Silappadhikaram* and *Manimekalai* are referred to in specific ways. The folk legend of Nallathangal who killed her seven children because she could not feed them becomes the motif for the widowed sister's life. The predominant mode of lullaby, that is very often a song that women improvise, is used to describe the ideal Tamil family where a sister is protected by her brothers. The lullaby is normally the voice of the woman and there are some beautiful lullabies in Tamil where the women give voice to grief, happiness or hope. The lullaby-mode is appropriated here using very similar language but politicising it in

such a way that it comes to represent an identity and an idealised domestic space where the woman occupies a specific role. It is in the voice of a woman, it is sung by a woman, and its lyrics are close to what a woman would use, but it is transformed into an act delineating the space of a woman in an ideal Tamil society. An obvious choice is made here to tell the woman what her future ought to be. The marching days are over. Now come the days of taking care of the family, leaving politics to men.

The language of the woman who protested against Hindi and worked along with her male colleagues is not entirely abandoned; but it is toned down in such a way that it does not seem like an effort to enter any space not meant for her. The 'new' woman is presented as someone with a mind of her own but not so assertive that she will take over the job of acting out her ideas. She is the one who inspires men, goading them to action, willing to support and help but never taking over. Her long speeches on social revolution are made within the confines of the home whereas her brother gives speeches on public platforms. Even her speech on social revolution is credited to her brother. The 'new' woman is bold enough to hold her man's hand casually, call him by his name and address him in the singular, and even intersperse her conversation with English. But her monologue when the hero leaves her looking for his sister without taking proper leave of her, is to wonder if he left her because she was an idealist. An idealist does not have to be a Manimekalai (one who becomes a saint) but can be a Kannagi, she says. That particular monologue is a crucial one in terms of attitudes towards women, for it clearly points out that Kannagi is still the model to follow. Chastity is a yardstick that even the so-called radicals are not in a great haste to abandon. In fact, the character of the sister is built around this notion. Her entire struggle after she is widowed is to maintain her chastity that she finally manages to put in the protective hands of her brothers. The 'new' woman who aspires to be a Kannagi is not really different, except that she speaks at times a different language. The film manages to evade the issue of widow-remarriage entirely. The space occupied by the woman herself is shifted to the home, overlooking many cultural images in the past of her being outside because the cultural identity is sought by fixing her space and body in non-problematised zones. The woman becomes the guarantor of authenticity by occupying an unsullied and 'pure' space.

So we have three women in the film: the one who sings lullabies detailing the social customs of brothers protecting and taking care of their sister; the 'new' woman who needs a rationalist brother to tell her not to observe some of the customs; and the third character is the 'impure' woman. She cheats the hero of his money. The male characters in the film are of several types the tough, the stupid, the timid, the rapist and the idealist but the women fall into definite categories of purity and impurity.

These obviously contrasted women have continued to appear in Tamil films, and true Tamil heroes like MGR and Sivaji Ganesan in the earlier days and younger heroes who came later, have been at the task of turning them

into Tamil mothers metaphorically. In a film directed and produced by Murasoli Maran, called *Valiba Virundu* (A Feast for the Young) (1967) there is a song describing the kind of bride needed:

> Wanted a bride
> a good bride ...
> Even if she gallivants freely
> like the temple bull
> romping around with no one to check her
> I shall put a string around her nose
> and drag her and control her
> I shall make her as patient as a buffalo.
> Wanted a bride
> a good bride ... [4]

## Enter the bold, beautiful and liberated woman

Tamil cinema has its share of 'realistic' cinema and cinema that is supposed to be portrayals of real women. Picasso once said that art and nature work differently. The work of art is to capture the concepts nature keeps hidden. These hidden emotions never surface in this kind of cinema for it wants everything broken into physical, tangible facts that can be detailed. Films that can be broadly termed 'realistic' or 'different' claim that they are about real women, but like Christine Gledhill, one would like to ask, 'Are these really about women?'[5]

At this point, it is worth looking at the theme of extra-marital relationship that has become a common theme to portray the 'bold' woman. Such films exist in other languages too. These films generally seem to assume that every woman is just a few orgasms behind liberation. When the customary clandestine orgasms take place, lo and behold, her chains fall off; the world seems a different place and she is carried away on the wings of liberation. When the purity obsession works, it is normally through the body of a woman. A woman, whose physical purity is tarnished, becomes impure. The present 'bold' woman portrayals are only an extension of this body obsession. She is bound by her body and set free through her body. Films like *Ghare Bhaire* (Home and the World) of Satyajit Ray break the boundaries of a woman in this manner.

The real women of Tamil cinema are, however, different. Their routes to liberation are tortuous and painful, and fraught with consequences they have to pay for. One should not forget that the Tamil culture could not even allow the innocuous 'revolution' in Jayakanthan's story in the sixties where a girl who is seduced is given a purification bath by her mother and told to get on with her life. Counter-stories were written where the girl went through violent and cruel punishments. Jayakanthan himself, probably guilt-ridden,

wrote sequels to the story and even made a film *Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal* (Some People in Some Situations) (1976) where he declared that the character aptly named Ganga, was pure, definitely pure. Not satisfied, he wrote another sequel where Ganga is finally drowned in the river Ganges. In his previous film *Unnaippol Oruvan* (Someone Like You) (1965), a realistic film based on life in a slum, a mother who has men in her life is questioned by her son and she tells him that if only someone like him had been there in her life to exercise authority over her, she would not have gone wayward. Women who break barriers or boundaries or accepted norms need a man even if he is a little boy to bring them back to the right path. There is also the connotation that breaking any rule is not by choice but through ignorance, lack of understanding or circumstances. Women are driven to do something different and cannot opt to be different because they have reasoned it out. Whatever it is, there will always be a man to advise them, and where a man cannot be found, there is always the river Ganges or similar holy rivers. Depending on the imagination of the filmmaker, there are many ways of killing a woman who claims to be different.

*Aval Appadithan* (That is the Way She Is) (1978) by Rudraiah is another film that is constantly referred to as a realistic film about a liberated woman. The woman's characterisation is, of course, brought out entirely verbally by her. According to her, she has become 'this way' (as she is suffering from some communicable disease) because of a wayward mother. And 'this way' is nothing sensational. She had one boy friend with whom she slept, and another who left her. In its filmic text the film constantly resorts to existing myths about women and relationships: that a wayward mother destroys her children; that a woman who speaks the 'truth' is always alone; that men are scared of her; that the woman who is different is confused, not sure of herself and is only seeking love from a man but does not know it herself. The only plus point of the film is that it does not expose the body of women in the way it is customary to do. In all other visuals it sticks to myths normally adhered to like showing her alone on the bed; insecure in her work sphere, she is almost always moving about in her office and we never catch her still at any moment; the room where she walks is arranged in such a way that it appears as if the tables block her movement and become obstacles; plus the men in the office look lecherous just waiting to devour her. The visuals constantly play upon the fact that she is pitted against the world. All this could have been avoided if only she had a 'proper' mother! The last shot of the film leaves her on the road that is where a liberated woman ends up. This final visual detail reveals the entire content of the film.

The independent woman who makes a choice to assert her sexuality is always seen as a cultural freak in Tamil cinema. If a woman's behaviour can leave the daughter psychologically damaged (any woman talking of freedom or liberation is considered damaged), in the case of a son, a mother who is deemed characterless will turn her son into a psychopath as in Bharathi

Raja's *Sivappu Rojakkal* (Red Roses) (1978). Many claimed that K. Balachandar's *Aval Oru Thodarkathai* (She is a Continuing Story) (1974) portrayed the innermost emotions of a working woman. This working woman, who supports a family, is grumpy and foul-mouthed at home for she feels that she is being exploited. Outside the home, she is worldly wise and knows how to ward off unwanted attention. She has a boyfriend and she does go out with him but she knows her limits. At one point, the boyfriend takes her to his mother and the mother comments that she seems very proud. The heroine retorts, 'I am proud. But I am not pregnant.' In Tamil the dialogue is alliterative and drew heavy applause from the audience. The temptation of alliteration apart, one can understand why the two things are linked in the filmmaker's mind for there is another character in the film, made famous by her repartee 'phata phat' (liberated women of Balachander like to mix Hindi with Tamil when they speak and are normally brought up in the north) who indulges in activities considered liberated and becomes pregnant and is quite laid back about it all. There is a famous sequence of her baring herself in a bathtub having a conversation with the heroine clad in a sari fully covering her. Talk of contrasts! In yet another alliterative dialogue, she says that she will not go through an abortion again, not because it is a sin but because it is painful. Towards the end of the film, the heroine finds her a man and the 'phata phat' girl dressed in a sari falls at his feet grateful for his gesture.

In Balachandar's *Agni Satchi* (With Fire as Witness) (1982) the sensitive woman quoting Bharathiyar, is of course, mentally sick. And she too has had a difficult childhood. She talks with her big, beautiful eyes shining, is bold and assertive, and cannot bear to see even a candle shaped like a child melting in heat. But these are not her natural qualities. These are behavioural problems because she is mentally sick. And such women can only die. So at the end of the film, fully pregnant, she bends low to touch the feet of her patient, loving husband (whose idea of dealing with mentally sick women is to beat them black and blue) and enters the hospital's maternity ward to deliver a child and obligingly dies. Other liberated women in his films like *Sindhu Bairavi* (1985) and *Kalki* (1997) do the great deed of providing childless women with children by becoming pregnant outside marriage because they are liberated. But there is always an 'understanding' man they can fall back upon. When women in his films dare to remove their *thali*, the soundtrack goes haywire.

## Friends, foes and family

More recent films in Tamil have not done any better. A single man, widower, divorcee or otherwise, will finally succumb to marriage only because his food needs have to be taken care of. There are exceptions like in Bhagyaraj films where a man is forced to take care of a child and cook for himself or films where bachelors are shown cooking for themselves. But these are shown

as exceptional situations of struggle but relief in the form of a woman will not be far away. In a recent film, *Priya Saki* (Dear Friend) (2005), the attitude towards a woman comes out strongly. In this film, the woman who wants to divorce her husband is forced by her husband to deliver the child she is carrying, leave the child with him, and walk out. The message is clear; motherhood is not a right; it is a duty, it is a compulsory act and any woman can be coerced to become a mother.

Since family is seen as the hub of Tamil culture in Tamil cinema, unusual women characters have to be constantly tamed and brought into the fold of the family or they have to be humiliated or eliminated, sometimes rather violently. Where this is not possible, they have to function outside the institution of the family. And when films opt for themes that have to do with noble landlords and their family honour the roles of women tend to get more and more circumscribed. The patriarch of the family rules often supported by a mother who is the epitome of love and a wife who is the ideal *pattini* and occasionally an unruly daughter who is educated but who soon realises what her role in life is through an obliging, strong man who belongs to the village and who is the one she needs to save her chastity.

All this takes us back to what we began with the good, the bad and other similar entities that are called women. Contemporary Tamil cinema has ways of dealing with the contradictions of wanting to bare women and keeping them pure. All the daring and baring is done in songs supposed to be imagined where both the hero and heroine let go in different parts of the world. So the heroine is kept 'pure' so to say. But the dancing woman is here to stay. So there are women who do item numbers in non-imagined real sequences. There have been a number of them in Tamil cinema like Jyothilakshmi and Silk Smitha and their numbers are not exactly dwindling in recent times. There are younger and newer ones on whose bodies the Tamil cinema is constructed. Even so-called different films like *Azagi* (2002) need an item number so that the masses that represent Tamil culture are not disappointed.

Recent events in Tamil Nadu, where women poets who have written about sexuality were threatened that they would be slapped and doused with kerosene and burnt alive on Annasalai, and the heated debates and even court action following actress Khushboo's statements mentioned earlier, have proved that the Tamil culture will continue to define itself in one way and act in another. So long as attempts to define culture continue the women in Tamil cinema will be obliged to carry their bodies only in particular ways in clear categories: pure and impure.

## Notes

1 In her review of the book *Positive Images* by Linda Artel and Susan Wengraf, Diane Waldman elaborates that looking at images from the point of view of positive or negative will involve the process of adding a truth value to the

images. The reality of sexism cannot be dealt with in such a prescriptive manner. For more details, see Diane Waldman, 'There's More to A Positive Image Than Meets the Eye' in Patricia Erens, ed, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*.

2 Quoted in ibid.

3 The current debate on the purity of Tamil women, which has been sparked off by a statement made by actress Khushboo that Tamil men should no longer expect their women to be virgins when they marry and that safe sex should be practised to prevent AIDS, is an example of the stubbornness with which the Tamils adhere to this concept even when it is a historical absurdity in the present times.

4 For more details see C. S. Lakshmi 'Mother, Mother community and Mother Politics in Tamil Nadu' and C. S. Lakshmi 'Seduction, Speeches and Lullaby: Gender and Cultural Identity in a Tamil film'.

5 Quoted in Angela Martin, 'Chantal Akerman Dossier'.

## References

Barnett, Marguerite Ross. (1976) *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Baskaran, Theodore. (1981) *The Message Bearers: The nationalist Politics and the entertainment Media in South 1880 1945*. Madras: Cre A.

(2004) *Chithiram Pesudhadi* (Images that Speak). Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu Pathippagam.

Birke, Lynda. (1986) *Women, Feminism and Biology: The Feminist Challenge*. Sussex: Harvester Press.

Bock, Gisela, and James, Susan. (1992) *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics, Female Subjectivity*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cameron, Deborah. (1990) *The Feminist Critique of Language*. London and New York: Routledge.

Erens, Patricia. (1990) *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Bloomington and Indiana polis: Indiana University Press.

Irschik, Eugene F. (1986) *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s*. Madras: Cre A.

Lakshmi, C. S. (1984) *Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

(1990) 'Mother, Mother community and Mother Politics in Tamil Nadu', *Eco nomic and Political Weekly*, October 20 27: 72 83.

(1995) 'Seduction, Speeches and Lullaby: Gender and Cultural Identity in a Tamil film', *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 11: 309 311.

Martin, Angela. (1979) 'Chantal Akerman Dossier', *Feminist Review*, London: No.3: 34.

Pandian, Jacob. (1982) 'The Goddess Kannagi: A Dominant Symbol of South Indian Tamil Society' in Preston, James J. (ed.) *Mother Worship,* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Ramaswamy, Sumathi. (1997) *Passions of the Tongue*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Sangari, Kumkum and Vaid, Sudesh (eds). (1999) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women. Reprint, Bombay: Research Centre for Women's Studies.

# 2 The Tamil film heroine

## From a passive subject to a pleasurable object

*Sathiavathi Chinniah*

> The stories played out on the screen are the men's their conflicts, their dreams, their aspirations, their tragedies, their revenge, their desires and their heroism. The women exist only in relation to the men, as their mothers, their wives, and especially their lovers. It is hard to find even one story revolving around a single unattached woman.
>
> (Nair in Jain and Rai 2002: 52 53)

The above comment on Hindi cinema is also apposite for a description of Tamil film narratives narratives which by assuming a masculine orientation relegate women, including the *katã-nãyaki* (heroine), to a secondary position.[1] An overview of *katã-nãyaki* portrayals over nearly eight decades of Tamil cinema indicates that the female protagonist, once hailed for her feminine attributes of *accam* (fear)*, madam* (tenderness)*, nãnam* (coyness) and *payirppu* (modesty), has now been replaced with a *katã-nãyaki* who is indisputably distant from these qualities. There has been an obvious shift in the way the *katã-nãyaki* is presented. From having been the traditional, sari-clad, docile protagonist of early Tamil cinema, representative of a 'passive subject', the *katã-nãyaki* has become a modern, scantily clad, mischievous woman, indicative of a 'pleasurable object'. Despite this transformation, the secondary position assigned to the *katã-nãyaki* continues especially with the overt emphasis on chastity or *karpu*, which C. S. Lakshmi describes as the 'pet obsession of the Tamils' (1984: 3). In fact, this attribute is used as a device to ensure that the Tamil film *katã-nãyaki,* whether assigned the role of a passive subject or pleasurable object, remains entrapped within cultural notions of womanhood constructed by the patriarchal order in Tamil society. In this chapter, I first explain the terms 'passive subject' and 'pleasurable object' which I use as two ends of an imaginary scale to explain the shifting positions of the Tamil film *katã-nãyaki*. Using this scale, I then illustrate the transformation of the *katã-nãyaki* drawing from film examples belonging to different times. I also devote a section at the end of the chapter to highlight films with narratives centred on *katã-nãyaki* to demonstrate that such films too silently engage in reinforcing dominant patriarchal ideas.

## Understanding the dichotomy – Passive subject versus pleasurable object

A quick review of female representations in Tamil films indicates that female archetypes in the Tamil domain have often served as points of reference in the construction of heroines in film narratives. Chatterji asserts,

> Indian filmmakers constantly weave dream-stories around our mythological women, mainly Goddesses, and try to present them, cinematographically and in terms of narrative, in a way that these celluloid distortions become the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our fantasies and our dreams get translated either into identification within the darkened theatre or into reality within our own lives.
>
> (Chatterji 1998: 30)

Chatterji speaks of 'Radha, Sita, Meera, Savitri and others' in the Hindi film context. In the case of Tamil cinema, besides the pan-Indian prototype Sita,[2] indigenous female exemplars such as Kannaki and Vasuki serve as eminent female archetypes. The first half of *Cilappatikāram*[3] presents protagonist Kannaki as an enduring wife; patiently awaiting the return of her husband Kovalan who is smitten with courtesan Mathavi. When Kovalan eventually returns to Kannaki, she accepts him and gives him her only possession, her anklets, so that they could go to the city of Madurai to start life anew. In the second half of the narrative, we witness an enraged Kannaki, who meets the King of Madurai, questions him with regard to his wrong decision to behead her husband, and curses the city of Madurai to be consumed by fire. Vasuki, the wife of Tamil poet Valluvar,[4] is presented as an unassuming spouse who best understands her husband's needs. Unlike in the earlier example, where the wife is treated undeservedly by her husband, in the case of Vasuki she is well loved and respected by her husband. Both these women portray different personality types; but both possess a common attribute, i.e. chastity.[5] In the case of Kannaki, her chastity leads to the destruction of Madurai and eventually her deification as the chaste Goddess, while in the Vasuki narrative her chastity provides her with a peaceful conjugal life. Commenting on this attribute of chastity, Pandian states that it 'is ubiquitous both in Tamil culture and politics', and elsewhere has written,

> From ancient times to the present, purity or chastity has been associated with sacredness or spirituality which is in turn linked with Tamil language and Tamil womanhood. Just as Tamil language must retain its purity or chastity to retain its sacredness or spirituality, Tamil women should retain the purity or chastity to retain their sacredness or spirituality.
>
> (Pandian 1992: 90)

This notion of chastity in the Tamil context is a complex one. As pointed out by Egnor, '*Karpu* means more than sexual fidelity; it means following the husband through thick and thin, however weak or cruel he may turn out to be. It means above all the power of patience (*porumai*) and endurance (*tankum sakti*).' (in Wadley 1980:15)

Therefore dominant ideology states that a Tamil female elevates herself to a higher level by possessing patience and endurance, thus strengthening her power or *sakti* (see Hart 1973 and Wadley 1980). As such, although seemingly assigned a secondary role in which she projects a passive image, the female is not a powerless person as is often understood in the western context. As noted by Egnor, 'The concept of *sakti* is a difficult one for the westerners to grasp, because central to the meaning of *sakti* is the proposition, "Action and power are female"' (in Wadley 1980:1). Therefore, in the Tamil context, it is precisely the woman's passivity that provides her with power, making her a 'passive subject'. This idea is succinctly put across by Reynolds when he asserts that

> The Tamil code of chastity makes women subordinate and subservient to men, to be sure, but it also allows woman to transmute generative power into superior moral power. From this position, a woman is able to gain considerable control over her own life, to say nothing of her husband's.
>
> (in Wadley 1980: 47)

Chastity also entails that a wife fulfils the physical needs of her husband and this brings us to the term that marks the other end of the imaginary scale, i.e. 'pleasurable object'. Dwyer comments: 'In a patriarchal society, women's bodies do not belong to themselves but to the patriarchal male.' (Dwyer and Patel 2002: 84) In the Tamil context too, the body of a married woman is only for the pleasure of her husband, that too within the setting of the private space.[6] When a woman assumes a contrary position, placing her body for the view of others in a public arena, she becomes a spectacle losing her latent *sakti,* thus taking on the position of a 'pleasurable object' especially for the male gaze (see Mulvey 1985).

In its initial decades, Tamil cinema drew directly from popular epics, folklore and ballads and paid attention to presenting the female protagonist as a 'passive subject'. But in time, the interplay of various factors, chiefly related to the position of the hero in the film, led to the *katã-nãyaki* being assigned the position of a 'pleasurable object'. Such *katã-nãyaki* were distant from the ideal Tamil women such as Kannaki and Vasuki. However, they were not presented in total contrast to the archetypical females. In fact, these *katã-nãyaki-s* were modern only from the outside; when the narratives required them to return to the traditional mould, they were able to do so almost effortlessly. Thus, both the identities assigned to the *katã-nãyaki* place her in a subordinate position. In both cases, the need for women to

maintain their chastity remains. In both cases, the patriarchal idea dominant in Tamil society, that a woman's powers when left unchecked would cause great turmoil and thus women should be guarded and subdued, remains. Thus, despite being assigned different personas over the decades, the position of the Tamil film *katã-* as an appendage to the hero remains. In the following section, I elaborate further on these observations.

## Tracing the *katã-nãyaki's* transformation

Films made in the initial decades of Tamil cinema were basically celluloid representations of popular epics or folk stories. This was especially so because Tamil filmmakers, like their other Indian counterparts, were keen to make movies using content that was familiar to local audiences, so as to lure them to the new medium. As mentioned by Rao, 'it was only natural, and inevitable, that a nascent innovative technology should resort to the most abiding cultural strength of the people to ensure its social acceptance.' (Rao 1989: 446). The attitude of wanting to present audience with familiar stories resulted in the making of films such as *Kalidas* (1931), *Ramayanam* (1932), *Harischandra* (1935), *Nallatankal* (1935), *Tiruvalluvar* (1941) and *Kannaki* (1942) where the *katã-nãyaki* was primarily presented as a 'passive subject'.

The Tamil film narratives of the post-independence period gradually shifted away from mythological stories, and expanded to explore new genres which included narratives based on costume dramas. Such narratives presented the female protagonist as being courageous, reflective of women belonging to the literary *Cakam* period.[7] These bold women placed great emphasis on chastity. In the film *Manohara* (1954), the hero's mother assumes the central female position in the narrative. Presented as a queen, she does not question her husband when he maintains an illicit relationship with another woman who has plans to usurp the kingdom. Assuming the persona of the 'passive subject', this *katã-nãyaki* displays the qualities of a brave Tamil mother eventually commanding her son to restore peace and establish justice in the kingdom. The 1950s was also the period when Dravidian politics began to have a special bearing on Tamil cinema, with the newly formed *Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam* (DMK) effectively using cinema as a propaganda tool to reach out to the masses (Pandian 1992 and Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980). Party functionaries and prolific scriptwriters C. N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi together with charismatic actors like M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) contributed to this objective. Commenting on the status of women within the movement, C. S. Lakshmi states:

> The Dravida Kazhagam formed in 1944 and its off-shoot Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (1949) were themselves formed as large families with family loyalties with EV Ramaswami Naicker being addressed as *Tandai* (father) and CN Annadurai as Anna (elder brother) and the rest

> of the members being called *thambi* (younger brother). And hence their concern for women could only be within this familial atmosphere of 'freedom' and 'glory' within imposed limitations of *karpu* (chastity) and *thaymai* (motherhood).
>
> (Lakshmi 1984: 13)

Adopting such an attitude towards women in their attempts to gather public support, DMK filmmakers largely related the underprivileged position of women in society by treating them as a subset within the larger category of the downtrodden. Reference to the representation of the female as a 'passive subject' was useful in helping them achieve this objective. In the popular DMK propaganda movie, *Parasakthii* (1952), the hero's sister, Kalyani, is fatefully separated from her male 'protectors', her brothers, her husband and her father. Following the death of her husband and father, she becomes a widowed destitute. Heeding the advice of a female friend, she gathers the courage to set up an *idli* (rice cake) shop to provide for her only child. Unfortunately, the indecent behaviour of lustful males eventually drives her to kill her child and attempt suicide. However, Kalyani and her child are eventually saved and she unites with her brothers. The image projected here is of a heroine who is a 'passive subject'; a protagonist who endures hardships to guard her chastity from lecherous males (Pandian 2000).

The 1960s witnessed a stronger bond between politics and stardom with MGR becoming synonymous with DMK. This coupled with the mushrooming of fan clubs (Dickey 2003) in Tamil Nadu greatly affected the position of the heroine in Tamil film narratives. Films starring MGR, which were made with the primary aim of securing electoral votes, were escapist in nature (Hardgrave, 1973). Among other means, escapism was promoted through the power of the male protagonist. One of the means used to achieve this objective was through the depiction of the hero as the saviour of the *tãikkulam* womenfolk.[8] As suggested by Pandian (1992), in such film narratives, the hero was usually 'in charge' of his mother, sister and girlfriend. The girlfriend, often the *katã-nãyaki*, was presented in relation to the hero, seldom possessing an independent voice:

> In his (MGR) films, the heroine's sole endeavour is to get married to MGR, the hero, and she waits endlessly for him to complete his more important and urgent work before he finally weds her at the end of the film.
>
> (Pandian 1992: 88)

Marriage served as the denouement of the narrative with all ending well, thus providing audience with escapism as noted by Dickey:

> Tamil movies almost always have happy endings. After the villains have been killed or converted, hero and heroine joined in love, and wayward

> family members reunited in a palatial setting, viewers may leave feeling supported in their hopes for an easier life.
>
> (Dickey 1993a: 114)

Thus in the 1960s MGR movies, we see a shift in the 'passive subject' *katã-nãyaki*. From having been a chaste wife the *katã-nãyaki* has now adopted a new persona of being the chaste girlfriend. Here it is important to note that there have been instances of earlier films where the *katã-nãyaki* assumed the role of a girlfriend. However, in movies made in this decade, we see marriage being pushed to the end of the narrative as compared to many of the earlier films where the transition from single-hood to marriage occurs much earlier in the narrative. This meant that earlier traditional female archetypes, presented as wives, were now of less direct relevance to the Tamil film *katã-nãyaki*. Nevertheless, chastity was still an important attribute to this unmarried woman as this quality was viewed as a pre-requisite that justified the *katã-nãyaki*'s relationship with the hero. However, as an unmarried woman, the *katã-nãyaki* was assigned greater space to transgress traditional norms. In the film, *Periya Idathuppen* (1963), the *katã-nãyaki* a young unmarried woman, belonging to a rich family in the village, is presented as an educated woman. She adopts western clothes reflective of the emerging middle class in India (Virdi 2003: 201). However, she sheds her modernity and adopts the traditional sari immediately after her marriage to the hero. In fact, projected as being haughty in the initial part of the narrative, this *katã-nãyaki* is finally subdued by the male protagonist. The increase in the numbers of 'girlfriend' *katã-nãyaki* did not mean that the traditional representations were totally erased from the Tamil film scene. This representation continued through popular film narratives, especially in movies that were family centred. Such portrayals were evident in films such as *Par Makale Par* (1963), where the *katã-nãyaki*, a mother of two grown-up girls, is compelled to put up with her status-conscious husband and his insensitive attitude towards their daughters, one their biological child and another an adopted one.

Stalwarts MGR and Shivaji Ganesan continued as heroes in the 1970s, starring with actresses who were much younger then them. Therefore, in films such as *Rickshakaran* (1971), *Urimaikkural* (1974) and *Dr Siva* (1975), in order to accentuate the virility of the hero, the *katã-nãyaki* was presented as a spectacle that is under the control of the male lead. As suggested by Mulvey in Mast and Cohen (1985), the heroine's body and beauty were made public not only for the eye of the camera but also the hero and the spectators watching the film. At this point, it is essential to bear in mind that the technique of extolling the *katã-nãyaki* as an object of beauty had been attempted, even in earlier films, often through songs and dialogues. However, the earlier films did not concentrate on projecting the *katã-nãyaki* as sex entities i.e. camera angles were not intentionally or obviously used to dissect the female body. Conversely, from the beginning of the 1970s, we

witness a gradual shift towards this trend. In most cases, however, such untraditional depictions of the *katã-nãyaki* were confined to dream scenes or song dance sequences. The objectification of the female body was achieved largely through another woman in the film, the cabaret dancer, who was often presented in direct contrast to the *katã-nãyaki*.

The second half of the 1970s introduced another type of films, which Sundar Kali in Vasudevan terms 'nativity films' (2000:169). As highlighted by Sundar Kali, the village has not remained unexplored in Tamil cinema. It has been discussed occasionally with films based on studio sets. However, in the second half of the 1970s, new directors like Bharathiraja were keen on location shoots to project reality. What did this mean in terms of the *katã-nãyaki* representation? First, the heavily made up glamorous *katã-nãyaki* of yesteryear was replaced with a simple looking protagonist who was representative of the village woman, or *kirãmattuppĕn*. As in the case of earlier *katã-nãyaki*, chastity was of prime importance to this woman. Interestingly however, many of these rural centred films, in the guise of reflecting the innocence and tradition of village life, presented the female body for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience. The film *16 Vayatinile* (1977) serves as a good example to illustrate this observation. In this narrative, an urban doctor enters the village and is attracted by the youthful *katã-nãyaki*, Mayil. To express the point that he is perverted and dangerous in contrast to the innocent *katã-nãyaki*, Mayil is shown to walk across the river holding up her *pavadai* (skirt) upon his request. The camera focuses on Mayil gradually lifting her skirt up to her thighs thus objectifying her body. From the examples cited thus far, it is apparent that the 1970s protagonists were largely depicted as 'passive subjects'. However, this was also the period that clearly marked the *katã-nãyaki*'s shift towards the position of the pleasurable object.

The 'angry young man'[9] genre attained importance in Tamil cinema in the 1980s. This type of film, made popular in Hindi cinema through Amitabh Bachaan, was presented in Tamil cinema largely through superstar Rajinikant. In many of these films, the hero, initially an honest person, turns into an angry young man when faced with the attempted or actual rape or murder of his sister, girlfriend or mother. The use of rape in these films was an important means through which the female body was objectified. The inclusion of rape scenes was not a recent phenomenon. Even in earlier film narratives like *Mannathi Mannan* (1960), the villain attempts to rape the *katã-nãyaki*. However, interestingly in films belonging to the earlier period, such scenes did not concentrate on exposing the female anatomy. In fact, even in the 1970s, rape scenes were often inter-cut with shot sequences that were symbolic. In such scenes, larger animals were often shown to be preying on smaller ones. However, in the 1980s graphic violence was incorporated in the rape scenes, to assist in making the female the pleasurable object.

Often in such revenge narratives, the *katã-nãyaki*'s role ends with providing a listening ear to the hero, comforting him in times of distress. She is

usually not depicted as an active person capable of solving his problems. On the contrary, she often places herself in a position where she is in need of the hero's protection. In the Rajnikant movie *Tharmayutham* (1979), the hero, Vijay is orphaned at a young age as his parents are murdered. He is brought up by a stranger, a widower with an only daughter. This daughter becomes the hero's adopted sister and it is her murder, that occurs in the latter half of the narrative, which serves as a catalyst in prompting the hero to seek revenge. In this film, we are presented with a supposedly 'daring' young *katã-nãyaki*, Chitra, who expresses her desire to live independently. She becomes a journalist in a company that is about to close down due to financial difficulties. In fact, the heroine, through her initiative, is able to redeem the company from its dire financial state. However, this progressive image of the *katã-nãyaki* only lasts for the first half of the narrative. Once the *katã-nãyaki* falls in love with the hero, her professional life assumes secondary importance. Despite knowing that he suffers from a medical condition, Chitra vows to marry him emphasising that she would feel content even if she loses her life in her endeavour to restore her lover to good health. More importantly, at the end of the narrative the *katã-nãyaki*'s portrayal as intelligent is conveniently and completely dissolved when she, held captive by the criminals, discloses to them directly that she will inform the police about their illegal activities, thus landing in further trouble. Finally, it is the hero who rescues her.

The 1980s was also marked by another film type: the romantic tragedy, which portrayed young lovers attempting to break away from the conventions of arranged marriage to seek a partner of their own, in most instances overcoming class, caste and religious distinctions. Bharathiraja's *Alaikal Oivatillai* (1981) belongs to this genre of movies. On the pretext of portraying the young lovers' reactions to romantic love, it focuses on their physical intimacy. Often in the course of such film narratives, the young female lover was presented as a spectacle for the voyeuristic pleasure of the film viewers. As for the rural based films made in this decade, most resumed the representations of the village woman as being subordinate to the hero. Often *katã-nãyaki* in such films, were depicted as second cousins of the hero, pining for his love. In projecting such an image, the female protagonists seemed to emulate the 'passive subject' examples of earlier *katã-nãyaki*, those who displayed the qualities of patience and endurance. The film *Enka Uru Pattukkaran* (1984) presents two *katã-nãyaki*. The first protagonist, the daughter of a rich headman, commits suicide, as she is not allowed to marry the hero, who is less prominent than her in many ways, especially in terms of status and wealth. The hero is then coerced into marrying another woman. However, he disregards his newly wedded wife causing her much misery. The rest of the narrative focuses on the wife's attempts to win over the hero's love. Eventually all ends well when at the end, he accepts his wife whole-heartedly. The range of *katã-nãyaki* types highlighted in the films belonging to the 1980s follow the *katã-nãyaki*'s gradual shift towards

becoming a 'pleasurable object'. However, she has not totally given up her position of the 'passive subject'. The rape scene and dream sequence served as the two most significant ways through which the *katã-nãyaki* was often presented as the pleasurable object. However, with the continued presence of the cabaret dancer, the distinction between the vamp and heroine was still maintained, thus stopping the *katã-nãyaki* from assuming a form that was completely pleasurable.

The period after 1990 ushered in great changes to the Tamil film scene, which resulted in a major revamp of Tamil film content. Greater proliferation of television into rural areas and later video and cable television provided audiences with not only a spectrum of programs and films to choose from but also the convenience of watching films at their own leisure. This affected film viewership at theatres, thus giving rise to competition. Hence, it was vital for filmmakers to produce films that attracted audiences. As a result, emphasis on film content was quickly replaced with elements of glamour. The entrance of international beauty pageant winners like Aishwarya Rai and Sushmita Sen into the Tamil film industry at this point thus served as a windfall for filmmakers. In addition, with improved filmmaking techniques, the Tamil moviemaker was now equipped to explore alternative ways of packaging films and this allowed filmmakers to concentrate on other filmic elements like cinematography rather than the film story. Moreover, with India's liberalisation policy in the 1990s, the effects of globalisation began to affect large sections of the population, including filmmakers and film audiences, with the result that global elements were infused into the film content. These factors, when combined, led to the emergence of a narrative that was distinctly different from earlier film types; thus emerged a new *katã-nãyaki* in Tamil cinema.

Often projected as the unmarried virgin woman, this modern *katã-nãyaki* is educated, brash and is even capable of taunting the hero. With the elimination of the vamp or club dancer, who in the earlier decades was representative of the negative image of the female in contrast to the good-natured protagonist, the *katã-nãyaki* of the 1990s assumed a persona that combined both facets. However, chastity was still an attribute that was important. In *Aval Varuvala* (1998), the *katã-nãyaki* is confused about accepting a man who loves her because she has been married once before. However, through the plot, it is made clear that her earlier marriage had not been consummated, making her worthy of the hero. Thus, the ending of the film, in which she unites with the hero, is vindicated.

The representation of the Tamil film heroine in the new millennium is very similar to that of the latter half of the 1990s. The use of camera angles, especially in the song and dance sequences and the dress adopted by the heroine contribute towards presenting the female protagonist as a sexual entity. The heroines in the film *Ayuta Eluthu* (2003) directed by Maniratnam are useful examples for an understanding of such representations of women. The film presents three female protagonists. However, all three women are

nearly absent in the narrative space of the film as they are largely presented as objects of pleasure. The film narrative is centred on three youths, Inba, Michael and Arjun. Inba, a ruffian, often acts violently towards his wife Sashi. He does not heed her constant advice to stop his unlawful activities. At the end of the narrative, he deserts her. Sashi's role in the film seems to be merely fulfilling the sexual needs of the hero and providing voyeuristic pleasures to the viewers. The next hero, Michael, depicted as a student leader, interested in entering politics, is in love with his neighbour, Gigi. Always spotted with modern clothes, Gigi is presented as a French language teacher but this is made clear only through one scene in the film. In the rest of the narrative, we see her praying for Michael, when he is hospitalised after being attacked by rivals, or accompanying him on his political rallies. The third hero, Arjun, a rich young graduate, has dreams of going to the United States. Portrayed as a flirt, he meets Meera at a pub, dances with her and immediately develops a liking for her. Though putatively engaged, Meera, clearly presented for the male gaze, also flirts with Arjun and finally decides to refuse her fiancé to be with the hero. All three *katã-nãyaki* have transformed into 'pleasurable objects'. However, like the ideal Tamil woman, they are projected as being chaste and they assume a subordinate position within the narrative.

## The lesser known *katã-nãyaki*

The changing persona of the heroine charted thus far is based on the majority of the Tamil film heroines. In contrast to this majority, there exists in Tamil cinema a small but significant group of female protagonists who are different. They belong to two types of women: a) progressive, and b) unconventional. The progressive heroine, reflective of Tamil poet Bharati's *putumaippen,*[10] while focusing on chastity, also questions dominant myths imposed on the Tamil female through patriarchal ideology.

In the film *Viti,* directed by K. Vijayan, we witness a bold protagonist, Radha, who does not submissively accept her boyfriend Raja's unjust gesture towards her. When Raja deserts her after making her pregnant, she defies social norms and goes to court to fight her case. In her objective of wanting to establish the legitimate father of her child, she is prepared to accept the accusations hurled at her. Finally, she wins her case but refuses to live with her lover (now married) even though he agrees to accept her. Another progressive image of the *katã-nãyaki* is that of an economically independent woman; a representation that gained prominence in the 1970s. Films belonging to this category, such as K. Balachander's *Aval Oru Thodar Kathai* (1974), aptly explored the tensions felt by a working woman, who though assigned new financial powers, was positioned within traditional boundaries.

Tamil cinema also presents the unconventional woman, a category that can be sub-divided into two groups: the first is a traditional woman who is

pushed to the limit and forced to breach conventions to kill her own husband; and the second is the woman who transgresses boundaries. Heroines of the first type of unconventional women are reflected in films such as *Mantiri Kumari* (1950), *Anta Nal* (1954) and *Accamillai Accamillai* (1984). This kind of portrayal is not unknown in the Tamil milieu; the protagonist of the Tamil literary text *Kuntalakesi*[11] is representative of such a woman. Films portraying adulterous heroines basically attempt to explore the complexities of womanhood and sexuality. In *Rocappu Ravikkaikari* (1979), the female protagonist, Nandini, is married to an uncouth hero who is unequal to her in many ways. (The couple's marriage had been arranged when they were children.) Finally, the heroine gives in to the advances of a man who enters the village as an officer and has an affair with him. Eventually, this sexually uncontrolled heroine commits suicide out of guilt at transgressing moral boundaries.

It is interesting to note that in the narratives cited above the image of a progressive woman, a working woman or unconventional woman only emerges when there is a need, i.e. some injustice has been done to a woman and she questions it, as in the case of Kannaki; or male members in a family are irresponsible and thus the female protagonist is forced to take up employment. In *Aval Oru Thodar Kathai,* it is clearly established that Kavitha is working only due to economic necessity. Her desire to relinquish her working status in order to pursue a domestic life is made clear when she states, "I have been working like a machine and I need rest, I need a family and a life. I need a husband who will provide for me." In the later part of the narrative when Kavitha finds out that her brother has turned over a new leaf, she discards her cosmetics, terming them *cumaikal* (burdens) that she had to bear due to her position as a working woman. More importantly, she tenders her resignation almost immediately after. In addition, there remains one component that binds these protagonists. The protagonists in all these films place prime importance on chastity. In the film *Viti*, the loss of her chastity prompts the protagonist to seek justice while in the case of *Rocappu Ravikkaikari,* the *katã-nãyaki* commits suicide for failing to uphold her chastity. Thus even in these films, where women are assigned the lead role, chastity remains one major factor that 'puts women in their (subordinate) position' thus allowing for the reinforcement of patriarchal ideology.

## The *katã-nãyaki* – from a passive subject to a pleasurable object

I began this chapter with a quotation that emphasised the secondary position assigned to the Tamil film *katã-nãyaki*. This idea of women's inferior position in Tamil movies is further reinforced in this paper which analyzes heroine portrayals from the perspective of the hero, thus making minimal reference to actresses despite the content's emphasis on the position of *katã-nãyaki* in films. A lack of emphasis on actresses however does not totally negate the popularity of female film stars among Tamil film viewers. Tamil

film *katã-nãyaki* including T. P. Rajalakshmi, Banumathi, Padmini, Savitiri, Saroja Devi, Sri Devi, Radha, Khushboo, Meena, Jothika and Trisha have been and are popular[12] among viewers, but they rarely exist independently. A discussion based exclusively on well-known actress Sri Devi's films is almost unheard of in comparison to a similar discussion on famous actor Kamalahasan's movies. Before I conclude, I like to highlight and discuss one more significant factor that could have been contributory to the *katã-nãyaki*'s secondary roles in films. To reinforce my point, I begin with a quote by Hardgrave:

> The actress in Tamil Nadu, however much she may attract a following, carries an aura of ill repute. She is generally associated with *devadasi* origins and some allegedly with a background in prostitution. Most actresses are believed to have 'loose morals' and there is a general disapproval of any actress who continues in film after marriage. The actresses, however, is a source of ambivalence for most film fans. As the sacrificing and sympathetic wife or as the doe-eyed young heroine, she draws them to her but she is never fully able to escape the ambiance of 'immorality'. The actor has the benefit of the double standard.
>
> (Hardgrave 1993: 95)

I contend that these inter-related ideas of film, female and reputation suggested by Hardgrave have been important in allowing the *katã-nãyaki* to remain in a secondary role despite her transformation from a 'passive subject' to a 'pleasurable object'. In spite of the popularity of Tamil film stars and the fact that many of these stars have turned into politicians in the Tamil context, a career in films does not command much respect among the general masses. In fact, K. Kamaraj, a Congress party member, who was once Tamil Nadu's chief minister, used a condescending term, *kũtãikal* or mountebank, to refer to DMK personnel who were swiftly combining films and politics in a dynamic manner. There may be a minority that feels otherwise about film acting and reputation, especially in recent years. However, the majority seem to hold the traditional view with regard to film acting, especially in relation to women. Audience feedback highlighted by Dickey (1993a) also seems to present a similar picture where film viewers are certain with regard to the distance that exists between film stars and themselves. This demarcation can probably be explained using the nature of film acting. Film acting requires a woman to not only step out of the private sphere and enter an unknown public arena dominated by males but more importantly necessitates a female to present her own self as a spectacle for the gaze of both men and women. Therefore, by taking up acting as a film career, a woman immediately detaches herself from other common women. Hence, whether the Tamil film *katã-nãyaki* emulates traditional female archetypes such as Sita, Kannaki and Vasuki, or shifts away from these prototypes to present her as a spectacle that is less traditional, she is eventually viewed as

being untraditional. This being the case, when external forces like politics, stardom and globalisation influenced Tamil film narratives, affecting the presentation of the *katã-nãyaki*, indirectly causing a transformation in her portrayal, audiences were and are not reluctant to accept the shifting images. After all, is she not merely a *kutai* assuming the role of the *katã-nãyaki*?

## Notes

1 Scholarly literature on women in Indian film is largely confined to a study of Hindi films. See the works of Lalitha Gopalan (2002) in Vasudevan (2002); Jain and Rai (2002); Prabhu (2001); Virdi (1998); Chatterji (1998); Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998); Maithili Rao in Vasudev (1995); Kumar (1995); and Leela Rao (1989) for a comprehensive understanding of this topic. Though centred on women in Hindi films, these sources are useful in gaining an overall under standing of women in Tamil cinema too. A discussion on the theme of female representation in Tamil cinema is often embedded in larger topics. See for instance C S Lakshmi (1990), Pandian (1992) and Dickey (1993a).

2 Sita's popularity among the Tamils can be attributed to Kampa Ramayanam, the Tamil version of the original Ramayana. More importantly, folk theatre and later Tamil films based on this epic i.e. *Ramayanam* (1932), *Sampoorna Ramayanam* (1958) and *Lava Kusa* (1963) assisted in popularising the heroine among the masses. Given the popularity of the Sita narrative, in this chapter, I limit myself to discussion of Kannaki and Vasuki.

3 This text has been adapted to film at two different points in the history of Tamil cinema; in 1942 as *Kannaki* and in 1964 as *Poompukar*. The dialogue for the latter film was penned by DMK leader M. Karunanidhi. Kannaki's popularity among the Tamil masses can be attributed to the efforts of Dravidian politicians, who in an attempt to mark a distinction between the Dravidian South and the Aryan North made reference to ancient Tamil texts like *Cilappatikãram*. In this chapter, I refer to Parthasarathy's (1993) translation.

4 There seems to be no authoritative book on this story; only a modern Tamil play by Ma. Vaittuaivan, which according to the writer, is based on Tiruvalluvar's literary treatise the Tirukkural. A film titled *Tiruvalluvar* was released in 1941. In addition, the Dravidian movement, in its efforts to highlight the antiquity of the Tamil language in contrast to Sanskrit, a language that was viewed as being representative of the Aryan North, has constantly promoted Tirukkural as the important text belonging to the Tamils.

5 The examples in this section refer to married women. However, the concept of *karpu* is also extended to include unmarried females. Such women uphold chas tity by ensuring that their virginity remains intact.

6 An unmarried woman is required to remain a virgin and protect her chastity so that she presents herself as a pleasurable subject to her husband once she is married. In the film *Utirippookkal* (1979), the male protagonist is presented as an anti hero. Wanting to take revenge on his sister in law who is about to marry a man of her choice, he disrobes her and tells her that it is enough punishment for her that he has seen her in the nude, a right that only a husband possesses.

7 Tamil literature of the *Cakam* period refers to early classical Tamil literature that consists of eight anthologies of lyrics, ten long poems and a work of grammar and poetics called Tolkãppiyam. Here, women are depicted as being courageous. See Zvelebil (1973) and Ramanujam (1985) for detailed discussion on this topic.

8 The term *tãikkulam* literally means 'community of mothers' as expressed by Pandian (1992:84) but it is also used to refer to womenfolk in general.

9 Refer to Claudia Preckel in Damsteegt (2003), Ranjani Mazumdar in Vasudevan (2000) and Fareeduddin Kazmi in Nandy (1998) for a detailed analysis of this phenomenon.
10 The term *putumaippen*, which literally means New Woman, refers to an imagined female constructed by the nineteenth century Tamil poet Subramania Bharati.
11 *Kuntalakēsi* is one of the five popular Tamil epics. The rest are *Cilappatikāram*, *Manimēkalai*, *Civakacintāmani* and *Valaiyāpati*. In *Kuntalakēsi*, the heroine kills her husband when he attempts to murder her.
12 The list of Tamil film actresses is much longer but for the present purpose I limit myself to a few names. When speaking of popularity of actresses, it is interesting to note that in the 1980s, enthusiastic fans constructed a temple for actress Khushboo, despite her Muslim origins.

## References

Babb, L. A. and Wadley, S. S. (eds) (1995) *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Barnouw, E. and Krishnaswamy, S. (1980) *Indian Film*. 2nd edn, New York: Oxford University Press.

Burke, L., Crowley, T. and Girvin, A. (eds) (2000) *The language and cultural theory reader*. New York: Routledge.

Chatterji, S. A. (1998) *Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema*. Calcutta: Parumita.

Damsteegt, T. (ed.) (2003) *Heroes and Heritage: The Protagonist in Indian Literature and Film*. Leiden: CNWS Publications.

Dickey, S. (1993a) *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. Cambridge: Cam bridge University Press.

(1993b) 'The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 52(2): 340 372.

(2003) 'Opposing Faces: Film Star Fan Clubs and the Construction of Class Identities in South India', in Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, *Pleasure and the Nation. The History Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Dwyer, R. and Patel, D. (2002) *Cinema India: The visual culture of Hindi Film*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press

Dwyer, R. and Pinney, C. (2001) *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public culture in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gokulsing, K. M. and Dissanayake, W. (1998) *Indian Popular Cinema A narrative of cultural change*. Staffordshire: Trentham Books.

Gopalan, Lalitha. (2002) 'Avenging Women in Indian Cinema', in Ravi S. Vasudevan (ed.), *Making Meaning of Indian Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hardgrave, R. L. (1973) 'Politics and Film in Tamil Nadu: The Stars and the DMK', *Asian Survey,* 13(3): 288 305.

(1993) *Essays in the Political Sociology of South India*. New Delhi: Manohar.

Hart, G. L. III (1973) 'The Sacred Powers of the Tamil Woman', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 32(2): 233 250.

Jain, J. and Rai, S. (eds) (2002) *Films and feminism: Essays in Indian cinema*. Jaipur: Rawat.

Kumar, K. N. (1995) *Indian Cinema: Ebbs and Tides*. New Delhi: Har Anand.

Lakshmi, C. S. (1984) *The face behind the mask*: *Women in Tamil Literature*. New Delhi: Vikas.

(1990) 'Mother, Mother community and Mother Politics in Tamil Nadu', *Eco nomic and Political Weekly,* October 20 29: 72 83.

Mast, G. and Cohen, M. (1985) *Film theory and criticism: introductory readings*. 3rd edn., New York: Oxford University Press.

Mulvey, Laura. (1985) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Movies and Methods Volume II*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nandy, A. (ed.) (1998) *The Secret Politics of our Desires; Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Pandian, M. S. S. (1992) *The Image Trap: MG Ramachandran in Film and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage.

(2000) 'Parasakthi: Life and Times of a DMK Film', in Ravi S. Vasudevan (ed.) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Parthasarathy, R. (1993) *The Tale of an Anklet: An Epic of South India* (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Prabhu, M. (2001) *Roles: Reel and Real Image of Woman in Hindi Cinema*. Delhi: Ajanya Books International.

Ramanujan, A. K. (1985) *Poems of Love and war from the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long poems of Classical Tamil* (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Rao, L. (1989) 'Woman in Indian Films a paradigm of continuity and change', *Media, Culture and Society*, 11(4): 443 458.

Vasudev, A. (1995) *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: UBS.

Vasudevan, R. S. (ed.) (2000) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Virdi, J. (2003) *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

Wadley, S. S. (ed.) (1980) *The Powers of Tamil Women*. New York: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University.

Zvelebil, K. (1973) *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India*. Leiden: Brill.

# 3 Bringing the Amman into presence in Tamil cinema

## Cinema spectatorship as sensuous apprehension

*Kalpana Ram*

To my grandmother: for those childhood afternoons in Delhi at the movies watching Saraswati Sabadam and Tiruvilayadal.

I begin with three narratives, all from Tamil Nadu. Each belongs to a different context. If we were to use conventional classificatory understandings, one narrative would be understood as belonging to 'real life', another to 'folk songs' or perhaps 'rural theatre', and only the third to cinema. Initially, I will deliberately combine contextual references, except to say that the Amman or goddess also goes by many locally known names such as Icakki Amman, Muttu Mari Amman or Mari Amman.

### First narrative

'After marriage I was the victim of *cuniyam* [sorcery]. My husband's cousin called me to him [*kuppittan*, i.e. made advances]. I was a good-looking woman. When I walked, I walked fine and strong. I also had a full set [of jewels] in those days. The man said: "What I cannot have, will not survive", and he kept *cuniyam* [sorcery] on me. Three of my children died. A fifteen-year-old son, studying tenth, got *veca katti* [poisonous tumour], a daughter of three got whooping cough; and one son who had anaemia, died of fright  s time [*neram*] had come on him. It was his fate [*viti*]. My husband's brother became sick and went into coma [*mayakkam*].'

'At this time of trouble, I had a dream in which Muthumari Amman came with *agni* [fire], *ti catti* [fire pot], *katti* [knife] and *culam* [trident]. She came to give me *sakthi*. The *devi* placed the *katti* and *culam* at my feet, giving me the sign that was to remain with me.'

'But my troubles were not yet over  had the *cuniyam* set on me, and I had a lot of [menstrual] bleeding. Finally, my womb [*pen udambu*] has been removed. *But the goddess has finally punished my husband's cousin. She chased him and stuck her culam or trident in the mud in front of him.* He begged my forgiveness publicly, and my other children were safe after that.'

## Second narrative

Two children, Nattuvan and Lakshmi, are born to a *devadasi* (temple dancer). He was the musician while Lakshmi dances. A Brahmin boy called Velavan falls in love with her. The Brahmin squanders the temple treasury to satisfy the whims of the temple dancer, and when he has no more money, the dancer's mother turns him out. He leaves the village in anger, but the dancer follows him and they run away together. While she sleeps with her head on his lap, he smashes her head with a rock and runs away taking her jewellery with him. Velavan is bitten by a snake and dies.

Lakshmi is reborn as Neeli after having prayed to Siva Peruman (Siva the Great One) to be reborn in order to wreak revenge. When Neeli matures, she takes a cactus tree and puts it on her hip. It turns into a child. She approaches the lover from her previous birth, Velavan, who has been reborn. Neeli approaches him. Sensing his destruction, he flees and takes shelter with a community of Vellalars. Neeli convinces the Vellalars that she is his wife and the elders give the wife a chance at reconciliation. *In the empty house, the goddess gores the man to death and kills the community he sheltered with.* (Performed Kanyakumari District January 2006 by Villu Pattu performers; narrative summary Blackburn 1988)

## Third narrative

My elder sister was very beautiful. She was raped by a wealthy young man and killed herself, unable to bear the shame. No one knew the true story, but she died outside the temple of the Amman, and the villain did not realise that the Amman was witness. Unknowingly, my parents organised my marriage to the very same man who had raped my sister and caused her death. My life was a misery my mother-in-law a scold, my husband did not give up philandering and running after other women, my father-in-law did nothing to intervene. But the final straw was when my husband wanted to take all my jewellery and even my *tali* to give to his current mistress. I stood my ground, and this time, I refused to give in. He snatched my jewellery, tore my *tali* off my body, and pushed me I hit my head as I fell and he left me dying to go to his mistress. *But I transformed into the Amman*. But I kept the bodily form of the dead woman. My husband was amazed to see me alive, and no one around me could work out what had happened to the demure wife. Now I set about restoring justice when the mother-in-law scolded once too often, I struck her dumb, when she raised her hand to strike me, she found her arm frozen. The impotent father-in-law found himself paralyzed. But I gave the husband another chance. I told him to seek forgiveness from a famous *rishi* in her ashram. He arrived there and, sinner that he is, the only emotion that overcame him was that of lust for her. He began his familiar move to hunt down his prey but this was no ordinary woman. It was actually me, the Amman. I let him chase me right

into my home, my temple. In his final moments I let him see me the horrifying experience of my angered *raudra* form, advancing inexorably to the sound of blaring conches, my many arms holding the weapons of destruction, my tongue lolling with blood and fury, my hair unleashed like a weapon. He retreated before me, terrified yet swooning with the ecstatic experience *he lay prostrate before me before I plunged my* culam *into his belly. He was found like this, impaled, by his tearful and awe-struck family.* He was still alive, and confessed to them the story of his infamous crimes and of the Amman who had meted out this punishment.

## The Tamil tradition of goddess cinema

The first narrative comes from 'real life' it is the story of her life as told to me in 1997 by Mutamma, a Dalit woman who lives in a village in Chengalpattu District. I met Mutamma through her work in a non-government organisation, but I then came to know her also as a medium, someone who can channel the energies of the goddess in order to dispense justice to those who gather around her as supplicants.

The second scenario is a narrative that is performed in Kanyakumari District, in a performance genre called *vil pattu* or bow songs. These tell of death and (re)birth, as well as the exploits of the goddess.

The third narrative comes from cinema, and is my re-telling of the plot of a film made in 1970, called *Namma Veetu Teyvam* or *The goddess within our very own home* (directed by Sundaram).

All three (but less so in the case of the film) invoke a goddess whose characteristics strongly align her with the volatile and terrifying 'demon deities' and 'fierce gods' of Tamil Nadu (Shulman 1989; Mines 2005). Along with other related goddesses such as Muthu-mari Amman and Mari-Amman, Icakki wields her powers in part through the medium of disease as much as fertility. The *muthu* or pearls refer to the dreaded pearls of smallpox which she may arbitrarily visit on a human subject, but just as arbitrarily remove or *mari* (change). But this is no simple opposition between affliction and benevolence. The disease is itself a form of fierce love with which she claims and marks the body of one she wants, and is therefore best understood as another form of the possession through which she characteristically manifests herself in the bodies of devotees at the climax of rituals that entail songs, dance, and the performance of narratives just like the ones we have just heard (Hart 1986; Blackburn 1988). All three narratives entail the inter-changeability between human beings and the goddess, but more specifically, between women and the goddess. Wronged women, murdered women, turn into fiery goddesses either instantaneously or in their next birth, and they mercilessly hunt down and kill the offender, regardless of whether they are killing their own lovers, husbands or, as in the case of Mutamma, their own kinsmen.

*Namma Veetu Teyvam* is quite possibly the first of the Tamil films whose plot lines mesh so closely with the Amman we find circulating in rural

popular culture. But there have been Tamil goddess films going right back to the early part of the twentieth century. This seeming paradox stems from the fact that, in south India, there are not one, but multiple cultural constructions of the goddess, reflecting the occasionally tense co-existence of pan-Indian Sanskritic as well as regional and local traditions. Regional redefinitions of goddess culture have informed Tamil cinema from its very inception. The very first film ever to be made in Tamil Nadu in 1917, was called *Keechaka Vadam* (directed by R. Nataraja Mudaliar). I would surmise from the title that it would have been dedicated to an episode in the Sanskrit epic the Mahabharata that deals with the slaying of Keechaka, in punishment for his sexual harassment of a chaste woman, Draupadi, the heroine of the epic. The next film to be made in Tamil Nadu, *Meenakshi Kalyanam* or *The Marriage of Meenakshi* (directed by S. Prakash in 1920), also dealt with an episode whose significance can be judged by the fact that it was made again as a movie in 1940 (directed by R. Padmanabhan). Its importance stems from the fact that Meenakshi rules as a sovereign in the Tamil city of Madurai, and is annually married to Siva in an elaborate festival (Fuller 1984). In this southern world, even the 'high culture' goddesses who may share the same name as their northern counterparts, behave quite differently. In Madurai, it is Meenakshi who is worshipped before Siva (Fuller 1984). Tamil films dedicated to the exploits of these goddesses, such as *Sri Kanchi Kamakshi* (directed by K. S. Gopalakrishnan in 1978), feel no need to refer to a male consort.

South Indian cinema is not unique in this early orientation towards religious culture. The north also began with such films. What *is* unique is the prominence of the goddess within this broadly shared orientation, and the re-definitions of the goddess admitted by regional culture. The film *Adi-Parasakthi* (directed by K.S. Gopalakrishnan in 1971) declares, in its very title, that *sakthi*, embodied in goddesses and women, is *adi*, primary in both a temporal and an ontological sense. All over India, the goddesses Parvathi and Lakshmi are worshipped as 'consorts' to the great male deities Siva and Visnu. But in *Adi Parashakti,* it is the Goddess who creates Siva and Vishnu and then also creates Parvathi and Lakshmi to keep them company. The primacy of *sakthi* does not abolish male dominance in Tamil Nadu. However, it does release a set of volatile elements into the culture, which fuels tensions, ongoing questions and negotiations. Films such as *Adi-Parasakthi* are concerned precisely with such questions as: what are the limits of female *sakthi*? And what are the limits of male supremacy? The film opens with Parvathi's disgust at the hubris of her husband Siva. She issues the challenge: can Siva survive without his Sakthi? The film gives an unambiguous answer no. When she withdraws her presence, he is left an inert corpse and the universe is plunged into cosmic chaos.

But the actual well-spring that feeds the southern re-interpretations of the goddess the Amman who rules over and guards the intimate heartland of culture as 'native place' or *ur* was not acknowledged directly in Tamil

cinema until the 1970s. Indeed, quite the opposite. Possibly due to 'the association of film makers with the "high" classical traditions' (personal communication Velayutham), films such as *Sri Kanchi Kamakshi*, dedicated to the goddesses of the great temples of Madurai and Kanchipuram repudiated non-Sanskritic culture. An entire episode of the film is dedicated to combating offerings of goats, chickens and blood sacrifice of any kind by equating them with black magic and primitive superstition. The offence to the goddess Kamakshi at such profanities in her temple is so great that her eyes have become permanently and exaggeratedly wide with horror and will only relax when the Brahman spiritual leader Sankaracharya has re-educated gullible villagers and rescued them from sorcerers. One would never guess from films such as this that the Amman of popular culture herself thoroughly enjoys the goats and chickens offered in sacrifice or that such worship, including possession, enjoys a robust history that is part of the literary tradition proudly invoked as 'classical' by Tamil nationalism. Since the 1970s, there has been a spate of films dedicated to this non-Sanskritic subaltern Amman and villagers offer chickens and goats with greater impunity on screen. The subaltern Amman now commands a sub-genre of cinema in her own right.

## In the realm of the 'mythological'? The legacies of realist epistemology

Discussions of the early choice of subject matter in north Indian cinema are usually dominated by an exploration of the modern politics of *swadeshi* or cultural nationalism. Phalke, director of the early Hindi films on Krishna, is said to have wondered, after seeing *The Life of Christ* in 1909: 'Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?' (Rajadhyaksha 1993: 49; Zutshi 1993: 83). What is less often noted is that this nationalist impulse to find quintessentially Indian images was accompanied by another legacy of modernity, namely, a realist epistemology that equipped middle class Indians with a discourse quite at odds with the palpable potency of the relationship between audiences and the religious images on the screen. As the content of Indian cinema diversified, this genre of cinema came to be known as 'mythologicals'. Even as religious images moved on to celluloid animation, the dominant intellectual framework heralded their irrelevance to modern concerns. The term 'mythological' prefigures our judgement, telling us we are dealing with a subject matter belonging to a superseded and antiquated past.

From such a position, we cannot even begin to even apprehend the power of such films. Even those of us who grew up with Indian cinema receive, as if it were information about a distant place, the news that Amman films 'get good viewership from women and rural folk' (Natarajan, *The Hindu*, 2003). More often, the middle class glimpses the power of such cinema only in the discourse of hostile critics. Writing for the internet, Balaji B. regularly casts

a supercilious eye on the latest offering of the Amman goddess film industry. For all his own evident fascination with the genre, he understands it only as a conscious ploy of filmmakers who prey on backwardness and illiteracy:

> Movies like *Hey Ram* and *Alaipayuthey* stand testimony to the fact that Tamil cinema is definitely making big strides in quality and content. But then there are movies ... that refuse to budge even an inch from the clichés that have defined Tamil cinema. Now comes another movie that pushes Tamil movies even further backward along the progressive line [sic] ... *Rajakali Amman* is another of those devotional movies that contains the standard story of the deity protecting her devotee from evil ... As long as there are viewers who pat their cheeks in devotion whenever Ramya Krishnan appears on screen as Amman, there will be directors and producers who take advantage of people's gullibility and offer up such movies. All we can do is hope that people become more literate and reject these movies.
>
> (Balaji 2006)

The class divide that separates filmmakers from watchers is, according to Dickey, a very real one. Filmmaking in Tamil Nadu has been described as 'the province of people who belong almost exclusively to the middle and upper classes' (Dickey 1995: 131). But for the likes of Balaji, the class distance between filmmakers and viewers is measured in somewhat different terms. It appears to him as a distance between those who know, at all times, how to correctly distinguish the difference between reality and illusion, and those who confuse the two. Filmmakers, as members of the educated middle-class, know there is a difference between the actress and the role she plays. Balaji, of course, also knows the difference. In addition, he also knows what is progressive, and what is backward, thus making him a watchdog of the class to which he belongs, as well as an authority on the gullibility of the poor. The viewers, on the other hand, betray their gullibility and illiteracy in their evident predisposition to confuse the actress with the goddess herself, responding to the former with behaviour that correctly belongs to the temple, foolishly 'patting their cheeks' in devotion when the actress appears on the screen. The middle class comes to be divided in this scenario between those who exploit the gullibility of the poor, and those who speak up on their (admittedly misguided) behalf. Both sections, however, appear to share a knowingness that relentlessly excludes the possibility of any blurring of distinction between real and non-real, between cinema and other contexts such as religion or real life.

Even on the face of it, this description of an inexorably clear-eyed gaze that entertains no intermediary possibilities between truth and falsehood, which knows its own motivations and is in entire control over the production and content of a film, is an unlikely description of any process of cultural production and indeed, of any conceivable type of human subjectivity.

It certainly does not provide an accurate description of the subjectivity or practices of the postcolonial Indian middle class, which has been far more eclectic in its retention of certain favoured indigenous medical practices such as Ayurveda and yoga, and in its selective enthusiasms for a nationalism that is Hindu as well as modern; nor does it capture the conscious efforts of Indian nationalism to forge a unitary synthesis of indigeneity and western science by re-locating the roots of science in its own cultural past (Prakash 1999). Certainly when it comes to gender and women, the educated middle class has been remarkably selective in its adoption of 'modernity'. But these are not the contexts where the middle class characterises its own subjectivity in terms of rationalism. Rather, such formulations *emerge in specifically cross-class contexts*, where they function simultaneously as a form of class distinction and gender distinction. Here I draw on my ethnographic work on cross-class relations between the rural poor in Tamil Nadu and professionals such as teachers, social workers, health professionals and clergy (Ram 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2001). Any doctor or nurse in a public hospital maternity ward in Tamil Nadu, any non-government health worker who has dealings with the poor can readily and automatically rattle off the *muda nambikkai* or foolish, superstitious beliefs of their patients and the backward orientations of poor women.

## The movement of cultural schemas across fields of practice: transpositions

According to the specialisms that have built themselves on a realist epistemology, narratives one, two and three each belong to quite different orders of reality and are therefore to be studied in quite different terms. The first belongs to what we would study under village ethnography, the second to theatre and therefore to performance studies, the third to cinema and the territory of film studies. Yet all the narratives beat to the same emotional pulse which is to be found in the violent breakdown in women's lives, in violations that rupture the moral fabric of gendered life trajectories. These ruptures, along with tragic untimely deaths, take us into what is part of a profound affective core in south Indian culture which is why their performance has the 'ritual depth' normally associated with worship (Hart 1986). Indeed, the performance of these tragedies, characteristically climaxing with the pulsing rhythms of the *tutukku* drum, is capable of generating the intensities that will transmute humans into the goddess or dead hero (Blackburn 1988). The morality invoked here is also very old in Tamil literary culture: women's fulfilment is to be found in love, wifehood and maternity, men's in heroism and valour. But these narratives also afford women a justice and forms of reprisal that are far more direct than those of conventional upper caste models of femininity. Women turn instantly into, or are re-born as avenging goddesses. These dramatic and contagious meanings find easy purchase in the lives of women when experiences of

suffering and violation become salient. Mutamma, a Dalit woman, tells in narrative one of suffering which began when she attracted the unwanted sexual attention of a man who was her relative. When she rejected him, she suffered grievously from sorcery attacks, saw three of her children die, and her body bled from continual menstrual disorder. The Amman, Muthu-Mari-Amman, after whom she was re-named after nearly dying as a young baby, visited her in a dream promising to be with her always. Finally, the goddess intervened. She hunted down the man who was attacking Mutamma, curbed him with her *culam* (trident) and has stayed with Mutamma ever since. Many years after this episode, Mutamma the Dalit woman now directly becomes the goddess Mutamma, bringing direct judgement and justice to those who gather around her makeshift 'courts' in the hot noonday sun, under the shade of a tamarind tree. She is able to actively utilise the narrative to powerfully re-interpret the meanings of events in her life, and re-shape her life in quite dramatic ways. Nor are such experiences uncommon (see Ram 1991, Nabokov 2000, Egnor 1980, Hancock 1999).

Films such as *Amman* (directed by Kodi Ramakrishna in 1995), *Rajakaali Amman* (directed by Rama Narayanan in 2000) *Paalayathu Amman* (directed by Rama Narayanan in 2000), *Pottu Amman* (directed by K. Rajarathnam in 2000), to mention just a few of this genre, also explicitly focus on the goddess's responsiveness to female vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities may be familial oppression from natal or conjugal families, violence from the husband, or poverty. In what follows, I will refer principally to two recent films, *Rajakaali Amman* and *Amman*. *Rajakaali Amman* features the special relationship between the goddess who is herself looking for love and two orphaned siblings, a boy and a girl. For them, she is not simply a goddess but their mother. She repeatedly foils attempts on their lives, but is unable to prevent the girl's marriage to a depraved villain who is in league with a sorcerer. The girl's isolation and vulnerability is almost total following the murder of her brother, when the goddess arrives at her doorstep posing as the villain's diasporic cousin from America (!), but with a manner and tastes disquietingly at odds with what one would expect from a westernised, well heeled girl. After much humour at the expense of the villain and his bossy sister, the film moves into a climactic showdown between the goddess and the villainous team.

The film *Amman*, originally made in Telugu as *Ammoru*, is much closer to the ritual depth of the tragic mode in south Indian culture. The girl is even more isolated and vulnerable than the heroine in the previous film, lacking even a brother to protect her from the world's scheming villains. She has only the goddess and a kindly temple priest. From the moment she attracts the love of a well-to-do, educated young man visiting his family in the village, her fate is sealed, as his family is scheming to marry him to his cousin. The attempts made on the heroine are far more insidious than attempts on her life they include attempts to have her paraded naked in front of the village, and when all plans to prevent the wedding are foiled, to convince

the world and her that she has become insane. The hero returns overseas without her, and the girl is trapped in a world of horror. The goddess intervenes only when she is left for dead, bleeding with a swollen pregnant womb gashed and gored, in front of the goddess's temple. The goddess comes down the temple stairs as a radiantly confident young girl who heals the heroine and moves in with her. A marvellous scene has the young girl bringing rain to the village. Excited by a festival of song and dance held to thank the goddess, she dances with her hair unleashed, declaring to the world that she *is* the Amman. The confrontation and the climactic delivery of the Amman's justice are violent and bloody, and she is brought back to her cooled state only with difficulty.

I do not know if Mutamma the Dalit medium has seen these Amman films. I did not ask her at the time. Certainly, Amman film hit songs are now part of worship at village goddess festivals (Ondrich 2005). But ultimately, to wonder if someone such as Mutamma herself saw these films and copied them is to frame the question in a mechanical way. Rather, what we are dealing with is a series of *transpositions* from one field of cultural practice to another. What allows these transpositions to occur in the first place is the existence of certain basic cultural *schemas*, in Bourdieu's sense of the term (1992). The schemas entail a conjunction of elements at once more basic, and also more impoverished, than any of their actual realisations, whether in cinema or ritual performance or in understandings of life itself. Pared back, the relevant schema probably consists of no more than a few relational pairs that are transposed on to one another according to the particular situation at hand: woman/man, suffering/power, death/birth, human/divine, and woman/goddess. Yet by virtue of being shared, schemas, impoverished as they are, or more accurately, precisely *because* of their impoverished quality, are able to connect different fields of practice, creating pathways whereby each field is able to lend its own power and meanings to the others.

These relational pairs are easily mistaken for structuralist cognitive oppositions. But what travels from one field to another are not simply cognitive or linguistic categories, but embodied, corporeal schemas. When women such as Mutamma become mediums for the goddess, there are striking convergences between the way in which actors on screen convey the presence of the goddess, and the way in which Mutamma convinces others that they are in the presence of the goddess rather than of a poor Dalit woman. Spectators, whether of Mutamma or of the goddess in the film, can only know whether they are watching an ordinary woman or a goddess through bodily gait, stance, demeanour and style of language. Instead of the demure, long-suffering wife, we now have a woman whose outward appearance is the same, but who now walks with measured gait. Her head is never bowed; she meets the gaze of her hierarchically superior in-laws with level eyes and intimidates them instead. Instructions fail to elicit obedience; instead, the woman serenely does exactly what she pleases. When the Dalit

woman Mutamma is possessed by the Amman, her language is imperious, she refers to her home as a palace (*aranmanai*), she chastises recalcitrant devotees, and she pronounces the fate of those who resist her power.

Finally, we are also discussing a transposition of bodily techniques and technologies the capacity to make music, to create the rhythms of drums and of language, to perform and make alive the affective structures of narrative, to manipulate liquids, foods and objects in more or less impressive ways. Amman cinema is, in this sense, better seen as another layer of techniques which facilitate the realisation of a shared 'practical' goal, that of activating the power of the goddess. Thus considered, it is no longer the case that cinema remains the sole medium that deserves the name 'technology' while the others continue to be described simply as 'rituals' understood as pertaining to an arcane and outmoded sphere. We may draw here on work done in a very different context. In a detailed examination of a video made by an Aboriginal artist specifically to link the Yolngu people of northern Australia, Deger (2003) has highlighted the deliberate use of video as a fresh set of technical possibilities that could reveal to the knowing watchers a sense of how ritual techniques and knowledges concerning a river serve to link the scattered Yolngu communities. Similarly, Amman cinema implicitly recognises the compatibility between older and newer technologies of power. A striking instance of this easy transposition between older and newer technologies of power occurs in *Rajakaali Amman.* The villain taunts the devotee, ridiculing the absurd notion of the Amman who sees past, present and future. 'Does she watch closed circuit TV?' he laughs. In the next scene, we are treated to just that the Amman is reclining, and shows her devotee all that has just occurred and is about to occur on a giant TV screen.

## The bodily senses and the devotional spectator of Amman cinema

What would happen if, instead of sneering at it, we were to take the 'confusion' of the viewers between the actress and the goddess, between cinema and the temple, more seriously? What if we take their response of 'patting their cheeks in devotion' when the Amman appears on the screen as a means of exploring the nature of spectatorship for cinema in general? What can it tell us about the nature of the relationship between cinema and other cultural practices significant as a perceptual horizon to cinematic spectatorship?

Considerations of the religious image have already yielded some of the richest insights into the phenomenology of cultural practices that produce and receive images in India (Kapur 1993, Rajadhyaksha 1993, Jain 2007, Pinney 1997). If mainstream criticism sees little but 'degraded spectacle' in cinema (Dickey 1995), the same has not been true of Indian cultural studies. One of the earliest and most influential concepts to emerge from this body of work was that of the 'frontality' of the iconic image (Kapur 1993). Gods and goddesses directly address the camera. Frontality also entails a static

freezing of space and time and a certain exaggeration of meanings, as in tableaux (Dwyer and Patel 2002). The discussion of 'frontalism' has been intimately linked with the theme of spectatorship as gaze, which in the context of Indian cinema, has been modelled on *darshan*, or the hierarchical inter-subjective exchange of gazes between devotee and the image of the deity.

But Amman cinema alerts us to other qualities of Indian cinema, and to the employment of other senses besides the gaze. Quite unlike the static, frontal, gaze-driven quality emphasised in the literature, in its post-digital use of computerised technology, Amman cinema exults in those aspects of the goddess's ontology and authoritative power that require supple and fluid morphological transformations. The ontology of the Amman worshipped as Icakki, Mariamman, Neeli, and so on, is of one whose very essence it is to change shape and form, to move in labile fashion between divine and human, to erupt in quicksilver fashion into her heated form and to move into a beneficent form when cooled by the attentions of her devotees. In *Rajakaali Amman*, digital computerised technology revels in the fluidity with which the avenging *chakra*-like weapon of the goddess can be shown to zoom through space in relentless pursuit of the evildoer. Digitalised images of the goddess have not yet incorporated some of the sensory modalities available in even the simplest computer games, such as the exploitation of the sense of touch, the capacity to influence images through touch that is incorporated into the controllers for video-game consoles. These 'allow the user not just to see three-dimensional shapers represented on the screen but also to feel them and interact with them.' (Paterson 2006: 4). However, even at this stage of the technology, the movement of digitalised images such as the goddess's *chakra* zooming relentlessly after the villain employs senses besides sight and sound. It incorporates a sense of *kinaesthesia*, which is triggered by the effective thrust of the narrative. The viewer, whose level of frustration at the impunity of the brutal villain has been raised to a peak, is favoured with a sense of release and is herself moving, indeed, flying positioned by the goddess's *chakra* seeking out the villain to bring him to his bloody and deserved end. The viewer is not relating to the goddess solely through the gaze of *darshan*. Fluid morphological transformations are also crucial to the humour to be had in the dispensation of justice in Amman films. In *Rajakaali Amman* (2000) the bossy sister-in-law who demands to be massaged because her 'head feels like it is coming off' finds her head literally off and re-located on the other side of the room; the hand raised to strike becomes a rubbery stretchable substance; and when she finally contemptuously rubs her shoes into the lime beloved of the goddess, she suffers the ignominious fate of death-by-limes.

I have emphasised movement. But, more accurately, the powers of the Amman lie in the movement *between* em-placement and de-territorialisation. Ammans in south India are intimately associated with *place*, with *ur*, often translated in Tamil-English as 'native place'. Both *Rajakaali Amman* and

*Amman* work with a tension between the goddess on the move and the goddess in place. The orphans in *Rajakaali Amman* meet an Amman who has left her previous *ur* in disgust at her neglect and the villainy that is abroad. It is their love and attention which re-emplaces her in their *ur.* The film *Amman* opens with the story of an *ur* hit by a typhoid epidemic. The Amman comes, as a stranger to the *ur*, and to the woman who shows her kindness, reveals the secret of how to rid the *ur* of typhoid, promising to await her return. On realising who her guest is, the woman resolves to kill herself for then the Amman, bound by her own promise to wait, will have to stay in the *ur* forever. In both films, it is devotees, through their affective power of devotion and sacrifice, who territorialise the Amman, *bringing* her to an *ur* and keeping her there. Once again these are stories that circulate between spheres of practice villagers narrate how a particular goddess came to rest, the contagion of her *sakthi* or power seeping into the very soil of the *ur* (Mines 2005: 129 30). Post-modern tendencies to emphasise movement at the expense of 'rooted' identity may well learn from closer attention to the interplay between the two in the relation between the Amman and place making.

In his comments on 'darshan', Pinney remarks on 'recent anthropological and philosophical critique. ... [of] the visualist bias in the Western tradition', but, he adds, 'such a bias is equally evident in an Indian context' (1997: 109). Such a bias may be more a feature of the theoretical apparatus western and Indian than of actual devotional practices. I would agree that the exchange of the gaze associated with *darshan* forms one of the striking features of Amman cinema. A sequence in *Rajakaali Amman* shows the eyes on a calendar image of the goddess come alive when the heroine is in danger. In the climactic sequence in the same film, the evil husband begins to destroy the eyes of the neglected image of the goddess in the temple, ignoring the winds of outrage that begins to howl and swirl around him. Two of the swirling leaves attach themselves to his eyes and pluck them out. Blinded, he may now have the opportunity to see, at last, with the vision of *darshan.*

But these films also make it clear that the capacity to comprehend the image as the living goddess cannot depend simply on an inter-subjectivity of the vision and gaze, however potent this may be. The cinema genre lovingly dwells on the intimacies of *inter-corporeality* between devotee and goddess, sustained by a range of embodied practices modelled on the everyday inter-corporeality between mother and child. Temporary and deliberate inversion of hierarchical pairs is a widespread way of performing love in South Asia. Thus, a husband may show love by insisting on feeding his wife himself, from the same plate the wife has brought for him. In the film, the goddess indulges the devotees by letting them bathe her in milk and honey, and dress her in silks. The child/devotees address her in tones of loving intimacy, worry about her when she has not eaten or slept for a long time, sing her a lullaby and rock her to sleep in a swing or in their own lap. Marks (2000:

149, 153) has argued that the 'tactile visuality' of certain forms of cinema that allow us to understand film viewing as an exchange between two bodies and two sensoriums — that of the viewer and that of the film. In Amman cinema, the power of such exchanges in transforming the experience of images is explicitly dramatised for us. We are treated to the image as the devotee sees her, transformed by his daily caring touch — there she sits, a dazzlingly beautiful woman smilingly listening to his prattle. Then we lapse into the image as the non-devotee sees it — an inert image of cold stone.

Amman cinema therefore dramatises for us the fact that the relationship between spectator and image is not exhausted even by the potent version of 'seeing' implied by 'darshan'. Instead, a much richer and fuller confluence of sensory engagement allows the devotee 'inside' the film and the spectator of the film to experience the goddess as living flesh rather than stone. For spectators who 'pat their cheeks in devotion' at the sight of the cinematic Amman, the cinema is in any case understood in and through a background of effectively rich, sensuous practices. The cinematic representations of tending the Amman are no different from what worshippers do off-screen. Amman cinema explicitly incorporates these off-screen practices as part of its cinematic material. A striking feature of the Amman genre is the insertion of sequences entirely dedicated to quasi-ethnographic footage of goddess festivals and non-actors worshipping the goddess. These sequences are located in a space quite outside the cinematic narrative but establish a vivid sense of continuity between not only the world outside and the world of film, but also between the *style* of 'ethnographic realism' and the apparently fantastic style of Amman cinema. All are brought together by the project of activating the power of the Amman.

I have emphasised the deliberate way in which Amman cinema draws on the power of non-cinematic cultural practices. I will close by indicating that this is no straightforward championing of rural culture. The genre of cinema is also narrowing the range of meanings available to Dalit women such as Mutamma. The rural Amman demonstrates justice by killing the villainous husbands/lovers of women. Justice of this kind shares the character of peasant justice (cf. Guha 1983), demonstrated precisely by its excesses. Once aroused the Amman is likely to leave a wake of destruction until appeased. By contrast, increasingly, the pattern in Amman cinema is for the goddess to spare even the life of the murderous, brutal husband, contenting herself at best with a symbolic blinding. In the rural stories, it is the murdered woman herself who becomes the goddess and kills her wrong doers. In the more recent cinema versions where the goddess moves in with the heroine, a tension is created between the goddess's inclination to dispense a summary justice and the woman's desire for an auspicious life as a wedded wife. In *Rajakaali Amman*, the oppressed woman herself pleads with the goddess to spare the life of her husband. The rural Amman's relationship to maternity is ambiguous at best. But in these films, the Amman is equipped with conventional maternal feelings for her devotees.

The cinema songs enumerate all the names of the goddess, from 'high' to subaltern, and announce with fervent authority: ALL AMMANS ARE ONE! If an earlier era of goddess films elided non-Sanskritic forms of worship by equating them with sorcery and primitivism, today's Amman films celebrate the non-Sanskritic goddesses only to find a general 'unity'. In the process, we are robbed of the very qualities that associated them with subaltern desires for justice.

## Acknowledgements

My appreciative thanks to Selvaraj Velayutham and Sara Dickey for their valuable comments, and to Kajri Jain for her stimulating work on religious calendar art and for ongoing conversations.

## References

Blackburn, S. (1988) *Singing of Birth and Death. Texts in Performance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Balaji, B. (2006) *Review of Rajakaali amman.* Available online at: www.thenisai.com/tamil/movies/rkamman.htm (accessed 26 July 2006).

Bourdieu, P. (1992 [1977]) *Outline of A Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Daniel, V. (1984) *Fluid Signs. Being a Person the Tamil Way*. Berkeley: University of California.

Deger, J. (2003) unpublished Phd *Shimmering Screens: media, mimesis and a vision of a Yolngu modernity*. Anthropology, Macquarie University.

Dickey, S. (1995) 'Consuming Utopia: Film Watching in Tamil Nadu' in Breck enridge, C. (ed.) *Consuming Modernity. Public culture in a South Asian world.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 131 156.

Dwyer, R. and Patel, D. (2002) *Cinema India. The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*. London: Reaktion Books.

Egnor, M. (1980) 'On the meaning of Sakti to Women in Tamil Nadu' in Susan S. Wadley (ed.) *The Powers of Tamil Women*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, pp. 1 34.

Frasca, R. (1990) *The Theater of the Mahabharata. Terukkuttu Performances in South India*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Fuller, C. J. (1984) *Servants of the Goddess. The priests of a South Indian temple*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Guha, R. (1983) *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hancock, M. (1999) *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Hart, G. (1986) 'The Manikkuravan Story: From Ritual to Entertainment' in S. Blackburn and A. K. Ramanujan (eds) *Another Harmony. New Essays on the Folklore of India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 233 264.

Hiltebeitel, A. (1988) *The Cult of Draupadi. Mythologies: From Gingee to Kuruksetra*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jain, K. (2007) *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian 'Calendar Art'*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kapur, G. (1993) 'Revelation and Doubt: Sant Tukaram and Devi' in T. Niranjana, P. Sudhir and V. Dhareshwar (eds) *Interrogating Modernity. Culture and Colonial ism in India.* Calcutta: Seagull Books, pp. 19 46.

Marks, L. (2000) *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment And The Senses.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Mines, D. (2005) *Fierce Gods. Inequality, ritual and the politics of dignity in a south Indian village.* Bloomington and Indianopolis: Indiana University Press.

Nabokov, I. (2000) *Religion Against The Self. An ethnography of Tamil rituals.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Natarajan, D. (2003) 'Avenging Goddesses', *The Hindu* 18/12/2003. Available online at: www.hinduonnet.com/mp/2003/12/18/stories/2003121800570300.htm

Ondrich, M. (2005) 'Amman movies an introduction', *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 9(2), October. Available online at: www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9NO2/Ondrich AmmanFilm.htm.

Paterson, M. (2006) 'Feel the presence: Technologies of touch and distance', *Envir onment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24, pp. 1 18.

Pinney, C. (1997) *Camera Indica. The Social Life of Indian Photographs.* Chicago: University of Chicago.

Prakash, G. (1999) *Another Reason. Science And The Imagination of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rajadhyaksha, A. (1993) 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology' in T. Niranjana, P. Sudhir and V. Dhareshwar (eds) *Interrogating Modernity. Culture and Colonialism in India.* Calcutta: Seagull Books. pp. 47 82.

Ram, K. (1991) *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community.* Allen and Unwin; Zed Press, and Kali Press for Women, New Delhi (1992).

(1996) 'Rationalism, cultural nationalism and the reform of body politics: Minority intellectuals of the Tamil Catholic community' in P.Uberoi (ed.) *Social reform, Sexuality and the State.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 291 318.

(1998a) 'Maternity and the story of Enlightenment in the colonies: Tamil coastal women, South India' in K. Ram and M. Jolly (eds) *Maternities and Mod ernities: Colonial and Post Colonial Experiences in Asia and the Pacific*. Cam bridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 114 143.

(1998b) 'Uneven Modernities and Ambivalent Sexualities: Women's construc tion of puberty in coastal Kanyakumari, Tamilnadu' in Mary E. John and Janaki Nair (eds) *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of modern India*. Kali for Women, pp. 269 303.

(2001) 'Modernity and the Midwife'. in L. Connor and G. Samuel (eds) *Heal ing Powers and Modernity. Traditional medicine, shamanism and science in Asian societies.* Westport and London: Bergin and Garvey, pp. 64 84.

Shulman, D. (1989) 'Outcaste, guardian and trickster: Notes on the myth of Katta varayan' in Hiltebeitel, A. *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Zutshi, S. (1993) 'Women, Nation and the Outsider in Contemporary Hindi Cinema' in T. Niranjana, P. Sudhir and V. Dhareshwar (eds) *Interrogating Modernity. Culture and Colonialism in India.* Calcutta: Seagull Books, pp. 83 143.

# 4 Politics and the film in Tamil Nadu

## The stars and the DMK

*Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr.*

Introductory Note: The following paper, based on research I conducted in Tamil Nadu in 1969 70, was published in 1973,[1] in the wake of the split in the DMK that led to the creation of the All-India Anna DMK (AIADMK). In the years since, the two parties have remained the major political forces in the state, the DMK under the continued leadership of M. Karunanidhi; while, on the death of M. G. Ramachandran (MGR), the leadership of the AIADMK passed to Jayalalitha, who was, when I interviewed her in 1969, a young starlet in M.G.R.'s film galaxy. For an extended version of this paper see 'When Stars Displace the Gods: The Folk Culture of Cinema in Tamil Nadu,' in my *Essays in the Political Sociology of South India* (1979, 1993).

***

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the ruling party of Tamil Nadu state in India, has split in climax to persistent rumors of intraparty discord and impending schism. M. G. Ramachandran, DMK party treasurer and popular Tamil film star, was stripped of his party offices and suspended from membership in the party to which he had so long brought support from his devoted fans.

The crisis culminated a long feud between MGR and Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. In the early months of 1972, as Karunanidhi, in demands for regional autonomy, began to tout himself as the "Mujib of Tamilnadu," MGR protested Karunanidhi's "dictatorial methods" and called for a boycott of the party's General Council in protest against one man rule. His criticism of Karunanidhi and the party leadership mounted with his demand for a party probe into rampant corruption. MGR called for a disclosure of all assets of ministers, legislators, and party officials and assets of their close relatives. Party careerists were alarmed: MGR's public utterances violated party discipline and, in discrediting party and Government, created confusion in the public mind. A memorandum, submitted by 26 members of the DMK Central Executive, called for disciplinary action against MGR His suspension, sustained by the General Council, soon followed.

MGR appealed to party members to remain loyal to the ideals of C. N. Annadurai, founder of the DMK and Chief Minister until his death in 1969. To continue his policies, MGR announced the formation of a rival party, the Anna DMK, to challenge the legitimacy of Karunanidhi's leadership. MGR "fan clubs," long adjuncts of the DMK, now became branches of the new party. Many regular DMK branches throughout Tamil Nadu also switched allegiance to MGR The star's fans paraded in the streets. In Madurai, they pulled down DMK flags and stoned Government buses; in Vellore, they brought off a total hartal; in Madras, rickshaw men went on strike in protest against the party's suspension of their idol and protector.

On the other side, MGR posters were defaced and torn, and theaters showing his films were attacked, as were MGR fan clubs. Perhaps fearing reprisal, the scheduled release of a film starring M. K. Muthu, Karunanidhi's son, was postponed. Muthu, who had only begun to act in films, had already incurred MGR's wrath by an alleged attempt to convert MGR fan clubs into Muthu Associations. The aging actor, no doubt, did not take this too kindly.

The role of film in the politics of Tamil Nadu has been significant, and the influence of the "stars" on Tamil politics has made political astrologers of those who would seek to understand it. During the course of the 1967 election campaign, the New York Times carried an article describing film star involvement in the politics of Tamil Nadu as having "a touch of California." Film has become increasingly pervasive in almost all aspects of Tamil society and perhaps most prominently in political life. Although Bombay is usually considered the capital of the Indian film world, it is within South India that film has made its greatest impact. The film industry in the South, centered in the city of Madras, is the largest in India in the number of studios, capital investment, gross income, and in the number of people engaged in the industry. Since 1931, when the "talkie" was first introduced in the South, some 1500 films have been made in Tamil. Half of India's six thousand cinemas are located in the southern region and half of these are in the state of Tamil Nadu. Virtually no village in Tamil Nadu is so isolated to be beyond the reach of film, and even the poorest laborer can afford the few pice to see the latest production.

Early Tamil films were largely "mythologicals," but with the first "social" films in 1936 came an infusion of politics. The Congress sought to use the motion picture for nationalist propaganda. One Tamil social, for example, dealt with prohibition, part of the Congress program, and it included a popular song about the importance of the spinning wheel, strongly advocated by Gandhi. Sometimes a portrait of Gandhi would appear inconspicuously in the background in hope that it might slip past the British censors. The Congress also used film stars to attract crowds. K. B. Sundarambal, an actress famous for devotional songs, regularly appeared on the platform of the Tamil Congress leader, S. Satyamurthi (Interview, Punju).

While the Congress in Tamil Nadu made early use of the film, most Congressmen looked on the medium with contempt and shared C. Rajagopalachari's view of the cinema as a source of moral corruption. It was only the party of Tamil nationalism, the DMK, that took film seriously as a vehicle of political mobilization. With Lenin, the leaders of the DMK regarded film as the most important art form because it was the most popular. Congressmen never realized the power of film, says Kannadhasan, song writer for the Tamil screen and one of the founders of the DMK. "They decried the cinema. We used it." (Interview, Kannadasan).[2]

The DMK's involvement in the Tamil film industry is rooted in the Dravidian movement for non-Brahmin uplift in South India (See Hardgrave 1965; Irschick 1969; Barnett 1976; Ram 1968; Spratt 1970; Ramanujan 1967; Ramanujan 1971). Writers and actors who had matured in the touring dramatic companies associated with E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker's Self-Respect Movement came to dominate the Tamil screen. From the "guerilla theater" of Tamil nationalism, they brought anti-northern, anti-Brahmin themes. Their Tamil was purged of Sanskritic elements in assertion of Dravidian self-respect; the golden age of the Tamil kingdoms was resurrected on celluloid; Brahmins were depicted as sinister or foolish.

In organizing the Dravida Kazhagam (or Dravidian Federation) in 1944, E. V. Ramaswamy sought to extend his movement for social reform and uplift to the demand for a separate and independent state of Dravidasthan. The DK, in spite of its appeal to the masses, was a quasi-military organization and basically elitist in character. Seeking democratic party organization and electoral involvement in the newly independent India, a dissident faction broke with E.V.R. in 1949 and founded the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progressive Federation). The leader of the new party was a young film writer, C. N. Annadurai. Among those joining him were M. Karunanidhi, another film writer, and a number of film stars, including K. R. Ramaswamy, S. S. Rajendran, and Shivaji Ganesan, who later left the DMK for Congress, to be replaced by M. G. Ramachandran. Their films introduced symbols and references to the DMK, and the party rode the rising popularity of cinema. Film artists brought glamour and electoral support to the DMK, and actors graced the platforms of party rallies. Some stars, like M. G. Ramachandran and S. S. Rajendran, converted their popularity on the screen into successful bids for seats in the Legislative Assembly.

K. Kamaraj, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and then president of the All-India Congress Party, scoffed at the DMK's aspirations to power: "How can there be government by actors?" (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1963, p. 175). In 1967, in a landslide victory, the DMK with Annadurai as Chief Minister took control of the State. Within the DMK leadership of the new Government were many associated in one way or another with the film industry or with earlier dramatic careers. Some had been no more than stagehands or ticket takers for the troupes of the Dravidian movement two

decades before; others had become film stars, producers, directors, or writers. The stars, like MGR, had mass appeal, but it was through film writers that the DMK had made its initial impact through C. N. Annadurai, founder of the party and Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu until his death in 1969, and M. Karunanidhi, who succeeded "Anna" as Chief Minister and party leader.

As a young lieutenant of the Dravida Kazhagam, Annadurai had written a number of dramas as vehicles for social reform and non-Brahmin self-respect. After the DMK was founded, Annadurai, E. V. K. Sampath, and K. R. Ramaswamy, then Tamil Nadu's most popular actor and film star, staged dramas in benefit performances for the party. The DMK head office at Royapuram in Madras City was purchased with these funds (Interviews, Ramaswamy, and Sampath).[3] From plays, Annadurai entered the film world. He wrote six screenplays "with a view," he said, "to educating the people of Tamilnad. All my stories and screen-plays have, therefore, been on themes of social purpose." His first film, *Nalla Thambi* ('Good Brother,' 1948), featuring the popular actor-comedian N. S. Krishnan, advocated prohibition, cooperative farming, and zamindari abolition. *Velaikar*i ('Servant Maid,' 1949) "made it clear that the greed and avarice of the rich did not pay in the long run." Here Annadurai explained "some of the elementary principles of socialism and stressed that we should depend upon our own labor for our progress and well being and not some unknown factor" (*Filmfare* 1968, p. 45)

*Velaikari*, with its attack on religious dogma, was regarded as a revolutionary film. The story itself, however, raises some serious questions. A landlord was pressuring a debtor for money, and the man, in shame, commits suicide. His son, played by K. R. Ramaswamy, vows to punish the landlord and devises a plan by which, through impersonation, he marries the landlord's daughter. By design, he then mistreats the girl and develops a reputation for drunkenness and gambling to bring disgrace upon his father-in-law. He then encourages the father to forbid an intercaste marriage between his son and a servant girl and, to bring the family into final wreckage, succeeds in having the distraught son thrown out of the house. With further complications, our "hero" announces his purpose. Overcome with emotion, the father sees the error of his own ways. He blesses the marriage of his daughter to the revealed son of the debtor, and, in final retribution, approves the marriage of his son to the servant maid. The old man never really emerges as a villain but the hero certainly comes out as a dastardly character. If personal vendetta designed to destroy a man's family is social reform, it is a curious moral indeed.

The film, no doubt, had shocking aspects. After a scene in which the landlord offers puja before Kali, showing the hypocrisy of religion, Ramaswamy who had spent all his money in offerings after his father's suicide upturns the offerings before the goddess. He shakes his fist at the deity and in a long monologue says, "Just as the rich man lives on the sweat of the poor, you do likewise."

Soon after *Velaikari*, M. Karunanidhi's *Parasakthi* (1952) stunned the Tamil audience. The film, a screen version of an earlier play, was initially banned, but with its release, it became an enormous box office success.[4] Karunanidhi, who wrote the screenplay, had been an early associate of the DK and had written on the themes of Dravidian self-respect. As a founding member of the DMK, he lent his talent to the new movement. "My intention was to introduce the ideas and policies of social reform and justice in the films and bring up the status of the Tamil language as they were called for in DMK policies." Karunanidhi emphasizes the view of the party on the role of film. "We say that art should be for propaganda for the people and for society" (Interview, Karunanidhi).

*Parasakthi*, according to its director, S. Punju, was designed to "create havoc. Of course, it did. We were challenging the social law itself, the basic Constitution itself" (Interview, Punju). One of the most dramatic scenes of the film involved the attempted seduction of a young girl by a priest of the temple. Before the idol itself, the priest molests the girl. The hero (played by Shivaji Ganesan) saves her and then expounds upon the social philosophy of the DMK. The scene of the temple seduction was drawn from fact a case that went all the way to the Madras High Court and created a popular sensation. "We don't object to the temple," Punju says of the DMK stance on religion, "but to the evil-minded people who use it. The DMK believes in one god, but opposes the bribery of god through puja" (Interview, Punju).[5]

The entry of the Dravidian movement into the film industry brought a new era in the Tamil screen. In the years before 1949 50, film dialogue had been awkward really a Brahminical slang. Annadurai and Karunanidhi brought particular prominence to the spoken word, and in the early DMK films, dialogue was of a highly literary, "chaste" Tamil, almost like formal speeches. Indeed, DMK party speeches are heavily influenced by dramatic form. They are rich with alliteration and employ a euphonic stage style filled, according to its critics, with sound and fury signifying nothing. These speeches, whether from the platform or the cinema screen, come as "a rain of words" (*sorpozhivu*) and have popularized a highly ornate form of spoken Tamil.

Annadurai's film dialogues tended to be rather high-flown and lacked the more popular appeal of those by Karunanidhi, who in more than thirty films has sought to provide entertainment along with party propaganda. Through film, both Anna and Karunanidhi became "stars" in their own right. People wanted to see them at public meetings, to have darshan before them. Their films were vehicles for both social reform and party propaganda. Their themes were of widow-remarriage, untouchability, the self-respect marriage (introduced by E.V.R. to eliminate the use of the Brahmin priest in the wedding ceremony), zamindari abolition, prohibition, and religious hypocrisy. "We wanted to bring revolution in the mind," says DMK director and Member of the Legislative Assembly, Rama Aranganal, "and to some extent we succeeded" (Interview, Rama Rangal).[6]

The DMK films served an audience the party could never have reached by other means. The ideology of the DMK, explains Murasoli Maran, faces both the past and the future, and this is reflected in film. The Tamil past — its rich language and culture — are glorified in story and song. Rationalism and social reform are extolled in attacks on caste, religious dogma, social injustice, and economic exploitation. Maran underscores the fact that for the common man, the cinema is the only form of entertainment. "So far as our party is concerned, we have made use of it as a vehicle of our social reform policy. In every story, we mix amusement with instruction, and we explain our programs of social reform" (Interview, Maran). Some of the early "revolutionary" films of the DMK were so heavy with social reform that they were box office failures. DMK producers, says Maran, are now more sensitive to the story element, to the entertainment value. "We select a good story and introduce our ideology wherever possible" (Interview, Maran).

The shift away from the more radical films — particularly those of an anti-religious character — was in part a product of official censorship. The early DMK films met little difficulty for all their controversial content. The party was little known and censors made no connection between film theme and party ideology. By the mid-1950s, however, it was evident that the DMK was attempting to use the motion picture to advance its political position. Maran is convinced that film censorship was consciously used by the government to undercut the DMK. One technique, he says, was to censor and cut critical elements of a film to destroy the picture's coherence and thus ensure financial failure. In the period of greater conflict with the censors, the party turned again to drama. "Under the Dramatic Licensing Act," Maran relates, "we were required to give the script to the police. We would give them some ordinary script, then enact something else in the drama." This didn't always succeed, for three of Karunanidhi's plays were banned by the state Congress government (Interview, Maran).

In producing films under close censorship, the DMK turned to subterfuge. The use of double meanings in dialogue became a DMK forte. They also created a character called "Anna" — the Tamil word for older brother and the popular name for Annadurai — who appeared in almost all the DMK films as a wise and sympathetic counselor. In an historical film, for example, the dialogue might go, "Anna, you are going to rule one day," at which the audience would break into wild applause. The historical film was particularly useful for the party, for it provided both an opportunity to eulogize Tamil culture and the glory of the Tamil kingdoms and, at the same time, to subtly comment on current political affairs. Maran tells the story of one film, *Kanchee Talaivar*, about a Pallava king whose capital was the city of Kanchee [Kanchipuram]. Not without coincidence, Annadurai was from Kanchee, and he was known as Kanchee Talaivar, "the Leader of Kanchee." The censors demanded a change of title, but, after all, it did refer to a Pallava kingdom. The DMK got the title, but the censors so badly mangled the film that it was a financial failure (Interview, Maran).

The shift from social reform as the dominant theme of the DMK films, whatever considerations for government censorship, was primarily political. As the party entered the electoral arena, it sought less obtrusive subject matter. In courting the electorate, the DMK could no longer afford the iconoclasm of the old Self-Respect Movement, with its blatant attack on the social and religious institutions of Hindu orthodoxy. "The DMK films are no longer revolutionary," says one disgruntled DMK Member of the Legislative Council. "We are now chasing votes, and our principles have been watered down."

Displacing content as the thrust of the DMK's use of the film media, the party now sought to emphasize star popularity as a vehicle for political mobilization. The DMK now hitched its political wagon to the stars of the silver screen. The movement's association with dramatic and film actors, however, was not wholly a new phenomenon. DMK actors had grown up in the Self-Respect Movement and the DK of E. V. Ramaswamy, and many were among the founding members of the DMK.

In 1949, with the founding of DMK, the actor K. R. Ramaswamy provided financial support for the struggling party. "Only with my earnings was the party founded," he says. (Interview, Ramaswamy). He had met Annadurai through E. V. Ramaswamy, and it was his dramatic company which produced Anna's first play, *Velaikari*. When the play was later filmed, K. R. Ramaswamy was the star. At this time, Ramaswamy had reached the pinnacle of the Tamil film world. From his first film in 1944 (*Poompavai*, 'Lady With Flowers,' directed by S. Punju), K.R.R. rapidly became one of the most popular actors in South India. He could both sing and act a critical combination before "playback" and when a film might easily have thirty songs or more. Indeed, he was known by the title, Nadippisai Pulavar, "the Acting-Singing Poet." With the "playback" dubbed into the sound track, however, a popular singer could warble to the silent mime of the actor, and Ramaswamy began to lose out to rising young stars who had no need of singing talent. At about this time, in the early 1950s, personal problems brought his career into ruin. Later, in reward for his services to the party, Annadurai secured for K. R. Ramaswamy nomination as a Member of the Legislative Council, the upper house of the state government.

Although he was never a member of the DMK, N. S. Krishnan lent his enormous popularity to the party. Krishnan was the greatest comedian of the Tamil screen and, as the times required, a very fine singer. His appearances ensured a film's success. "Without him," says Maran, "there wouldn't be any picture" (Interview, Maran). Krishnan was particularly famous for his roles as the Brahmin buffoon, which he would recreate to the delight of his audience at DMK rallies. During the 1940s, the film industry was dominated by Brahmin producers and by Brahminical themes. N. S. Krishnan was a notable exception. Influenced by E. V. Ramaswamy, Krishnan introduced in his comic scripts which he wrote himself the seeds of non-Brahminism which were later to become the driving force of the DMK (Interview, Raman). In

the last public function before his death, Annadurai, on January 14, 1969, unveiled a statue of N. S. Krishnan, located at a busy Madras intersection.[7]

Although never sympathetic with the DNIK, one actor closely associated with many of the DMK leaders when they were still devoted followers of E. V. Ramaswamy's DK was M. R. Radha. Radha, arch villain of the Tamil screen, and would-be assassin of M. G. Ramachandran, came into contact with E.V.R. during the early 1940s through his dramatic performances. Radha had one of the leading troupes in South India, the Social Reform Company, and he presented plays on anti-Brahmin and atheist themes. Almost all of the DK-DMK people were associated with Radha at one time or another during this period, and the young DK writers, Annadurai and Karunanidhi, both of whom were in the dramatic company, often acted in the plays. Annadurai is once reported to have said that he really cared only for the acting of M. R. Radha and Shivaji Ganesan (Interviews, Sampath, Thirumal, and Radha).[8]

V. C. Ganesan ("Shivaji"), like so many actors of Tamil Nadu, has been on the stage most of his life.[9] From the age of six, Shivaji toured with various companies, including the famous troupe of M. R. Radha, playing both male and female roles. In 1949, Ganesan appeared in a play written by C. N. Annadurai, *Chandra Mohan*, which depicted the triumph of the Maratha hero Shivaji over the Brahmins. Annadurai himself played a villainous Brahmin priest. Ganesan played the role of Shivaji. Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy presided over the first performance and was so impressed that he bestowed the name "Shivaji" on the young actor.

In Tamil Nadu, politics is a bedfellow of almost every film artist. For Shivaji, it is a subsidiary but clearly apparent facet of his public image. Shivaji had been politically weaned in the DK and was one of the founding members of the DMK. It was through the party that he got his start in film. At Annadurai's suggestion, Shivaji was offered the leading role in the film Parasakthi. The "powerful dialogues" and screenplay were by M. Karunanidhi. Released in 1952, the film was an immediate sensation, and Shivaji, at the age of 24, was launched on a stellar career. He made many contributions to the party coffers and served as a drawing card at political rallies, but Shivaji had never really been involved in party activities, and its demands pressed upon him. If the DMK had given him his initial boost in his film career, it also served to limit his horizons. A reputation of atheism, arising from his association with E.V.R. and the movement, did not set well with a fundamentally religious audience. Perhaps feeling that the opposition party was no longer an asset, Shivaji attacked the DMK as a "glamour" party which exploited the Tamil film industry. In 1955, in a flurry of publicity in connection with the release of a new picture, Shivaji went to Tirupathi temple. When he returned, he was publicly abused by DMK members, and his photographs and billboards were defaced with mud and dung.

In 1961, Shivaji warned, "Artists keep away from politics," but extended his support to the new Tamil Nationalist Party, a split from the DMK,

(Hardgrave 1965, p. 75) and staged a benefit drama for the party's election fund. When the party dissolved and its leader, E. V. K. Sampath, joined Congress, Shivaji followed. Today he described himself as a "200 percent Congressman" (Interview, Ganesan). His lithographic portraits are emblazoned against the Congress flag, and he proclaims Kamaraj as his leader. During the 1967 elections, Shivaji toured throughout Tamil Nadu for the Congress. With no interest in running for office, however, Shivaji is only tangentially involved in Congress work almost entirely in electoral campaigns. He keeps his politics away from art, and his films are generally free of political overtone.

Among the founding members of the DMK was another young actor, S. S. Rajendran, who, like Shivaji, had been introduced in Karunanidhi's *Parasakthi*. S. S. Rajendran entered the stage at the age of nine, and soon was acting in the dramatic troupes of the DK. It was Annadurai, in 1950, who had asked him to be in *Parasakthi* (Interview, Rajendran). In his career, S.S.R. has acted in some 85 films and, like MGR, plays the undaunted hero. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, S.S.R. was among the most popular stars of the Tamil screen. He worked tirelessly for the DMK in collecting funds, and in 1962, he was elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly. His films glorified the party and were heavily laden with social reform. Indeed, he became known by the title Ilatchiya Nadigar, "Actor of Ideals."

At the height of his career, deepening personal problems brought S.S.R. into serious difficulty, both with the film industry and the party. Audience attendance began to fall off and producers, tired of his failure to show up for shootings and of his temper displays, no longer signed him for films. Having given most of his money to the party, S.S.R. now went deeply into debt. Within the party, he had long been opposed both by MGR (with whom he vied for the same audience) and by Karunanidhi. Personal conflict with Karunanidhi now took on political color, and in 1967, in a bid to secure a DMK ticket for the Assembly, S.S.R. was passed over. Seeking to prove his party loyalty, he threw himself into the election campaign, and made a highly political film, *Tangaratinam*, timed for release during the campaign. The film, dealing with the love marriage of an untouchable girl and a high caste man, depicted a DMK conference and sought to appeal directly to the Harijan community.

During the campaign, S.S.R. announced that he had been threatened with murder (*Dina Thanthi*, January 16, 1967), and before the election, his health broke in physical exhaustion. After the election, S.S.R. became outspokenly critical of the Karunanidhi group. His public statements, increasingly embarrassing to the party, finally culminated after Annadurai's death in the unofficial ostracism of S.S.R. from the DMK. S.S.R., convinced that people were trying to kill him, spoke of threats against his life. On one occasion, he reported an attack and beating to the police, but the case was dismissed when an investigation of the evidence suggested that the wounds were self-inflicted. Abandoned by his fans and his party, S.S.R. was sustained by his old friend,

Shivaji, and dreamed of the comeback that would restore his stardom and his prominence in the DMK. But as both star and party stalwart, S.S.R. had been eclipsed by the DMK film luminary, M. G. Ramachandran.

M. Gopala Ramachandran ("MGR") has been in Tamil films for 36 years, with star billing in more than 100 films since 1947, the year of his first important role. MGR came to cinema from a stage career, beginning at the age of six, when he entered the Madurai Original Boys Company, where he learned acting, dancing, and sword-fighting arts that served him well in his later career (See Hardgrave 1971).

Known as Vadiyar, ("teacher"), Puratche Nadigar, ("revolutionary actor"), and as Makkal Thilagam, ("idol of the masses"), MGR is the symbol of hope for the poor in South India. He supports orphanages and schools and is always the first to give for disaster relief. After torrential rains in Madras, he gave raincoats to 6,000 rickshaw men. He is seen as "one among the people," "the incarnation of goodness," "the poor man's avatar." MGR's generosity is well advertised, for it is the grist of his fame. Every contribution to his philanthropic image is an investment in his continued popularity and following among the masses.

The rickshaw man is regarded as the archetype of the MGR fan, the poor man of the laboring classes. For many, a substantial portion of their income goes for films, and to go on the opening day of a new MGR film is the credential of real devotion a willingness to pay a premium for a reserved seat or to wait from early morning to brave police lathis for a chance at general admission.

MGR sees himself as the "protector" of the common man and is convinced of the moral purpose of his films. "My roles have been to show how a man should live and believe" (Interview, Ramachandran). With a purity and integrity reminiscent of the classic American western, the MGR film is a morality play in which good inevitably triumphs over evil. The villain is the embodiment of evil, unrelieved in his darkness except in the love he holds for his beautiful daughter. The hero (MGR) is all virtuous: He may be the captain of the guard in revolt against the tyrannies of a wicked dewan; a humble clerk at odds with a corrupt bureaucracy; a cow herder in struggle with a cruel landlord. Whatever the role, it is always the same: The audience expects and demands it. The hero neither smokes nor drinks, and is devoted to his suffering mother. In love scenes with the villain's daughter, he is almost invariably the pursued rather than the pursuer. The fight scenes, wildly cheered by the fans, recall the swashbuckling Errol Flynn in a revised and "Bonded" version. The climax brings the defeat of villainy, uplift of the poor, and fulfilled romance in a "self-respect" marriage.

The films are filled with references which blur the role and the actor into one. Indeed, for the MGR fan, the man is a projection of his screen image. In *Enga Vittu Pillai* ('The Son of our Home,' 1965), MGR sings, "If you follow me, the poor will never suffer. First Christ came and preached; then Gandhi came and preached; but the people have forgotten. Now I will set

things right." In *Nam Nadu* ('Our Country,' 1969), the hero is introduced in a series of short episodes: He helps an old woman walk across the street; captures a pickpocket; protects a young girl from "eve teasers"; and saves small children from eating unclean sweets. As the film progresses, there is a long queue waiting before a ration shop. A rich man arrives by car and is immediately supplied with his quota. MGR intervenes and asks the man to stand in the line. Someone in the queue is heard to say, "If there is one like this man, then the country will be all right." Later, when our hero agrees to help some slum dwellers, one of them says, "Really you are a God."

For MGR, "Art and politics are the two sides of the same coin." (Quoted in Kalaichelvan 1967, p. 13). The emblem of MGR's production company shows the DMK flag, and his films are filled with both direct and indirect references to the party. Early DMK films, like *Parasakthi*, were basically oriented to social re-form, but as the 1957 elections neared, the party chose less obtrusive themes with more of a specifically political flavor. The demand for a separate state of Dravidasthan  then the cry of the DMK  would be couched in "folk-lore" films in which MGR would struggle against an evil despot. Dialogue would obliquely refer to contemporary politics and gradually phrases were introduced to trigger applause  a reference to Anna or to the rising sun, symbol of the party.

In the folklore film *Nadodi Mannan* ('Vagabond King,' 1958), there are numerous references in song and dialogue to "Dravida." In the film, an adaptation of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, MGR, crowned king, issues a decree that could easily pass for the DMK election manifesto. In *Adimai Penn*, the heroine points to the rising sun and tells MGR, "That is our god. Pray." *Nam Nadu* is perhaps the ultimate in this genre. A remake in color of an earlier Telegu success, the film exposes administrative corruption and social evil and is given a particular DMK flare. MGR makes his first appearance wearing the party colors  a red shirt and black pants. He holds in his hands an open book with the pictures of both Gandhi and Annadurai on the cover. Throughout the film, the black and red combination appears, Annadurai's portrait hangs on the wall of almost every scene, accompanied by pictures of Gandhi, and in one song, Anna is specifically called the "South Indian Gandhi." The huts of a slum fly the DMK flag. When MGR, the sacrificing government clerk turned politician in the cause of the poor, seeks election, his posters are in the red and black form of the DMK. MGR, in one scene, asks a slum dweller why grievances have not been brought to the Councilor. The poor man replies, "They say 'Agattum Parkallam'"  a reference to the favorite phrase of Kamaraj, the Congress leader  "We will see." With MGR's election victory, a song proclaims, "The sun is rising, history is changing, and now everything will be alright." The film concludes with a self-respect marriage under a statue of Gandhi.

In January 1967, in an enactment of roles they had so often played together on the screen, M. G. Ramachandran was shot by M. R. Radha, a classical villain of the Tamil screen. Some have suggested that the shooting

was politically inspired by Radha's devotion to the DK, but although this seems unlikely the events of that day remain confused in a background of both personal and political conflict. Within hours of the shooting, some 50,000 people had gathered at the hospital where MGR had been taken. People were crying in the streets; shops closed. For six weeks, he lay in the hospital as fans awaited each report of his health. He was visited by the poorest people from the streets and by luminaries of Tamil film and politics. At the time of the shooting incident, MGR's popularity had been in gradual decline. The shooting, however, brought him to new heights of popularity. In a sense, it gave him new life. From his hospital bed, MGR conducted his campaign for the Madras Legislative Assembly. The day before the election, the Madras newspapers carried an appeal from MGR to the voters. With a large photograph of the actor in bandages, MGR called upon the people of Tamil Nadu to vote for the DMK. "I was to come to your homes, but it could not be done. Now I am asking for your hearts."[10] In his constituency, he won twice the number of votes polled by his Congress rival and the largest vote polled by any candidate for the Assembly in Tamil Nadu.

MGR's position in the DMK has long been controversial. Some people have argued that MGR was responsible for the party's 1967 victory. He was at least a significant factor. Murasoli Maran, a DMK Member of Parliament and nephew of Chief Minister Karunanidhi, says that there is mutual reinforcement. Others, both within the party and out, negate any really significant role for MGR in the party's advancement. Indeed, they believe that his enormous popularity derives primarily from the party.

During the late 1940s, MGR had known Annadurai. MGR then a Congressman was reluctant to associate himself with the movement. In 1954, however, Karunanidhi had unsuccessfully tried to get Shivaji for a new film. He then turned to MGR, who had been moving toward the DMK politically. The film, *Malai Kallan* ('Dacoit of the Mountain'), was a great success, and overnight MGR was a top star and soon joined the DMK. Shivaji had been a reluctant politician, and in MGR the party found a willing image for mass appeal.

As MGR's popularity grew to rival that of the party itself, there were rumblings within the DMK against him. MGR may have felt as well that he no longer needed the party and might benefit from official favor. In 1965 at a birthday celebration for Kamaraj, MGR felicitated the Congress President as "my leader." Though MGR later denied that he had said this, Karunanidhi, with whom he had had long personal conflict, sought to make an issue of it. In a huff, MGR resigned as a Member of the Legislative Council. His seat in the upper house then went to a Congressman infuriating many DMK members. At that time an MGR film was running, and when the news came of his resignation, attendance began to drop off. People within the film industry and the party admit that this was basically a coincidence ("the film was a stinker and would have failed anyway"), but it was widely believed that he had feuded with party leaders and that DMK supporters

were boycotting the film. His posters were slashed and defaced. It was at this time, amidst rumors that he was courting Congress, that MGR gave raincoats to the rickshaw men, each emblazoned with the red and black symbol of the DMK. Today MGR says his resignation was a "sacrifice" for the party (Interview, Ramachandran), although just how remains unclear. Karunanidhi allegedly determined to finish MGR, allocated him a predominantly Congress constituency for the 1967 elections with the expectation that he would lose. He hadn't counted on M. R. Radha.

After the shooting and MGR's landslide election, his position within the party was considerably strengthened. He became party treasurer, and after the death of Annadurai in February 1969, Karunanidhi, now Chief Minister, faced up to a truce with the powerful actor in order to maintain party solidarity. The "honeymoon" was short-lived. By early 1972, MGR and Karunanidhi were in open battle, with MGR's accusation of "dictatorship" and allegations of widespread corruption among ministers and party officials. In October, MGR was suspended from the DMK.

MGR is virtually indistinguishable from the party. "I am sacrificing my life for the sake of my politics" (*Bombai*, August 1967, p. 3). MGR has been an important source of finance for the party, although now that the DMK is in power, it is less dependent on him. He has financed campaigns in a number of constituencies, but one DMK leader denies that he has made direct contributions to the party. "MGR has publicity value," he says, and "helps collect money" for the DMK, but "not from his own pocket." *Link* magazine has described him as the "DMK's prop" (September 4, 1966). His presence on the platform of party rallies and conferences has served as a drawing card for the masses. At the time of the 1968 World Tamil Conference, MGR presented the city of Madras with a statue of Annadurai, erected at a busy intersection of Mount Road, the city's main thoroughfare. MGR's hundredth film was released in 1968 to coincide with Annadurai's birthday. His film, *Adimai Penn* ('Slave Girl,') released in 1969, just after the death of Annadurai, began with a view of Anna's statue.

Annadurai is once supposed to have said, "When we show his face, we get 40,000 votes; when he speaks a few words, we get 4 lakhs." MGR's fans are overwhelmingly DMK supporters, and some were surely drawn to the party by the star and co-opted as party workers. "I had no liking for any party," said one MGR fan club member, but "since I like MGR, I began to support the DMK. When we worked for him in the 1967 elections, he used to give us the food which he himself would eat."

In a random survey on "film and society" in Tamil Nadu, film star preference was significantly related to political party support. In the broadest terms, MGR fans were DMK-inclined; Shivaji fans, Congress-inclined. In the urban sample, 81% of MGR fans voted for the DMK in 1967, and only 16% for Congress. Of the Shivaji fans, 56% voted for Congress and 29% for the DMK. In the rural sample, the same pattern holds 73% of MGR fans voted for the DMK and only 19% for Congress. On the other hand, 71% of

the Shivaji fans voted for Congress; 17% for the DMK. In examining the relationship between party vote and possible determinant variables, one variable, favorite star, accounted for 35% of the variation. In other words, whether an individual preferred Shivaji or MGR was the best predictor of how he voted in the two elections  Shivaji fans for Congress; MGR fans for the DMK.

The relationship between star preference and party vote is confirmed in looking at these same data from the party perspective. Of Congress voters in 1962, 73% favored Shivaji; 16%, MGR The star's party identification seemed even more clearly evident in 1967. The Shivaji preference rose to 76%, and MGR declined to 13%. In terms of DMK voter preference, 39% of those voting for the party in 1962 liked Shivaji; 61%, MGR With considerably greater numbers in 1967, DMK voters indicated a preference for Shivaji of 42%, as against 58% for MGR This might appear, at first glance, to suggest that MGR was losing his hold over the DMK voter, but with the increase of some 14% in popular vote from 1962, it is clear that the party had been able to attract new support from the Shivaji audience. In addition, a significantly larger portion of the MGR audience voted for the DMK in 1967 (Hardgrave and Neidhart 1975;[11] also see Hardgrave 1970).

The identification of the film star and party are reflected in the popular images of the stars. The relics and accouterments of fandom are omnipresent in Tamil Nadu and are often infused with political symbolism. Multicolored lithographs present dream images of the stars: MGR against the embattled banner of the DMK; MGR in spacesuit with DMK armpatch, as the first man on the sun; Shivaji, bleeding, as a Congress freedom fighter in the struggle for independence; Shivaji in conference with Kamaraj over the fate of the nation.

Both MGR and Shivaji pay considerable attention to their fans, and fan clubs (*rasigar manrams*) have been organized to advance the image of the stars. Shivaji claims three thousand fan clubs in Tamil Nadu, and among their various functions, political activity for the Congress looms high. Some of the clubs are directly associated, even coterminous, with Congress organizations. The letterhead stationery of various clubs are printed in the orange, green, and white colors of the Congress and depict the Congress flag. The party flag flies from the office buildings, and Shivaji's pictures share the walls with those of Congress leaders. During the elections, the clubs organize public meetings, often with Shivaji's presence, and make personal contacts to secure votes for Congress. The activities of the *manrams* form an important part of the Congress electoral effort in Tamil Nadu, and the fans have been dedicated political workers. In 1970, a massive all-India Shivaji Manram conference was held in Madras. With Kamaraj in attendance, Shivaji made an emotional pledge to live and die for Kamaraj (Jagannathan 1971).

There are some four to five thousand fan clubs claimed for MGR in South India. Loosely organized, in contrast to the Shivaji clubs, an MGR

fan club would seem to form whenever three or four fans come together. Their devotion to the star, however, is all-absorbing, and the fan is likely to subordinate all other activities to the *manram*. Like those of Shivaji, the fan clubs are politically involved, although apparently with little central direction. The clubs officially have no politics, but most operate as loose adjuncts of the DMK and have been deeply involved in electoral campaigns.

The 1967 elections brought film stars into the political arena for both Congress and the DMK. The Congress sought to follow the DMK in the use of propaganda in film, and Gemini Studios produced one specifically political film for the Congress party, *Vazhaga Nam Thayagam* ('Long Live Our Motherland'), starring Shivaji Ganesan and the popular comedian Nagesh. Shivaji and the actress Padmini worked tirelessly for Congress throughout the "star-studded" campaign. Congress, however, was late in the act. The DMK had used the film and film stars as a vehicle for propaganda and political mobilization since the party's inception. The cinema was a vital element in the landslide victory that brought the DMK to power in 1967 (See Nathan 1967). After the DMK's electoral victory, the southern correspondent for *Filmfare*, India's premier film magazine, wrote, "The DMK... rose to prominence and secured its vast popularity mainly through its script writers." (May 12, 1967). Two years later, *Filmfar*e reiterated that the Tamil film industry's "whole-hearted participation and complete identification with the DMK party in general and Anna in particular was responsible for the mass support the party received and with which it ultimately captured power in Tamilnad" (February 28, 1969).

In power, the party consolidated its position with the film industry. The president of the South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce was appointed by Annadurai to the honorific position of Sheriff of Madras. Congress producers and film directors now sought to cash in on the popularity of the DMK, with the introduction of DMK symbols and references into their films. The new government gave emphasis to the film division of the state's information department. New documentaries, shown weekly throughout Tamil Nadu, depicted party leaders at every opportunity.

The 1971 assembly elections in Tamil Nadu again brought out the stars. Annadurai was dead, but Karunanidhi was in full command of the DMK. For three weeks, the studios of Kodambakkam "the Hollywood of Madras" were silent. In the words of *Link* magazine, "The entire star billing was on deputation to politics" and most had been mobilized by the DMK. MGR, defending the record of the DMK in office, addressed more than 1400 party rallies. Shivaji, for the Organization Congress, addressed some 2000 public meetings throughout the state (March 14, 1971). The DMK held its own, and the party of Tamil nationalism was again returned to power.

The films of the DMK today are unlikely to shock or pose a serious challenge to traditional values. The early plays and films of the Dravidian movement indeed had been revolutionary in content, but since the mid-1950s,

the themes of social reform have been diluted in electoral compromise. Today, DMK films are less a catalyst to reform and revolution than a catharsis of counter-revolutionary tension release. Situations of structural conflict (landlord v. landless laborer; capitalist v. factory worker) are mediated through romantic love. Sex becomes a social solvent. Villainy is defeated and perhaps, like MGR, the poor rickshaw man will be able to marry the rich man's daughter. "The revolutionary urges of the masses," writes Mythily Shivaraman in *Mainstream*, "find a vicarious fulfillment in the movies while in reality they are denied a real-life forum for articulation. The close identification between the movies and the party ... creates the happy illusion among the people that the Government is on 'their side'" (1969).

Even in catharsis, however, the DMK's use of film represents one of the few self-conscious efforts to employ the medium for political purposes. In propaganda and mobilization, the film has played a significant role in the rise of the DMK, and, for good or ill, the stars have influenced the fate of Tamil society.

## Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of my research assistant in this study, Sriram Athri, whose initiative and sensitivity to the research problems were major ingredients of the project's successful completion. The study was made under a Ford Foundation Research Grant.

## Notes

1 This chapter was originally published in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (March 1973), pp. 288 305.]
2 Kannadhasan left the DMK in 1962 to join E. V. K. Sampath's Tamil National Party and with Sampath in 1964, he joined Congress. In opposition to the DMK, Kannadhasan has been out of favor with DMK film stars like M. G. Rama chandran, but the popularity of his songs is so great that he is frequently signed for DMK films.
3 Sampath was the nephew of E. V. Ramaswamy and the No. 2 man in the DMK until he bolted from the party in 1962 to found the Tamil National Party. He subsequently joined the Congress.
4 Punju, director of *Parasakthi*, had wanted K. R. Ramaswamy, who was then getting about Rs. 40,000 per film, for the picture to ensure star attraction. Ramaswamy and Karunanidhi, however, were at odds within the party, and Ramaswamy refused to act in the film. Annadurai suggested that Shivaji Gane san be cast as the hero. Although he had never acted in a film, Shivaji had been popular in Anna's dramas. Punju signed Shivaji for Rs. 250 per month quite a bargain compared to what K. R. R. would have commanded. S. S. Rajendran, a young actor associated with the Dravidian movement, was also introduced in the film. (Interview, Punju).
5 Ironically, for all of Parasakthi's anti religious character, each day of production was begun with the propitious breaking of a coconut and the burning of camphor.

Most of the people in the film industry go to sentiment, says Punju, and while he has no use for puja, 'we are all business people, so we let them have it.'

6 Rama Arangnal was associated with E. V. R. in the 1940s and was assistant editor of the DK newspaper, *Viduthalai*. In 1949, he became one of the founding members of the DMK and edited Annadurai's weekly *Dravida Nadu*. He entered film as a dialogue writer about 1950 and later became a producer. After 1962, he served as a Member of the Legislative Assembly.

7 In the mid 1940s, N. S. Krishnan became involved in a notorious murder case. He was finally acquitted, but in order to raise money for his appeal, his friends decided to make a picture, *Mad Man* (1947). Punju, the director had been long involved in the Dravidian movement and had presided over a number of widow remarriages. This, Punju decided, was to be the theme of the movie (but to be on the safe side, it was to be a virgin widow). It was this film which brought Annadurai into association with Punju, who later directed Anna's first film, *Nalla Thambi* ('Good Little Brother,' 1949). Interview, Punju.

8 I conducted the interview with M. R. Radha in February 1970 in the Madras Center Jail, where Radha was serving sentence for the attempted murder of MGR Details of the assassination attempt are discussed in Hardgrave 1979, 1993.

9 For a discussion of Shivaji and other stars of the Tamil screen in their broader relation to Tamil society, see Hardgrave 1979, 1993.

10 Advertisement in *Dina Thanthi*, February 14, 1967. The *Dina Thanthi* is the most popular daily in Tamil Nadu and has one of the highest circulations of any newspaper in India. Its publisher, S. B. Adityan, supported the DMK for the first time in 1967 and was made a minister in the new government. Before 1967, however, Adityan had been a strong opponent of the DMK and particularly of MGR At one time, the paper's policy was to refer to the actor as the "old hag" and to never carry his name or photograph.

11 The article was presented as a paper at the 1972 Annual Meeting of the Amer ican Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.

## References

Barnett, M. (1976) *The Politics of cultural nationalism in south India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Barnouw, E and Krishnaswamy, S. (1963) *Indian film*. New York: Columbia University Press.

*Bombai*, August 1967, (Madras), Tamil film monthly.

*Dina Thanthi*, January 16, 1967, (Madras), Tamil daily newspaper.

*Filmfare* (Bombay) 1968, interview with C. N. Annadurai, May 10, 1968, p. 45.

Hardgrave, R. (1965) *The Dravidian movement*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

Hardgrave, R. (1970) 'Film and society in Tamil Nadu: a profile,' *Monthly Public Opinion Surveys of the Indian Institute of Public Opinion*, New Delhi, Vol. 15, March, April, 1970, pp. 1 62.

Hardgrave, R. (1971) 'The Celluloid god: MGR and the Tamil film,' *South Asian Review*, vol. 4, July 1971, pp. 307 14.

Hardgrave, R. (1979, 1993) 'When stars displace the gods: the folk culture of cinema in Tamil Nadu,' in *Essays in the political sociology of south India*, New Delhi: Manohar, pp. 92 124.

Hardgrave, R. and Neidhart, A. C. (1975) 'Films and political consciousness in Tamil Nadu,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 11, 1976, pp. 27 35.

Irschick, E, (1969) *Politics and social conflict in south India: the non brahmin move ment and tamil separatism 1916 1929*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
Jagannathan, N. (1971), in *The Hindustan Times*, February 12, 1971.
Kalaichelvan (ed.) (1967), *M. G. R. Ponmozhigal* ('Golden words of MGR'). Madras: Tamil Nilayam.
*Link* (September 4, 1966) (New Delhi), news weekly.
*Link* (March 14, 1971) (New Delhi), news weekly.
Nathan, S. (1967) 'The DMK and the Politics of Tamilnad,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 19, 1967, pp. 2133 40.
Ram, M. (1968) *Hindi against India*. New Delhi: Rachna Prakashan.
Ramanujan, K. (1967) *The Big change*. Madras: Higginbothams.
Ramanujan, K. (1971) *Challenge and response*, Madras: Sundara Prachuralayam.
Shivaraman, M. (1969) 'DMK: Kisan's Friend or Foe?' *Mainstream*, August 30, 1969, p. 29.
Spratt, P. (1970) *DMK in power*. New Delhi: Nachiketa.

## Interviews

Ganesan, Shivaji, Madras, November 1969.
Kannadhasan, Madras, January 1970.
Karunanidhi, M., Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Madras, February 1970.
Maran, Murasoli, Madras, December 1969.
Punju, S., Tamil film director, Madras, January 1970.
Radha, M. R., Madras, February 1970.
Rajendran, S. S., Madras, December 1969.
Rama Aranganal, Madras, December 1969.
Ramachandran, M. G., Madras, December 1969.
Raman, V. P., Madras, January 1970.
Ramaswamy, K. R., Madras, January 1970.
Sampath, E. V. K., Madras, February 1970.
Thirumal, personal secretary to M. R. Radha, Madras, February 1970.
Sundara Prachuralayam, 1971.

# 5 The nurturing hero

## Changing images of MGR

*Sara Dickey*

> Our current Chief Minister [J. Jayalalitha] is a good administrator, but we have officials to take care of administration. What we *need* in a leader is a nurturing mother.
>
> C. Rajeswari, Tamil scholar and MGR fan, in 2005

At a 2005 opening-day showing of *Mannathi Mannan* in a Madurai theatre, fan club members outside the theatre cooked large pots of sweet rice *ponkal* to celebrate the opening, and garlanded posters of the film's hero M. G. Ramachandran (MGR). Inside the theatre, all seats were filled and the aisles were crowded with overflow viewers. For three hours, starting from the moment that MGR appeared on screen, fans cheered, lobbed confetti, and waved camphor flames in the air. But *Mannathi Mannan* was not a new film – it was shot in black and white, and first appeared in 1960 – nor was MGR a trendy new star. MGR ended his career in 1977, the year he was elected Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, and he died in 1987. Yet at least three or four of his films run daily in every city of Tamil Nadu, another one or two appear each day on television, and opening-day scenes like this one occur weekly in Madurai theatres. Legions of fans remain passionate about their hero-leader. Two decades after his death, MGR is clearly important to his followers; but what does he mean to them now?

Over the past twenty years, the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu has witnessed significant shifts in local and national politics, economics, and social values. Fans have also changed, and the meaning of fandom has altered over time. Popular images of MGR have metamorphosed as they are fed by burnished memories and current political uses of the hero, rather than by daily news reports or direct interactions with MGR.

Not surprisingly, the symbolic meanings of this hero have shifted as well. Although the praises for MGR today range over the same list of attributes as twenty years ago, the relative *weight* placed on different qualities has shifted over time. Fans I spoke with in the mid-1980s reserved their most elaborate praise for MGR's strength, potency and virility. In 2005, most fans downplayed his fighting skills and physical prowess, and stressed instead his moral teachings and his nurturing love for the people. They

portrayed MGR as a caring parent who mixed freely with his children and thereby directly contrasted him with two contemporary politicians: his successor J. Jayalalitha, then the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, and political rival and opposition leader Mu. Karunanidhi. In this chapter, I examine present-day fans' portrayals of MGR, exploring the particularly nurturing, even maternal, image emphasised in the topics fans raised most often.

Cinema and politics have a long, multi-sided history in Tamil Nadu, more so than in any other Indian state or film industry. Films have been used to make socio-political critiques and to advance political ideologies, stars have campaigned for parties, and film personnel have entered electoral politics. Silent films and early talkies often included anti-British plots, rhetoric, and songs until the advent of the Second World War (Baskaran 1981). From the late 1940s through to the mid-1970s, screenwriters used film dialogues to criticise state governments and to promote political platforms. Occasionally, both filmmakers and actors built on their reputations to develop their own elite or popular political followings. Although such successes were rare, when considered against the huge number of film personnel, they could be spectacular. (Virtually all heads of the state government have come from cinema since 1967.[1]) MGR, who painstakingly created a populist image through his film roles, was assumed to follow the values he espoused on film, and gained widespread political support. Some of his contemporaries played a minor role in electoral politics, including Shivaji Ganeshan. The last film star to reach great political heights, however, was MGR's co-star Jayalalitha, who, as I discuss below, entered politics in the early 1980s and later followed in MGR's footsteps as Chief Minister of the state. Since then, a few others such as actor-directors Bhagyaraj and T. Rajendar have been associated with political parties but have had limited prominence, and actors such as Rajnikanth have voiced influential opinions without running for office. Only very recently have actors made a noticeable return to politics, with Vijaykanth launching a party in 2005, Karthik taking the lead of another party in 2006, and numerous stars campaigning for candidates in the 2006 elections. For now, however, these remain nascent political careers; moreover, since the 1970s, few new films have been explicitly tied to political ideologies. Thus, MGR and his work continue to stand out.

MGR came to specialise in broadly two kinds of film roles: the underdog a rickshaw driver, farmer, or cowherd who overcomes oppression; and the ruler, warrior, or public servant who fights righteously for the downtrodden. In all these roles, he battled brilliantly, taught both followers and villains to live morally, won the heart of the heroine and eventually married her, and respected his mother. Fans came to see him as someone who enacted his personal and political values in the film roles he chose, and his fan clubs became official branches of the party.

MGR's theatrical beginnings were humble. He was sent by his indigent family to join a boys' drama troupe at the age of seven.[2] MGR made his first film appearance in 1936, and by the mid-1940s was becoming a popular

film hero. He soon came to the attention of C.N. Annadurai and Karunanidhi, leaders of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam political party (DMK, the Dravidian Progressive Federation), who used film scripts and film stars to spread their party's platform. MGR's characters soon espoused the party's populist ideology. The DMK came to power in 1967, initiating the continuing domination of state politics by ethnic Dravidian parties.[3] In 1972, MGR broke away to create his own party, the Annadurai-DMK (now officially called the All India Annadurai-DMK, or AIADMK). MGR's extensive fan clubs came with him and composed the bulk of his grass-roots party network. He became Tamil Nadu Chief Minister in 1977.

In 1984, MGR made the actress Jayalalitha a minister in his government. Jayalalitha had been MGR's final film co-star, and fans referred to her as his 'second wife'. After MGR's death, Jayalalitha struggled to gain the support of party officials, members, and other voters, and since then has ruled three times as Chief Minister, most recently in 2002 06. When she first entered politics, she emphasised her position as MGR's devoted follower and (apparent) anointed successor. Soon after becoming Chief Minister in 1991, however, Jayalalitha began distancing herself from MGR and from cinema. She encouraged party members to call her 'Amma' [Mother], and de-sexualised her image as she strove to shed her tainted reputation as an actress and create an independent political image and following.[4]

Economics and politics have changed significantly at state and national levels since MGR died. Nationally, and to some extent within Tamil Nadu as well, religious chauvinism has become a central feature of politics, and caste-based politics have become more important at the statewide level. India's economic liberalisation has altered class relations, occupations, and consumption, often embittering poor and even middle-class Tamil Nadu residents who perceive heightened inequality and increased job insecurity even as a wider array of consumer goods and careers become available or at least imaginable for some people. As I suggest below, nostalgia for a past life that is now remembered as secure ruled over by the generous and caring MGR intertwines resentment against national economic policies with criticism of Jayalalitha's political style.

## The research

The research informing this study has taken place at different times over the past twenty years, most recently between March and August 2005. I first carried out research on MGR and fandom during a study of film watching, fan clubs, and class identity in 1985 87. MGR was in office then, and many of his most stalwart fans stated that he was literally immortal. When I returned to Madurai in 1989, a year and a half after MGR's death, the fan clubs I had known were still organised but somewhat subdued; their members now admitted MGR's mortality, but argued that MGR's memory would never die. Although I still took this to be a figurative statement,

MGR's fandom has indeed persisted in far greater numbers and intensity than most observers expected. Working in Madurai in 2004, I was struck by the continued fervent devotion to MGR, which prompted me to return in 2005 to explore the contemporary significance of MGR for his fans.

In July 2005, I interviewed thirty people about MGR. Almost all were strong MGR fans, and supporters of the AIADMK; others were informed observers of fans, including two theatre owners. I also spoke with some detractors of MGR, though I did not interview them formally. In addition, I did not interview AIADMK members who support Jayalalitha but not MGR (and thus the views about Jayalalitha represented here do not include those of this group); it is difficult to estimate what percentage of AIADMK voters would fit this category, but it is probably not a large number. In choosing informants, I sampled across relevant variables, including party leadership and membership, age, gender, caste, class, and religion. All interviews took place in Madurai, a city of roughly one million residents. The views presented here are thus as representative as a carefully constructed purposive sample can be, based on long-term participation in a community, with a cross-class and cross-caste but male-dominated sample of Madurai residents.

## Today's fans

In Tamil Nadu, there remains a great deal of what Hardgrave called the 'folk culture of cinema' (Hardgrave 1975: 2). Fans decorate notebooks and vehicles with decals of film stars, write letters and e-mails to actors and actresses, dress or speak like their favourite stars, read a plethora of Tamil- and English-language film magazines, play CDs of film lyrics and download them as ringtones, and write blogs about movies. Films and industry gossip are frequent topics of conversation among friends. There are also organised fan activities; fan clubs, usually part of an official hierarchical structure, are highly visible in the city. All successful stars have fan clubs, whose billboards mark their meeting places on public streets. Most members are young men who gather to socialise and to promote their star's films or local appearances. Sometimes they will also carry out charitable works in the star's name, and occasionally provide political support to a star or to the party he or she supports.

As I have noted, MGR's fans and fan clubs are still numerous. The meaning of being an MGR fan, however, has changed over time. In particular, those who identify and are identified as MGR fans now are more likely to be AIADMK party functionaries than in the past. There are many fans who are *not* party members, or may not even see themselves as political, but the public perception of an MGR fan now seems to be more closely associated with party activism than it was in the 1980s.

At the same time, many stalwart MGR fans, including some party functionaries, support the AIADMK because it represents MGR's legacy rather than because of direct support for the current leader Jayalalitha, and a number

of them feel rather alienated from the party because of the inadequate attention it now pays to MGR. One man, K. Ahmad, a 35-year-old tricycle cart driver, reflected this view when he said,

> I am a member of the MGR party, not of the Jayalalitha party. Since he gave the two leaf symbol [of the AIADMK party] to her, we vote for her. I showed you many photographs when you came to my house. There wasn't a single one of Jayalalitha, was there? No, everything will be MGR's.[5]

Although Jayalalitha has taken care to include references to and images of MGR in the past decade, especially after the AIADMK was trounced in the 1996 elections, many MGR fans continue to feel that their leader is not given his due in the party he founded.

Today's fans are older on average than fans were as a group twenty years ago. Although all the people I spoke with had taken their children and grandchildren to MGR films, they recognised that most young people prefer the current film stars. These older fans still felt, however, that MGR's fame was being passed on to the next generation, so that their descendants would continue to appreciate MGR's wisdom and regale his generosity. Moreover, I did meet some young men and women, in their late teens and early 20s, who preferred MGR films to contemporary ones because of the moral values they espouse. These young viewers were, however, in the minority.

While the perceived political activity and the average age of MGR's fans have shifted, fans' class standing appears to be similar to the past. Most fans are poor, working class, or lower-middle class. But there is also a notable contingent of passionate middle-class fans of MGR. Fans' caste membership varies widely, and although fans are often presumed to be from relatively low castes, I met a number of high-caste fans of MGR as well. Middle- and upper-class fans, and those who are upper-caste, say that they are less public or vocal about their feelings than are other fans, their caution reflecting a dominant cultural view that values emotional containment and stigmatises the emotional excess commonly associated with MGR fans.

## MGR Today

MGR still has a vivid presence in the visual, political, and emotional landscape of Madurai. In addition to statues erected in different parts of the city, MGR film posters are pasted on roads all over the metropolitan area; decals and photos are sold by street vendors with those of other film stars, deities, and national heroes; monthly MGR fan magazines are sold at news shops and tea stalls; fan club billboards depict MGR in both fighting stances and reflective poses; cycle and auto rickshaws are painted with his pictures; and fans decorate their homes with posters, and sometimes erect shrines to MGR. And, of course, MGR's films play in theatres and on television.

Fans distinguish MGR's films sharply from contemporary films, and sometimes from other movies of the past as well. Today they say that the morals of the films are their greatest distinction. One evening I spoke with a group of AIADMK ward officials, and asked their opinions about why MGR has remained so popular with the people. The ward secretary answered:

> Because of his generosity — he gives to everyone. Also because of the good morals he teaches: that the poor should adjust to their circumstances, and live peaceably with their family members; that older and younger brothers should be affectionate with one another; and that we need to love our mother.

Whereas contemporary films are seen as stringing together empty pieces of sex, violence, and other shallow diversions, fans say that MGR's films teach people how they should live.[6]

Fans believe that such messages also reveal MGR's deepest nature. Film viewers comment frequently on connections between MGR's films and his actions in real life. Fans also recount many stories about MGR. To my surprise, the majority of these accounts were first-person observations. All of the fans I spoke with had seen MGR in Madurai, and most of the male fans had travelled to Madras at least once to visit his home. (Five fans — three men and two women — had also tonsured their heads in mourning when MGR died in 1987, and four of these had travelled to his funeral in Madras.) In the accounts they tell of seeing MGR, in describing his films, and in other reports about MGR, fans in 2005 focussed on common themes that revealed his contemporary meanings as a political symbol, meanings that have shifted in interesting ways from those emphasised twenty years ago.

In the 1980s, like other heroes of the time, MGR was praised by fans for his acting abilities; his personal concern for fans; and a certain guilelessness, often referred to as having 'the heart of a child', which indicated a genuine and spontaneous character rather than a shrewdly calculating nature.[7] Along with these characteristics went a widespread generosity, particularly toward the poor (see Dickey 2001). Throughout his career, he was seen as especially devoted to 'women's issues' such as commodity prices and, in certain periods, temperance (his largest set of followers was often claimed to be the *taay kulam*, the clan or community of women [see Lakshmi 1990: WS 82, Pandian 1992: 79].)[8] But the greatest praise was for MGR's physical and political prowess, both on- and off-screen. C. S. Lakshmi describes MGR's image during this period as 'the true Tamil man — he was brave, courageous, a devoted son and a virile lover' (Lakshmi 1990: WS 81). Fans described MGR's martial arts talents in loving detail (including *cilampam* or stick fighting, specialised knife and sword fighting, and hand-to-hand combat). They also recounted his political triumphs at length.

I was struck, then, by how rarely MGR's fight scenes and other forms of his potency figured into fans' descriptions of MGR in 2004 and 2005, whether

in accounts about the hero, discussions of his movies, or attempts to explain the persistence of his fame. When I asked directly about the importance of MGR's fight scenes, some male fans explained that their own aging had made them less interested in violence than they had been in the past, while both women and men pointed out that contemporary filming techniques make old fight scenes look old-fashioned or even silly.

Instead, when asked why MGR's fame or memory has persisted over almost twenty years, the answer was almost always MGR's love [*anpu*] for the people. And when asked how this love was manifested, respondents identified numerous types of caring and generosity, including donations to support individuals' educations, gifts of clothing and housing to disaster victims, and personal inquiries about fans' family members. The most frequently mentioned signs of his love, however, were of three types: price controls on rice, the Nutritious Meal Programme, and MGR's habits of eating with and feeding fans and officials. Each of these topics centrally involves food, a symbol of caring, intimacy, and well-being in Tamil society. It is also typically a women's domain. Although MGR's image retains a broad amalgamation of characteristics, the primary emphasis has shifted from a highly masculine fighting hero to a relatively feminine nurturing leader.

## Food

### *Rice*

Many analysts have argued that the overall policies and practices of MGR's government were detrimental to the poor and to the state's budget (e.g., Madras Institute of Development Studies 1988; Kohli 1990; Pandian 1992; Subramanian 1999; Widlund 2000). MGR was, however, extremely successful at utilising populist measures and at publicising acts of beneficence that poor and working class voters took as signs of his devotedness. The effectiveness of these programmes and policies in shaping public opinion is evident in their continuing prominence in memories of MGR. One such measure was strict price controls on rice. In Tamil Nadu, rice is both a premium food and a symbol of survival.

Various grains are eaten as staples in southern India. They include millet, tapioca, and wheat, for example, in addition to rice. Yet rice has long been the most prized grain in many parts of South India, and in recent decades it has become common in Tamil Nadu diets across economic classes, especially in urban areas. Rice is the primary component of urban poor and working class families' main meal each day, and the price of rice is critical in their budgets. Moreover, certain foods derived from rice — especially kanji, a thin rice gruel, and *niicca taNNiir*, water in which rice has been soaked overnight — are identified as foods of the poor. The availability and price of rice are thus highly evocative issues for impoverished people.

Rice subsidies have contributed to the success and failure of successive governments in Tamil Nadu. In the 1967 election campaign, the DMK promised to cap the price of three measures of rice (4.8 kilos) at Rs. 1. After winning the election, Annadurai modified this to one measure per rupee (which was one third of the prevailing price [Subramanian 1999: 205]), and implemented this subsidy briefly in the cities of Madras and Coimbatore only (Pandian 1992: 37, Subramanian 1999: 205). Annadurai died in 1969, and in the face of increasing rice shortages, Karunanidhi was unable to meet his predecessor's promise. MGR later made the price of rice a major issue, and was able to cap it at Rs. 1 per kilo when he first came to power in 1977.

One man, P. Velusamy, a 55-year-old tricycle cart driver and poet, spoke at length about the history of rice prices while telling me his views about MGR. He argued that price caps on rice were the source of MGR's political success:

> MGR took on Annadurai's one-rupee rice scheme, and made it come true during his rule. He brought that scheme again, but not in the same form. In 1967, it had been very difficult for Annadurai, so how could MGR do it in 1977? What he did was call all the bigshots in Tamil Nadu and all the rice mill owners. He made a deal with them that during his rule, the price of rice must stay stable. The price of any other commodity could be raised. And during his ten years of rule, rice ranged between Rs. 5 and Rs. 8, 9, 10 per kilo, depending on the quality. That was his great achievement.
>
> Even today, the reason the people think of MGR and pray to him as a god, is that his ten years of rule was a golden period for this reason.

Velusamy emphasises MGR's inventiveness in circumventing standard political processes in order to take care of the people. He depicts MGR's accomplishment as all the more remarkable given the inability of both Annadurai and Karunanidhi to achieve this goal.

Several other respondents also identified rice subsidies as the greatest demonstration of MGR's love. For example, G. Kannan, a 43-year-old auto driver, argued:

> MGR's reign was the best. Compared to now, and compared to Karunanidhi's reign, MGR's was best for the people. In Karunanidhi's reign, the people had to eat tapioca because rice wasn't available. But MGR wouldn't allow the price of rice to be raised. For the poor people, that itself was his primary help ...
>
> In his films he showed his love for his people. But in day-to-day life, three quarters of the people, they can eat only after they work, right? The working class, those without a monthly salary, make 40 rupees or

> 70 rupees only if they work that day. So for people like that, it's rice that they need.

Kannan evokes Karunanidhi's betrayal by feeding people tapioca, which Tamilians consider much inferior to rice. He also argues that while MGR's films depict the hero's love, it is the materiality of food that most convinces people of his heart. MGR recognised what daily wage labourers need most food to eat and ensured their access to this most symbolic of foodstuffs.

### *Nutritious Meal Programme*

Another populist programme that received lavish praise from fans, and one with much greater longevity than rice subsidies, is the Nutritious Meal Programme, which Washbrook (1989: 240) has called the most 'spectacular' of Tamil Nadu's welfare programmes in the 1980s. Although this popular programme is now commonly associated with MGR, the first statewide noon meal programme was inaugurated in 1956 by Chief Minister K. Kamaraj of the Congress Party. MGR significantly broadened the programme in 1982, making it available to all preschool and primary school children in the state, and shortly thereafter to secondary school children as well.[9] One of the programme's primary purposes is to increase school attendance, and although its efficacy across caste and gender categories has been questioned (e.g. Prasad 2005; Harriss 1991: 19), Harriss-White notes that 'Tamil Nadu is unique in India in having placed food and nutrition first on its social welfare agenda' (2004: 51).[10]

For today's fans, the Nutritious Meal Programme seems to have the most powerful resonance of all of MGR's official acts, and fans evoked it to make a variety of points about past and present regimes. It was used most frequently as an illustration of MGR's determination to care for the poor. In one conversation about the programme, two long-time acquaintances explored the roots of MGR's generosity. The speakers were R. Yogini, a 46-year-old college teacher, and K. Sivalingam, a cycle rickshaw driver who transported Yogini and her family to MGR movies when she was a child. Sivalingam is now in his late 50s and retired, and belongs to an MGR fan club. They emphasised MGR's personal connection to the poor because of his own childhood poverty, and contrasted his empathy with Jayalalitha's ignorance:

> Sivalingam: MGR introduced the noon meals system. When Amma came to power, she called it 'MGR's Noon Meal Programme'.
>
> Yogini: But when MGR was in power and introduced these nutritious meals, they ran for 365 days a year, no holidays. Even on Deepavali [a major Hindu and national holiday] they would give a sweet and the meal. With Jayalalitha, she started giving holidays. We can give

holidays for the meals, but can we give the stomach a holiday? Won't we feel hungry even on those days? The hunger that MGR was aware of that even on Sundays some families can't give food to their children she doesn't recognise.

Sivalingam: That's because MGR had experienced hunger himself. Jayalalitha doesn't know hunger because she was an actress, her mother was an actress, they were quite well off, she is well educated, but MGR was not. He only studied up to the fifth standard. That is why he understands poor people.

In this view, only someone who has known poverty and hunger himself can truly be tied to the poor. (This view had been promoted during MGR's lifetime through a number of popular media; see Pandian 1992: 98 100.) Sivalingam and Yogini point out that when MGR became wealthy and powerful, he did not forget his connection to those who are poor and powerless; instead, he used his power to help them. They also argue compellingly that Jayalalitha has not replaced MGR. She cannot follow in his footsteps because her privileged upbringing prevents empathy, and blinds her to people's needs.

In an interview, Yogini and her friend S. Balaji, a journalist in his 30s, also pointed to the programme as an example of MGR's devotedness to the poor. In this case, they cited it to demonstrate his commitment to social welfare regardless of the odds.

Balaji: The most significant thing about MGR was his generosity, his child's mind, his perfect calculation, [which was] not based on scientific reasons unscientifically done but perfectly devised.

Yogini: Like when he wanted to introduce the Nutritious Meals Programme for the children and the elders. He called the financial experts to plan for that. They said it was totally impossible. MGR got angry and told them that they were not convened to protest, but to find the means to pay for the scheme. They replied that they couldn't find a solution, because the resources were inadequate. MGR retorted, "I don't know anything about your economics, but I know a great deal about hunger the cruelty of hunger in a child," and he asked them for their budget. They said, "This programme would cost 110 crores" [Rs. 1,100,000,000].[11] He adjourned the meeting and announced the programme in the next day's newspaper.

The experts laughed as if he was ignorant of the value of money. But MGR was successful in proving himself to be the pioneer of this scheme in India, and was highly appreciated by UNESCO. He raised the whole amount through private donations. He made an announcement asking donors to give generously, and they did.

Yogini stresses MGR's determination to universalise the Nutritious Meal Programme, despite its apparent infeasibility. She and Balaji portray MGR as guided by his love for the people and his concern for their needs, rather than relying on cost analyses to determine his decision. Once again, he manoeuvred around 'rational' economic constraints to take care of the people. Ultimately, these two middle-class fans argue, MGR proved the elite economists wrong (the programme is now supported by state, national, international, and private funding),[12] and in fact had received international recognition for this entitlement programme.

### *Eating*

Where the Nutritious Meal Programme and price controls on rice were populist programmes instituted by MGR's government, MGR's individual behaviours were also mentioned frequently by respondents. Fans told numerous stories about MGR's eating and feeding practices including MGR's willingness to eat with any of his followers, his interests in specific foods, and his habits of feeding officials and fans all of which demonstrated his love for and his closeness to his people. These stories of eating and feeding suggest even more direct nurturing and greater intimacy than the preceding accounts. Moreover, they depict food sharing across caste, class and gender lines. Although these types of commensality are usually avoided in India, they can create and demonstrate intimacy when they are practised.

One of my interviews with Sivalingam took place shortly after I had seen the MGR film *Vivacayi* (The Peasant, 1967). I remembered Sivalingam mentioning previously that he had once seen MGR take rice water from someone Sivalingam knew, just as the farmer MGR does in the film, and I asked him about the incident. This was the story Sivalingam told:

> Sara: You said that MGR really drank the *kanji*, like in the film *Vivacayi*, right?
>
> Sivalingam: Yes, in the very same way ... In 1982, MGR was coming to Madurai. He was invited to a flag-raising function in the ward near my fan club. They thought he would come and raise the flag and just go off. His jeep was coming to the function. At that moment, an old woman was also coming with *niicca taNNiir* in a bowl. MGR's jeep was coming close to the flagpole. The crowd was a huge crowd, and it's pushing in to see him, right? Then, the woman lifted her bowl above her head and he saw it. He made a signal to his guards. So they brought her out of the crowd, and he took the bowl and drank the whole thing. After drinking it, he hugged her and gave her a kiss. Then he turned to the crowd, and waved at them, and showed the two-leaf symbol [by raising his hand with two fingers in a 'V']. Then he left the place.

As in this dramatic account, one of the typical features of first-hand MGR stories is that of MGR spotting a single individual in a crowd, overcoming 'regular' procedures or the pressure of the police and attendants, and welcoming and attending to the individual. As also with the accounts above, MGR is described as deviating from advised procedures, in this case breaking through the protection that would have kept him separate. This narrative also depicts his willingness to take food from an unknown person, and most particularly, from a poor and possibly low-caste person. People of different caste ranks are not meant to be voluntarily in close physical contact, and especially to share food.[13] When individuals do accept prepared foods from others, this is a sign either of the recipient's subservience or of equality between giver and receiver; in the latter case, it is also a sign of emotional intimacy. Close friends will share food from the same plate, mothers may eat children's leftovers, and wives eat their husband's leftovers (Parish 1994). But superiors do not eat cooked food touched by status inferiors.

MGR's remarkable willingness to ignore caste, class, and power differences is an almost universal feature of first-person accounts about him. Boundaries are broken so that MGR can be with, or act for, the people. A counter-genre, often told to accompany stories of MGR's mixing, relates Jayalalitha's distance from the people: calling party officers to Chennai rather than visiting them in their districts, staying in her car when she comes for a flag-raising ceremony, refusing to meet individually with party members when she makes appearances (sitting on a distant dais, protected by a bulletproof vest).[14]

People also told lengthy stories about MGR's favourite foods. Knowing, relishing, and relating such small details establishes an intimacy between fan and star. Such accounts reveal the idiosyncrasies, the bodily desires, and thus the humanity of MGR. Telling these narratives stresses again MGR's closeness to, rather than distance from, the people of Tamil Nadu. In contrast, such details would almost certainly not be known about Jayalalitha.

### *Feeding*

This interest in specificities and individual desires is also reflected in stories about MGR feeding others. One of the first such reports I heard was told by a theatre owner in Madurai. The owner, T. Ganesan, had had a number of connections with MGR. As a child, he had seen MGR on the theatre stage when the star came to celebrate the hundredth day of a film's run, and as a young adult he had helped to arrange security for similar appearances. His sister's husband was also an MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly, the state legislature) in MGR's government, and he had told Ganesan stories about MGR feeding high-ranking party members. Focussing on food and feeding, Ganesan built a picture of MGR as a generous and caring leader interested in his individual followers:

> Feeding people is a beloved issue for him. My sister's father-in-law is a very good non-veg eater, so sometimes if MGR was in a very good mood, he would send two boxes of quail for him. His love for each and every member is very significant ... Two different boxes, full of non-veg items. About 15 pieces each. There will be plenty of food.

Again, the minuteness of the detail is important. So is MGR's generosity. MGR is not calculating rather than providing precisely enough food for the exact number of individuals, he gives more than enough for all. He nourishes as well as nurtures his followers.

Later, Yogini told a similar story. Speaking in English, she said,

> After becoming Chief Minister, MGR invited each of his officers for lunch. This was very unusual. He watches to see who likes what food, and makes sure they get it the next time they come. "More than a mother, he knows the taste of me. He will ask the bearer to give me this and that": that's what the officers say about him.

Yogini thus argued that MGR paid the members of his government the same individualised attention that a mother gives to her children.

MGR was also known for feeding his fans in large groups. Fan after fan told me that during MGR's lifetime, his house was always open to feed visitors. This description by Natarajan, a temple priest and an officer in Madurai's head fan club who had visited MGR's home a number of times, was typical:

> I have been to MGR's house when he was alive, though most of the time he would be away for shootings. But the people who went there from Madurai would be treated very respectfully. He would not let us go without eating. There would be at least 100 people eating in his house. The gas stove was always on.
>
> The epic character Karnan is known for his helping tendency, but even he didn't give food to everyone. Every day at least 100 people would eat in MGR's house. He would speak to them only if they ate. MGR is the only actor who gave food for everyone who came to his house.

As with the Nutritious Meal Programme, people linked MGR's generosity to his history of childhood privation. Feeding is a very direct form of nurturing even more so than are rice subsidies and the Nutritious Meals Scheme. To feed individuals or groups in one's home is especially significant: being allowed to enter a house signifies social closeness with the residents. It thus combines the attributes of oneness and devotion found in other eating and feeding stories: whereas feeding is *for* the people, eating is *with* them. Here, by feeding followers in his home, MGR is symbolically joining them in the meal he has provided.

## Conclusions: nurturance and MGR

MGR is a hero who means something rather different now than he did during his rule. He continues to protect his followers, but through nurturance rather than virility. As in the past, fans emphasise MGR's oneness with and devotion to them, but they focus less on his superhuman potency than they once did. Instead, they bring out qualities that impart a decidedly maternal cast to his image. The contemporary focus on food in MGR's legacy be it rice subsidies, the Nutritious Meals Programme, or eating and feeding constructs a leader who protects his people's well-being in the most fundamental of ways, shows his caring through his concern with providing food, and demonstrates his egalitarianism by sharing it.

Among Tamilians, a mother's love for her children is said to be 'the strongest of all loves and the most highly valued' (Trawick 1990: 93). A mother knows what her children need. She knows the children as individuals, and attends to their needs precisely. In this way, MGR focussed on specific details of his followers' dietary desires. He also, followers argue, recognised the materiality of their needs, and provided what they most lacked: food. In addition, he provided moral training as a parent does, but perhaps because of MGR's recognition of material hardships and his contributions to their real needs, fans do not articulate resentment against this moralising as lower class citizens often do when privileged altruists try to teach them to live 'better' lives (Dickey 2001: 236; Caplan 1985: 202). Interestingly, in movies, he rarely urged the poor to improve their own material circumstances, but transformed violent or corrupt regimes to work in their favour, provided for their material and social needs, and/or articulated their pain and oppression.[15]

Mothers are also seen as emotionally, physically, and hierarchically much closer to their children than are fathers. Rather than maintaining boundaries of rank and difference, they often blur those boundaries by sharing food and encouraging emotional closeness. Ignoring or breaking boundaries between people enacts love and intimacy (Trawick 1990). Sharing food and being in close proximity are both signs of what is called 'mixing' in English, *kalattal* in Tamil. Such mixing implies a mingling of substance, a stirring together, a rubbing off on one another. This blending demonstrates egalitarianism as well as affection, the exact opposite of a distant leader. In all these ways, the striking stories of MGR's *anpu* show his love to be not simply parental but distinctly maternal.

MGR is also claimed to have desired to take care of the poor because he had the 'heart of a child'. This made him devoted to the people's needs, rather than to rational administration or budget concerns. Although I would not argue that this is a distinctively feminine ideal in Tamil society (all major film heroes of the 1980s, for example, were described by fan club members as having this quality; see Dickey 2001), mothers might be more expected to take this approach than fathers, since women are according to

dominant gender ideals — less likely than men to be conceptualised as dealing with the economic realm of the family. Although in reality many women make direct economic contributions to the family, in any case, a proper mother should be devoted to her children well beyond any cost-benefit ratio.

In addition, MGR was predisposed toward empathising with and challenging poverty because of his own childhood experiences. These fans argue that only someone who has known poverty and hunger directly can truly be tied to the poor. They emphasise that MGR did not forget his connection to those who are poor and powerless when he became wealthy and powerful; instead, he used his remarkable power to help them.

These characterisations come out in even greater relief, not to mention irony, when they are compared with depictions of Jayalalitha. Although referred to as Amma, Jayalalitha (in these fans' characterisations) does not permit physical or emotional closeness with her followers, she neither identifies with nor understands the needs of the poor, and her marked intelligence and education serve to make her shrewdly calculating rather than lovingly spontaneous and intuitive. While Jayalalitha has maintained many of the AIADMK's populist programmes and instituted new ones, many low-income members of the populace felt in 2005 that Jayalalitha had retreated from them; her public image was rather of someone with ties to specific castes and with interests in pan-societal development.[16] MGR's followers, including party officials, are deeply critical of her for these reasons — even though, it must be noted, they all respect her. But they do not see her as loving the people. Jayalalitha, however, is in a much different position than MGR. Tamil film actresses of her time had no access to heroic roles, and she must follow quite different gender norms than a man in negotiating a public political role. When pressed, fans will admit that it is *because* of Jayalalitha's gender that she cannot mix with people and must create and protect her distance in order to be respected, and it is *because* of her gender that she has had to overcome the stigma of acting rather than launch herself politically from her film roles. Paradoxically, being a woman prevents Jayalalitha from becoming the mother figure that MGR now is.

The shift in the dominant aspects of MGR's image over the past twenty years is striking. From a virile fighter, he has become a nurturing caretaker. From glorifying mothers, the *taay kulam*, he has become revered by men as well as women as a mother figure. Although more masculine elements of his image remain (albeit emphatically downplayed), and although characterisations of MGR partake of only certain aspects of motherhood (sexual purity, for example, is never emphasised, although it has been prevalent in symbolic deployments of Tamil motherhood since the late nineteenth century [Lakshmi 1990: WS 73]),[17] there has been a notable change in how MGR is depicted by fans.

What does this shift derive from? I can offer only a brief and speculative answer here. Nostalgia for a pre-economic-liberalisation leader — who is now cloaked with an aura of nurturing, 'maternal' paternalism, as Central

Government policies become increasingly rationalised and less paternalistic in the shift from a state-controlled economy certainly explains part of the contemporary yearning for MGR. Even though a number of these respondents are better off materially than they were twenty years ago (as measured by income relative to inflation, housing, and consumption goods), they claim that life was better before economic liberalisation when, somehow not coincidentally, MGR was in office. They see most of the economic gains as having gone to others, or feel that Tamil society as a whole has been hurt by processes such as increasing mechanisation leading to job loss, or crop commercialisation resulting in increased food prices. In addition, their nostalgia serves to articulate current opposition to Karunanidhi and the DMK party. It also, however, highlights their sense of abandonment by Jayalalitha. Now almost twenty years gone in a political milieu that has changed significantly, MGR is still being described as battling the evil villain and supporting the upper-class heroine while he remains the hero of the triumvirate. While MGR's fans remain true to their party, they use a continuously evolving model of this hero to express longing for a time now imagined as simpler, and for a leader more attentive to their needs.

## Notes

1 Tamil Nadu Chief Ministers with backgrounds in cinema include C. N. Anna durai, Mu. Karunanidhi, MGR, V. N. Janaki (MGR's wife, who became Chief Minister for a brief period immediately following MGR's death), and J. Jayalalitha. Since 1967, the only Chief Minister without a background in cinema was O. Paneerselvam, who served briefly in 2001 when the Indian Supreme Court barred Jayalalitha from continuing as Chief Minister because of a previous conviction on corruption charges. The Madras High Court later acquitted Jayalalitha of the charges, which enabled her to serve again as Chief Minister.

2 MGR's year of birth is disputed. While official biographies list it as 1917, some analysts and fans believe MGR was born five to ten years earlier. Presenting a youthful, virile persona was crucial in MGR's films. See Pandian (1992: 109 111) for a discussion of efforts to protect MGR's relatively youthful image and to disguise his aging.

3 The DMK was founded in 1949, with roots in the rationalist Non Brahman Movement in southern India. Over the years, its platform (and that of the AIADMK) shifted to a more inclusive construction of Tamil cultural national ism, dropping the anti Brahman and anti religion stances of rationalism, and coming to rely on local economic issues more consistently than on ethnic ones.

4 In the 1980s, MGR fans referred to MGR as Anna (elder brother) and Jayala litha as Anni (elder brother's wife). Many fans now deny this, however, which sug gests that Jayalalitha's attempts to create a more 'respectable' image have been relatively successful within the party. On Jayalalitha's changing visual image, see Jacob 1997.

5 Writing in 2000, Widlund argues that MGR's name 'became necessary to legit imise the leadership of his successor. And the reason for this was in all likelihood that both party workers and voters were ultimately motivated and mobilised by MGR, and by no other person but him' (2000: 153 154). Widlund also discusses

party supporters' belief today that Jayalalitha was MGR's anointed successor; see especially pp. 149 151.

6 As any fan can point out, MGR's films also have plenty of sex and violence. In addition to the fights that are an intrinsic part of the story, most films include scenes of women in tight, revealing clothing (either as villains, or as heroines who have yet to be reformed by MGR).

7 For a more extensive examination of the meaning of 'heart of a child', see Dickey 2001: 233 34, 228 29.

8 On MGR's women followers, and his association with women's causes, see also Washbrook 1989: 258 and Subramanian 1999: 256. On respect for the mother, a frequent theme in his films, see Subramanian 1999: 249n and Pandian 1992: 83. On MGR's respect for and treatment of women in his films, see Pandian 1992: 79 84.

9 The state's Nutritious Meal Centres also provide food to elderly pensioners, pregnant and lactating women, and children too young to attend school.

10 Spending on nutrition has continued to increase substantially in Tamil Nadu since 1982 (Harriss White cites a 100 fold increase between 1981 82 and 1994 95). By 2000, the state is said to have spent more on nutritional programmes than did all other Indian states combined (Harriss White 2004: 51).

11 In 1982, this was roughly $137,500,000. I cannot comment on the figure's accu racy; the speaker's point is the enormity of the obstacles that MGR is perceived as having overcome.

12 See Washbrook 1989: 255, Harriss 1991: 3, and Rajivan 2001: 125 126 for mention of different sources.

13 The Nutritious Meals Programme was also designed explicitly to create social tolerance by having children of different castes eat together, and eat food pre pared by lower caste cooks (see e.g. Harriss 1991: 19 20).

14 Jayalalitha is said to wear a bulletproof vest because she is on a 'hit list' of the Sri Lankan separatist LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam).

15 For an excellent overview of different themes in MGR's films and their rela tionship to his political messages, see Subramanian 1999: 248 252.

16 Fans' primary criticism of Jayalalitha is as a leader, not as a woman; a male leader who apparently failed to care for and mix with the people would also be bitterly criticized. There is also, however, an underlying criticism of Jayalalitha's failure to be a proper woman, or at least, a proper mother. (See Keating 2001: 83 84 for denunciations of Jayalalitha as a bad mother in the 1990s, and Bathla 2004 for a review of press criticisms of Jayalalitha's gendered failings.) Finally, it must be noted that while these characterisations were made across gender, class, caste, and religion in my sample, some other constituents especially educated middle class women are more likely to see Jayalalitha as a positive role model for women.

17 See Lakshmi 1990 and Keating 2001 for changing images of the mother in Tamil literary and political history. Keating (2001: 74 85) notes that both MGR and Jayalalitha abandoned the progressive image of womanhood advocated by their forebears in Dravidian politics to embrace a much more conservative model of women and mothers.

## References

Baskaran, S. T. (1981) *The Message Bearers: The Nationalist Politics and the Enter tainment Media in South India, 1880 1945*. Madras: Cre A.

Bathla, S. (2004) 'Gender Construction in the Media: A Study of Two Indian Women Politicians', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 10(3) (Sept. 30) (online text).

Caplan, P. (1985) *Class & Gender in India: Women and Their Organizations in a South Indian City*. London: Tavistock Publications.

Daniel, E.V. (1984) *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dickey, S. (1993) 'The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politi cians in South India', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52(2): 340 372 (May).

(2001) 'Opposing Faces: Film Star Fan Clubs and the Construction of Class Identity in South India', in Christopher Pinney and Rachel Dwyer (eds) *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Popular Culture in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hardgrave, R. H., Jr. (1975) 'When Stars Displace the Gods: The Folk Culture of Cinema in Tamil Nadu'. Occasional Paper Series, No. 3. Center for Asian Studies, The University of Texas, Arlington.

Harriss, B. (1991) *Child Nutrition and Poverty in South India: Noon Meals in Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

Harriss White, B. (2004) 'Nutrition and Its Politics in Tamil Nadu', *South Asia Research* 24(1): 51 71 (May).

Jacob, P. (1997) 'From Co star to Deity: Popular Representations of Jayalalitha Jayaram', in Vidya Dehejia, (ed.) *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*. Delhi: Kali for Women.

Keating, C. (2001) 'Maneuvering Gendered Nationalisms: Jayalalitha Jayaram and the Politics of Tamil Womanhood', *Women & Politics* 22(4): 69 88.

Kohli, A. (1990) *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lakshmi, C. S. (1990) 'Mother, Mother Community and Mother Politics in Tamil Nadu', *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, 42 43: WS72 WS83 (Oct. 20 27).

Madras Institute of Development Studies. (1988) *Tamilnadu Economy. Performance and Issues*. New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing Company.

Pandian, M. S. S. (1992) *The Image Trap: M.G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage.

Parish, S. M. (1994) *Moral Knowing in a Hindu Sacred City*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Prasad, C. B. (2005) 'Midday Meals Don't Work for Dalit Children', *Infochange News and Features* (April), http://www.infochangeindia.org/analysis66.jsp.

Rajivan, A. K. (2001) 'Nutrition Security in Tamil Nadu', in M. Dev, S. P. Antony, V. Gayathri, and R. P. Mamgain (eds) *Social and Economic Security in India*. New Delhi: Institute for Human Development, pp. 122 145.

Subramanian, N. (1999) *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citi zenship, and Democracy in South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Trawick, M. (1990) *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Washbrook, D. A. (1989) 'Caste, Class and Dominance in Modern Tamil Nadu: Non Brahmanism, Dravidianism and Tamil Nationalism', in Francine R. Frankel and M. S. A. Rao (eds) *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*, Volume I. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Widlund, I. (2000) *Paths to Power and Patterns of Influence: The Dravidian Parties in South Indian Politics*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

# 6 Tamil cinema in the public sphere

## The evolving art of banner advertisements in Chennai

*Preminda Jacob*

For the past five decades, the visually arresting medium of banners and cutouts transported the melodrama of Tamil cinema from the darkened confines of the theatre to the public sphere of the streets of Chennai. This medium consisted of images derived from film stills that were painted by hand on cloth and on plywood board. The gigantic proportions of banners and cutouts (33 by 6.5 metres for the largest banners and over 13 metres high for the cutouts), their vibrant colours, as well as the convincing illusionism of their imagery ensured the dominance of this medium in the urban landscape. But with the turn of the twenty-first century, solvent printed images on vinyl sheets have displaced the hand-painted banners and cutouts. What precipitated this transition in advertising media? Does this shift in media from hand-painted canvas to print on vinyl parallel a shift in Tamil cinema from a provincial to an international idiom?

To address these questions I examine the history of banner advertisements in Chennai and the significance of this medium in establishing entertainment cinema as a pervasive force in the cultural life of the city. I argue that in reinforcing the historical alignment of cinema with politics, the hand-painted banner played a significant role in cult formation around public figures in Chennai. While the quality of the advertisements varied considerably according to particular artists' skills in rendition, successful banners unfailingly provoked wonderment in the viewing public. On the other hand, the sleek impersonality of the new medium of vinyl advertising, with its consistently superior print quality, aligns cinema with commerce, internationalism and the seductions of a globalized economy. I develop this argument in the paper through an examination of the processes of manufacture of the two types of banner advertising: the hand painted and printed varieties. And I show how changes in media produce changes in the entire sign system of the images.

The following analysis of process and style is based on interviews conducted in 1990 91 in Chennai with local banner artists and their clients in the cinema industry and with film audiences.[1]

## The history of cinema advertisements in Chennai

Spectacular advertising has long been a fundamental and signature component of Chennai's cinematic culture. The right combination and timing of advertising can reap rich rewards as a popular film is typically viewed three or four times by an unusually large proportion of the Tamil-speaking film audience. And while television has made substantial inroads into most parts of South Indian society, much of the entertainment programming on television is dependent on cinema.

Film publicity in Chennai, compared to other metropolitan areas in India, is particularly extravagant. Intensely competitive markets for capital and for audience attention, the atmosphere of high risk, high uncertainty and the possibility of extravagant rewards play into the commission of advertisements in the Tamil film industry. Perhaps because the industry is ultimately focused on a group of consumers whose behaviours are clouded in uncertainty, its financiers producers and distributors are predisposed to relatively large advertising investments. According to those film producers whom I interviewed, probably between 15 and 25 percent of the total investments raised to produce each film are spent on advertising television spots, posters, theatre decorations, film music CDs and banners. And while both producers and distributors insisted that banners and cutouts, confined to prescribed locations, were the least effective of the advertising options at their disposal, they dared not attempt to release Tamil films without some type of highly visible on-the-street advertisement.

Banners and cutouts advertising the latest films first appeared on the streets of Chennai in the 1940s. Through interviews with banner artists, I was able to approximate an oral history of the profession. A majority of the artists claimed they were from Hindu artisanal communities that had, for generations, been engaged in traditional art practices such as jewellery crafting or sculpting in wood, stone and ivory. As a means of adapting their artistic skills to a modern, urban context so as to continue to earn a livelihood in the arts, these communities of artists had, in the first decades of the twentieth century, taken to painting backdrops and sets for local theatrical troupes and designing *sami patam* (images of deities) for a burgeoning commercial printing industry. When the Tamil film industry in Chennai became established in the mid-1930s, these artists transferred their newly acquired painterly abilities the rapid evocation of convincing illusions of three dimensions and the use of intense, saturated colour schemes to the creation of cinema advertisements. Some artists, however, insisted that banner painting was dissociated from the traditional caste-based occupations. Instead, as is typical of the modern artist, these individuals claimed that they ventured into the field because they possessed *aaruvam* (aptitude) for art. Whatever their mode of entry into the profession, my interviewees concurred that talent or aptitude remained the key ingredient for success in the field.

The first independently owned banner companies in Chennai, artists indicated, dated from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. Many artists also found employment in one of two large film studios, Gemini Pictures and A. V.M. Studios, both of which were based in the city. The older generation of banner artists whom I interviewed referred nostalgically to those days when, even after leaving to set up their own banner companies, their business relationships with these production houses continued to thrive and reap monetary rewards. In those days, my interviewees recalled, film producers lavishly commissioned a range of advertising materials beyond that of banners and cutouts. These included other large-scale painted advertisements, including designs painted on lorries (freight trucks) and theatre decorations, but also hand-painted designs that were reproduced on a variety of small postcard-like products that were peddled near the theatre.

Film publicity in Tamil Nadu was essentially the inspiration of S. S. Vasan (1903 1969), owner of Gemini Pictures. Located on prime real estate along Anna Salai, one of Chennai's major thoroughfares, Gemini Pictures was one of the city's better-known landmarks. During the 1950s and 1960s Vasan attempted to make his provincial production company a national venture in competition with production studios in Bombay. Through innovative and aggressive marketing strategies, he transformed Gemini Pictures into a self-sufficient enterprise that included a publishing and advertising wing, several studios, a group of film stars under contract, and, by 1958, a full scale Eastman colour laboratory.[2] And in the process, he developed a national reputation as the 'king of publicity'.

The innovation and scale of Vasan's advertising strategies have continued to characterize the Tamil film industry. I had the opportunity to interview Mr. Krishnajee, who had been Vasan's publicity manager for 35 years. It was Vasan, Krishnajee claimed, who first began displaying banners and cutouts in public locations, purchasing advertising rights at forty or more locations in each major metropolitan region of the country. Prior to this innovation, film advertisements were restricted to the compounds of cinema theatres. Vasan also initiated the escalating competition over banner sizes by financing the first giant cutout, 18 metres (60 foot) in height, for the film *Bhakta Cheta* (Saint Cheta, 1940) early in his career. This set the trend of self-promotion by advertisers. The owner of Mohan Arts Banner Company, seeking to establish a reputation for his new enterprise, in the late 1950s increased the height of the cutout to 24 metres (80 foot). This was for the film *Vanangamudi* (The Unvanquished, 1957). The institutional limits to this competition were reached in 1985, when, according to the owner of Chandran Arts Banner Company, a distributor commissioned his company to create a cutout of the film star *Kamalahasan* that was 30 metres (100 foot) high. Two weeks after it went up, the structure was pummelled by a severe storm, leaving the cutout leaning dangerously over Anna Salai the next morning. That week, civic authorities instituted a 12 metres (40 foot) height limit on all film cutouts in the city.

## The production and aesthetics of hand-painted banners and cutouts

For approximately two decades, from the 1980s to 2000, ten small and specialized family-owned businesses in Chennai handled about 90 percent of the contracts for painted banners and cutouts commissioned by film producers, film distributors and theatre owners, and publicity representatives from Tamil Nadu's political parties. Company owners were often practising artists themselves. Each company maintained several apprentices. And each company contracted a number of additional services. Carpenters, lettering artists specializing in painting text on banners and cutouts and construction labourers, involved in banner installations on the street and on theatre grounds and buildings, worked on an intermittent basis, or rotated on contract through several companies.

Individuals acquired the knowledge and artistic skills to produce hand-painted banners through an apprenticeship with a banner company. Most who entered this field grew up in rural locales where they may have only completed primary or middle school education. Admission to art colleges and subsequently networking within a gallery system was neither an option, nor perhaps an aspiration for them. Upon arriving in the city these young men and boys (the profession was exclusively male) joined a banner company and learned the art through a sequence of watching, then assisting with the initial stages of the process or working on the marginal sections of the image. Finally, 'by perfectly emulating the teacher's technique, the individual gained the permission to work independently as is typical of a traditional artistic training in a range of visual art forms'. (Inglis 1999: 130) Having graduated into the position and status of banner artist, an individual was free to adapt or change the methods he had learned but within limits, and those limits were set by the company's need to win contracts and please their patrons.

Ideally, a banner company had a week to ten days to complete a sizable order of approximately ten banners, each about 6 by 3 metres (20 by 10 foot), and two or three cutouts, each about 12 metres (40 foot) high. Occasionally a client required a smaller order to be completed in one day or overnight. In such instances, artists cut several stages from the production process, resulting in a lower quality product (in the opinion of the artists interviewed).

From start to finish, five successive coats of primer and paint were applied to the canvas or plywood surfaces. Apprentices first primed the *gada* unbleached cotton, broken white in colour, a cheap material used variously for packaging, lining curtains and painting banners with a water-coat, a loose mixture of chalk-powder and *vajram*, a reddish coloured glue produced from animal bones, fiercely heated and mixed with water to form a slurry. To make the banner smooth, stiffer, and less porous, the surface was primed a second time with an oil coat, white enamel paint diluted with linseed oil. Only then were images projected on them using a

slide projector and photo negatives and traced onto these prepared surfaces. Following closely the instructions of the lead artist, apprentices then applied a base coat of solid colours to different sections of the canvas. At this stage, senior artists began their part of the work. The collaborative process ended as artists were each assigned to complete a particular banner or cutout. With the first coat, the senior artist roughly demarcated areas of light and shade. With the application of the final coat, he completed the work by delineating finer nuances of light, shade and colour.

The imagery on banner and cutout advertisements was rooted in two distinct traditions of art practice: the culture of still photography and the culture of drawing and painting. With each film-advertising commission, the banner company received an album of promotional stills. Then from these, the lead artist usually the company owner chose a still and drafted one or more composition layouts for the financier's approval. To create an effective layout, the lead artist often mixed and re-matched the images within his catalogue of film stills. And artists maintained their own visual criteria for selection, looking for high contrasts of light and shadow, discarding stills with 'flat lighting' and those that lacked 'depth' for depth and contrast were essential qualities associated with professionalism in banner painting.

Banner painting was a collaborative enterprise. So too, the aesthetics of this art form resulted from a complex process of negotiation and compromise between artists and their clients. At times banner artists, in the conversations I held with them, assumed the mantle of the creative artist graced with a *varaprasadam* (god-given talent). At other times, they claimed to be nothing more than skilled craftsmen who followed the dictates of clients and viewers. Several artists were forthcoming, in my interviews with them, to distinguish between banner companies that were mainly (what the artists called) 'commercial', and those who, oppositely, 'valued their craft'.

The hand-painted banner medium demanded the mastery of four skills: portraiture, colour manipulation, an individualized brushstroke and compositional design. Both the artists and their clients prized achieving a good likeness of the individual star or politician as proof of the painter's talent. For viewers too, the instant recognition of the individual depicted in the painting produced a pleasurable experience of awe at the painter's skill. While the illusion of naturalism was important to the aesthetics of their craft, this did not deter artists from idealizing the individuals they depicted. The owner of Swami Arts Banner Company recalled that, 'when painting portraits of MGR as he continued to act in films during the later years of his life, I removed all the wrinkles on his face, gave him rosy cheeks and made him look like a handsome young man.'

Excellence in colour combination was a second criteria banner artists used to determine quality. Colour was important in creating the illusion of three dimensions or depth, a highly sought after aspect of banner painting. Artists' palettes typically included a wide range of colours. 'A human eye

captured in a photograph is usually a shade of sepia,' the owner of Swami Arts explained, 'but when we paint that eye on a banner we use many colours greens, blues, violets so that there is a full colour effect when it is viewed from a distance.' The ability to control this 'colour effect' distinguished a master artist from his peers.

Artists identified other artists' works, whether in the studio or on the street, by distinguishing characteristics of their brushstrokes. And while I at first found it difficult to differentiate these characteristics, I soon began to detect subtle variations among work. Several months into my fieldwork, after meeting artists and cataloguing their work on the street, I began to note differences between the painting styles of senior artists and those of the younger generation, who seemed to favour wider brushes and thicker strokes. This latter group produced visually vibrant effects by applying broad, parallel strokes of paint without blending the colours a method they referred to as 'rough style'.

Composition, the selection and arrangement of figures and text in the banner, distinguished the best artists from their mediocre counterparts. It was difficult, if not impossible to pinpoint the origin of an innovation in banner art because the moment a unique idea appeared on a banner it was immediately copied by other artists and made the norm. However, the artists who, in my opinion, produced some of the best work clearly recognized the arresting quality of an unusual visual effect or a unique composition. These artists claimed that they consistently tried to include 'something different' in their banners.

*Figure 6.1* Banner artist, Selvam, painting a cutout in the Mohan Arts Banner Company, Chennai, 1990. (Photograph by the author).

## The advent of vinyl banners

As one travels through the streets of Chennai today — in 2005 — it takes some effort to find hand-painted banners or cutouts. The new millennium ushered in a trend for solvent-printed vinyl banners that steadily eliminated the hand-made variety from the city's prime advertising spots. Occasionally, in the compounds of smaller cinema theatres, one might chance upon a small, 2 by 3 metres (6 by 10 foot), hand-painted banner. Usually roughly painted and unsigned, these are a paltry remnant of the once vibrant banners and cutouts that enlivened the urban landscape during the previous five decades. Cutouts — the two-dimensional human figures that once looked down upon Chennai's main thoroughfare, Anna Salai — are now absent from the urban landscape. In their place are billboards covered by more subdued film advertisements, digitally generated and produced on vinyl.

The promoters of local cinema ventured cautiously into the new mode of advertising. Yet, within three or four years, the displacement became nearly complete. In the initial years of their establishment in Chennai, the production cost of large-scale vinyl printing did not, by itself, make the medium competitive in a market dominated by companies producing hand-painted banners and cutouts. In fact, heads of banner companies were, at first, confident that the trend toward vinyl would be reversed once companies began to compare the costs and the product. I argue, however, that other factors were at work at this time that shifted the equation in favour of vinyl billboards.

Vinyl advertisements in Chennai first appeared in the mid-1990s but they were few and infrequent. Most advertisements for commercial goods and services were in the standard medium of enamel paints on metal sheets. The scale and quality of the photographic reproduction on the vinyl banners, however, made them strikingly different from the metal billboards. At night, the vinyl was brightly lit with series of spotlights along the top edge, like a painting in a gallery. It was vinyl's 'illuminating property', stressed Mr. Muzzammil, the owner of Olive Imaging — at the time a leading vinyl banner printer in Chennai — that accounted for its popularity in the market. 'When the light falls on this media it does not absorb, it bounces back. At night it can be lit up. Whereas, if you go for the hand-painting, it is good in the afternoon time but at night it cannot be seen. The vinyl has a glossy look at night.' Despite the high price of electricity, advertisers of commercial goods and cinema alike have installed spotlights to illuminate the vinyl banners at night. On the dark city streets, dimly lit by the orange glow from energy-conserving street lamps, the colourful vinyl banners glitter like brightly coloured gems.

Vinyl is an extremely thick and durable plastic with the density and weight of primed canvas.[3] Pieces of the material, which has a smooth, low glossy surface, can be joined by heat to create banners of any required size. The print quality on this material is of a very high resolution. And, with the

solvent printing technology currently in use, there are no practical enlargement constraints, given the upper limits in the size of banners that are set by city and state ordinances in Tamil Nadu. The luminosity of the colours is guaranteed not to fade even under harsh climatic conditions though allowances are made for India's subtropical climate. Olive Imaging was providing an 18-month colour guarantee, as compared to companies in the USA, where this media is often guaranteed to last three years.

The printing process was initiated when the press received a CD-ROM from the client containing the image to be printed. No design work was done at the press. Before the print work began, assistants at the press used a software application to divide the image into 'tiles'. The dimensions of each 'tile' in the grid depended on the size of the final image. 'Since most banners are 100 by 20 feet, 50 by 20 feet, or 10 by 20 feet, and since this machine prints a width of five feet,' explained Mr. Muzzammil, 'I will specify that the dimension of each tile will be 60 inches. So if the image must be a 100 feet long then it will create 20 tiles. The machine will print each of the tiles separately.'

The next step was merely to press a button to start the printing. The solvent printing machine, about seven foot wide and four and a half foot high, was similar in appearance and speed to a personal use printer used to make paper copies. Though noisy, the machine was virtually self-operating. Only one individual was stationed in the room to ensure that the material was feeding in and out correctly and that the print quality was sharp. When the vinyl was loaded into the machine, it passed over a heating plate, received the print (one colour at a time) and emerged at the opposite end, instantly dry. An exhaust vent, placed directly over the machine, sucked up the hot air produced while the press was in operation. Other than cleaning the heating plate and the vents in the cooling fan at the end of each day, the machine required little maintenance. It could be run continuously for a six-month period, after which it was serviced and put back into operation.

Solvent printing machines however, cost several thousands of US dollars to purchase and maintain (prices of new machines vary from $15,000 to $150,000). It is little wonder that Mr. Muzzammil appeared intent on expending all his energies on cultivating clients from highly stable and prosperous businesses, the 'MNCs' multi-national corporations in the technology, telecom and food industries, such as JVC, Hutch, Tata-Indicom, Nestle and Pepsi. Such clients, Mr. Muzzamil stressed, are 'not concerned about the money but are concerned about quality and about achieving their objective'.

## Medium as a sign-system

I contend that these two advertising media, hand-painted and vinyl printed varieties of banners, signal shifting trends in the identity and status of entertainment cinema in Tamil Nadu. In the former medium cinema enhanced its

power in society by proclaiming its difference from other commercial products and by overtly celebrating its connections to the state's dominant political groups. The latest medium of solvent printed banners instead, establishes cinema as one of the country's foremost industries producing technologically sophisticated goods that are marketed to a vast international audience.

With the disappearance of advertisements in the hand-painted banner and cutout medium, the public culture of the streets of Chennai is more akin to other Indian cities of Bombay, Bangalore, Calcutta and New Delhi. The loss is not merely that of a unique, contemporary art practice. Since the 1940s, influential nationalistic political ideologies in Tamil Nadu were communicated and popularized to a mass of constituents through the powerful medium of entertainment cinema. And the enormous, vibrantly coloured banners and cutouts were an indispensable ingredient in this evolving network connecting the Tamil-language cinema industry of South India and the political parties of Tamil nationalism. Brokered by these two, interconnected groups of clients, banners and cutouts shaped and powerfully promoted the image of celebrity in contemporary Tamil culture.

Like other regional cinemas, the story of Tamil films began in the silent film industry in Bombay. It was then taken up in Madras after soundtrack technology was introduced to filmmaking in the 1930s. In the 1940s, leaders of the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Dravidian Progressive Federation), a political movement in Tamil Nadu, harnessed the potential of cinema to promote their regionalist, ethnic ideology and widen their constituency base. The Dravidian movement marked a singular turning point in the political history of Tamil Nadu and was decisive in the formation of a contemporary regional cultural identity.

The rich development and cinematic expression of Dravidian ideology produced an exceptional diffusion between the arenas of filmic illusion and political reality for the spectators of Tamil cinema. And a series of individuals in Tamil Nadu, who were involved in both cinema and politics, became installed as charismatic leaders of the state. All five politicians who have headed the Tamil Nadu government between 1967 and the present were or are intimately connected with the Tamil film industry.[4] In return for the support they received from the film industry, leaders of the Dravidian movement consistently established generous awards and grants to encourage the growth of cinema in Tamil Nadu. Since the 1970s, the Tamil film industry, centred in Chennai, rapidly increased the scale of its film production, financial investment, studio facilities and percentage of persons employed by the industry. (Hardgrave 1971: 307)

This functional and logical connection between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu was visualized and reinforced by the use of identical advertising media, most prominently that of the hand-painted banners and cutouts. Politicians in Tamil Nadu had been prompted to prioritize oral and visual modes of communication to heighten their appeal to communities within

their constituencies with low literacy rates or below average levels of educational attainment. The plywood cutout was, according to those party publicity directors whom I interviewed, the most spectacular and affordable medium of visual communication available to political groups. Unlike cinema advertisements, political or religious advertisements could be displayed on city property free of charge. And while film banners and cutouts were confined to specific locations and restricted to heights no greater than 13 metres (40 foot) no such restrictions existed on political advertisements.

Three basic properties of the sign — indexical, iconic and symbolic — combined in the political cutout. For political events party propagandists regularly financed numerous cutouts of their leaders, 15 to 21 metres in height (50 to 70 foot), concentrated along the main processional routes and at the meeting venues. Towering over buildings and visible from a distance these giant cutouts indexed the particular event in progress while claiming the public spaces of the city for the party leadership and their constituents.

Visually prominent cutouts of political figures imparted a super-star aura to their images. Characteristic of iconic images, cutout portraits of each leader possessed distinguishing features that enabled the public to instantly identify the individual whatever the quality of the rendering. For instance, MGR was always depicted with a fur cap and sunglasses, Karunanidhi with sunglasses and curly hair neatly parted down the middle, while Annadurai's scholarly accessories included reading glasses, a book or a briefcase. These iconic images thickly populated the public sphere so that the throngs attending political events could satisfy their desire to gaze upon the familiar visage of their leader even if they only caught a glimpse him or her from a distance.

Symbolic messages in cutouts were transmitted through juxtaposition or colour. On the city streets, cutouts of politicians were invariably viewed within a milieu of film advertisements in an identical medium, thus establishing these political personages in a continuum with cinematic celebrities. And within the genre of political cutouts, juxtaposition established lineage as when cutouts of Jayalalitha were juxtaposed with those of deceased leaders MGR or Annadurai and images of Karunanidhi were juxtaposed with those of Annadurai or Periyar. Meaning was conveyed through colour as well. Politicians, for the most part, were depicted in white garments. This distinguished them from film stars. Exceptions to this coding by colour were, therefore, symbolic as in the cutouts of MGR for a 1991 political rally that depicted him in a saffron coloured *jubba* (upper garment) and a white *veshti* (lower garment), bordered with the party colours of red and black, indicating the venerated late leader's power in both the spiritual and political realms.

The political cutout, always a controversial medium, became irrevocably associated with the depth of corruption and conspicuous consumption in Jayalalitha Jayaram's administration during her first term in office (1992–96) as chief minister of Tamil Nadu. The information uncovered between

1996 and 2000 during the administration of Jayalalitha's political opponent, Karunanidhi, bolstered prior complaints in the English language media, which had characterized the cutout as a public hazard and a visual blight. This led to legislation in 2000, by the Tamil Nadu government, banning cutouts, followed by more legislation in 2003 that banned all wall paintings in Chennai. Though banners had not been explicitly banned, by their close association with the 'illegal' cutout, banners now signalled the wasteful expenditures of political groups during elections.

Censorship is not a new phenomenon for banner artists. The first recorded public protests of 'indecent film posters and hoardings' date to 1960. (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 25) From then on, the Tamil Nadu government periodically censored the content and imagery of cinema advertisements. For the most part artists adapted to the censorship by refusing commissions for sexually provocative images or by taking the precaution of 'clothing' half-naked figures with dollars (plastic disks that glittered in the sun). There remained a minority of banner companies however, that continually tested the limits of the censorship regulations even as they carefully omitted the company's insignia from such advertisements for fear of being apprehended by the police. Thus censorship laws were gradually breached until protests from various citizens' organizations about a particular advertisement's offensive qualities excessive violence, explicit sexual content, insulting textual material prompted renewed enforcement of the legislation. In 1991 auto-rickshaw drivers demanded censorship of the title of the film *Aye Auto* (Hey Auto), which they perceived as demeaning. The police accordingly plastered sheets of white paper over the word 'Aye' on banners and cutouts throughout the city. This method of pasted papers was likewise employed to censor revealing garments or other offensive imagery on banners. Yet, while the Tamil Nadu and Chennai city governments may have moved to regulate the hand-painted banner content, they could until the appearance of vinyl on the scene only do so within certain bounds.

The new medium of vinyl has considerably muted criticism of cinema advertisements. This feature must surely be attractive to advertisers of the cinema since they have greater license to use titillating images for publicity without the danger of provoking protest. In January 2004, I noticed a vinyl banner that struck me as particularly erotic, but even after being on display for a few weeks, it did not appear to arouse public criticism or censorship. The image, part of a 100-foot long banner for the film *Kovil* (Temple), was 20 foot in height and depicted a close-up shot of the torsos of a man and woman in a tight embrace. The woman, facing the viewer, was scantily clad in a North Indian costume of *ghagra-choli* sans *dupatta* so that her body from below her breasts to her navel was bare. Eyes closed and neck arched, she was stretched against the body of the man who nestled his face in the curve of her shoulder. A similar image on a hand-painted banner would certainly have provoked protests and censorship. What is the reason for this change in attitude?

One could argue that Tamil society has grown more permissive over the past five years. I argue, instead, that the answer lies in the medium. The banner and cutout medium differentiated cinema advertisements from the bland graphics of commercial billboard advertisements for other products while aligning cinema with the populism of the regional political parties the only other client of the banner companies. With its brilliant colours, the variations in the quality of its mimesis, its weathering by storms or sunlight and its untidy supporting framework of casuarina poles knotted with ropes, the hand-painted banner possessed the stamp of a 'handicraft' or indigenously produced good. And the persistent criticism of hand-painted banners in news media patronized by middle-class consumers was directed as much at the vibrant popular aesthetics the 'gaudy' colours and overall 'garish' effect that they so boldly flaunted as at the eroticism or violence of the subject matter of particular banners.

Cinema advertisements in the vinyl medium, identical with other commercial advertisements, appear less intrusive, and perhaps more in tune with the city's modernizing urban landscape. Although political groups also commission advertisements in the vinyl medium, the banner sizes are a modest 3 by 2 metres (10 by 6 foot). Vinyl banners for both films and commercial goods, however, stretch to lengths of 33 metres (100 foot) with heights of 3 to 6 metres (10 to 20 foot) thus aligning cinema with financial corporations, technology industries and communication networks that are the symbols of twenty-first century power and prestige.

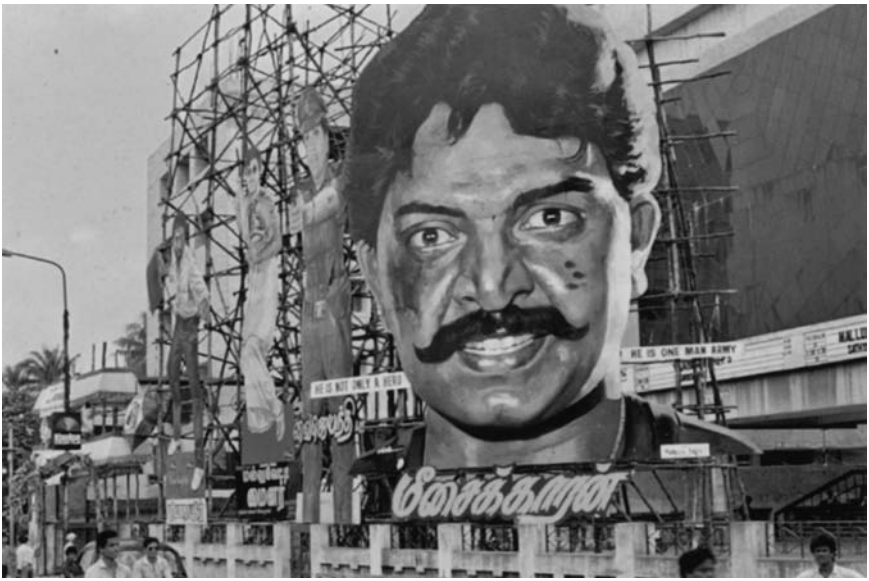

*Figure 6.2* Cutout advertisement for the film *Meeshaikkaran* on Poonamallee High Road, Chennai, 1990. (Photograph by the author).


*Figure 6.3* Vinyl banner advertisement for the film *Jeep* on Anna Salai, Chennai, 2004. (Photograph by the author).

In some respects however, the vinyl banners are no different from the hand-painted variety. Not only are they similar in scale, they share common imagery and compositional designs: dramatically enlarged close-ups of melodramatic facial expressions juxtaposed with full-size figures in various poses, dancing or embracing. Violence and sex remain the banner's most powerful elements. What is the difference then in the sign systems of these two media?

It is instructive to compare advertisements in the two media: a hand-painted plywood cutout for *Meeshaikkaran* (Man with a Moustache, 1991) and a solvent printed vinyl banner for *Jeep* (2005). In both advertisements, the dominant image is a close-up shot of the main protagonist that excites, threatens and transfixes the viewer.

The *Meeshaikkaran* advertisement, an enormous, 13 metres (40 foot) square, disembodied head, made its surreal appearance on the street the day the film was released. Intensity of facial expression and saturated colour alone, without the aid of accessories or background details, powerfully communicated the narrative. The cutout depicted a man engaged in deadly combat. A sheen of sweat glistened on his face, one cheek was flecked with blood and the other side of his face was blood-smeared as well. His teeth were bared, his nostrils flared and the expression in his eyes wild, fierce and desperate was riveting. His head of thick, tousled black hair was echoed in a luxuriant black moustache with pointed tips indicating his virility. The face was strongly lit from one side to produce a vivid illusion of

three dimensions. The shadows, however, were not painted black or brown but in a fantastic spectrum of colour ranging from Prussian to peacock blues, forest green, vermilion, fuchsia and purple.

Colour played a prominent role in the *Jeep* banner as well. The entire 33 metres long banner was a collage of still photographs in black and white save for the central image of the hero's head and upper torso that, along with the film's title, were in colour. Like the *Meeshaikkaran* head, the figure was dramatically lit so that it cast a deep shadow along one side causing it to project out of the banner. The image pulsated an aggressive masculinity in the bulging biceps, huge fists grasping a gun pointed at the viewer, glaring eyes beneath tensely knotted eyebrows and a snarling mouth framed by a thick moustache and beard. One could all but hear the figure shouting 'Hey you!' through the din of traffic. Two perfectly aligned circles of black and red, the gun's barrel and the *pottu* (spot of powder indicating the completion of an act of worship) on the protagonist's forehead, appeared to advance and recede providing a visual dynamism to the image. The cavernous black hole of the dramatically foreshortened gun jutted out of the picture even as it sucked the viewer's gaze into the image. And the *pottu*, though set in a visually receding section of the image, thrust outward because of its blood red hue. In both images, the titles were in Tamil but each included a phrase about the narrative in English. The *Meeshaikkaran* cutout warned, 'He is not only a hero. He is one man (sic) army' while the *Jeep* banner challenged, 'Are you ready?'

The two advertisements were almost identical in terms of their *subject matter* yet in terms of their *communicative content* they were quite different. This, as Marshall McLuhan famously theorized, is because 'the medium (and not the subject matter) is the message.' The hand-painted banner medium communicated concepts of artistic prowess and individual fallibility. And the solvent printed vinyl banner testified to the power of machines, digital technology and synthetic materials. The medium of oil painting is a fine art and the cutout, by association, falls into this category. Though some might question the artistic merits of film and political banners and cutouts, the medium is an art form and it was certainly understood as such by its artist practitioners. The virtuosity of the artist, years of training and in some cases his caste heritage made it possible for him to work in this medium.

Now it appears that banner artists have been undone by the very skill that they prized so highly and trained for so assiduously. Their impressive ability to quickly create mimetic effects on a large surface can now be done by the solvent printing machine, more effectively, consistently and rapidly than even the most skilled artist practitioner. Anyone who can afford to purchase the equipment can produce images with the press of a button. The true content of a medium, McLuhan asserts, resides in this 'change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs'. (McLuhan 1994: 8) And this was at the heart of the dejection amongst father and son at the J. P. Krishna Arts Banner Company that I visited in January 2004. Their special

abilities and status as artists no longer had validity. They had been rendered socially useless.

The change has been sudden. As recently as the early 1990s banners and cutouts were a well-established art form with trained practitioners competing for orders and establishing new standards of excellence. Despite the evident competition with television spots and screen-printed paper posters, artists were confident that the booming cinema industry would ensure them a permanent livelihood, as the half-tone photo printing technology used for producing posters on paper could not match banners in colour or size. Solvent printers and the affordability of digital technology in the twenty-first century, however, have finally displaced hand-painted banners. Vinyl is now ubiquitous in Tamil Nadu. Even in villages, it is the medium of choice for all forms of advertisements.

The ongoing mutations in banner art are, to some extent, a result of the hand-painted banner's association with the inherent volatility of the entertainment cinema industry. To continue to wield a far-reaching social influence and to be economically viable, entertainment cinema and its satellite industries must remain constantly alert to the latest innovations of media, technique and imagery. The rapid evolution of sophisticated visual effects, progress in musical style, and the moral evolution in story lines share in, and contribute to, this aura of modernity. And the extended fields of cinema, film magazines and film music industries, participate in a 'mediascape' a flow of aural and visual resources between distant and disparate locations on the globe. (Appadurai 1996: 31)

From its inception in the late nineteenth century, cinema has been emblematic of technological and social change. Along with other brash new media of mechanical reproduction, including photography and chromolithography, cinema displaced and destroyed numerous artistic traditions from theatre to painting. Ironically, the caste ancestors of artists in the banner community were among those buffeted by sweeping changes in demand, state support and state regulation of their artistry. The media, of course, were very different: stone carving, jewellery crafting and carpentry which in itself was testimony to the changes these artists endured, and for some of them, their ability to adapt. The change then was more gradual but no less radical as the current shift in media from the hand-painted banner to those that are printed on vinyl.

Unwilling to give up their vocation, aware that they possess unique skills and techniques that they have worked hard to develop, banner artists are waiting for the tide of technology to return to painting. At present, this appears highly unlikely but not impossible. Vinyl banners still cannot match the spectacular effects and displays of extraordinary artistic prowess evident in the hand-painted banners. Hand-painted banners were frequently deemed so distracting that they were pinpointed as the cause for numerous traffic accidents. Artists working in this medium could provoke wonderment in the viewing public not only by their virtuosity, but also by varying the sizes of

the advertisements and by including attachments of dollars, papier-mâché, and cutouts to the banner. In the vinyl medium, the print quality and the sizes of banners are standardized and no attachments are possible. This lack of variety makes it more difficult to produce a reaction of surprised delight from viewers. As my interview with him drew to a close J. P. Krishna said, 'we have faith that the interest in the drawn image will never completely die. We await the public's interest in our profession to return.'

## Notes

1 With artists and their clients I conducted 31 interviews, each an average of one hour in length. With film viewers, interviewed at nine cinema theatres in Chennai, I con ducted 100 interviews, each approximately 10 minutes in length. This data was updated with an additional series of follow up interviews conducted in 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2004 with banner artists and the owner of a solvent printing company.

2 The information on Vasan and Gemini Studios is based on conversations I held with Randor Guy (a historian of Tamil films), Ashokamitran (a novelist and former employee of Vasan) and Krishnajee (a former publicity manager of Gemini Studios). The former two persons also kindly gave me copies of their publications on Vasan. R. Guy (1985) 'S.S.Vasan. Cecile B. DeMille of India', in T. M. Ramachandran (ed.) *70 Years of Indian Cinema (1913 1983)*, Bombay: Cinema India International, pp. 158 168. Ashokamitran (1985) 'The Great Dream Bazaar', *Illustrated Weekly Magazine*, Bombay. The article was published in four parts and appeared in the following issues: July 21, pp. 52 55; July 28, pp. 42 45; September 8, pp. 60 61; October 13, pp. 44 45.

3 Foreboding aspects of modernization are evident in the problems posed by the disposal of this medium. Burning vinyl creates a public health hazard as it pro duces a colourless toxic gas, vinyl chloride ($CH_2CHCl$). Likewise, the inks used in solvent printing pose a health hazard unless the room in which the printing takes place is properly ventilated.

4 The chief ministers of Tamil Nadu from 1967 to the present are as follows: Annadurai, film screen play writer (1967 69); Karunanidhi, film screen play writer (1970 76; 1989 90; 1996 2000); M.G. Ramachandran, film actor (1977 87); Janaki Ramachandran, film actress (1988 89); Jayalalitha Jayaram, film actress (1991 1996; 2001 present).

## References

Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Hardgrave, R. (1971) 'The Celluloid God: MGR and the Tamil Film', *South Asian Review* 5(4) July.

Inglis, S. (1999) 'Master, Machine and Meaning. Printed Images in Twentieth Cen tury India', in R. Phillips and C. Steiner (eds) *Unpacking Culture. Art and Com modity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 122 139.

McLuhan, M. (1994) *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press. First published, 1964.

Rajadhyaksha, A. and Willemen, P. (1994) *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*. London and New Delhi: British Film Institute and Oxford University Press.

# 7 Encountering a new art

## Writers' response to cinema in Tamil Nadu

*S. Theodore Baskaran*

When cinema appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century as a new entertainment form in south India, print media was already flourishing. The nationalist movement had triggered an upsurge in journalism, both in English and Tamil. Dailies, magazines and fictional literature had built up a regular readership. Articles, serials and short stories were a popular component of magazines and there was an active publishing industry producing books including novels. Along with the print media, electricity and telephones were coming into use. The beginning of movies thus coincided with a period of momentous changes, politically and otherwise.

The cinema show, with its universal appeal, took a rigidly stratified and non-egalitarian society by surprise. New industries such as textiles were being established and a working class was emerging. In this essay, I look at the response of the Tamil writers to this new medium of cinema. This study has two dimensions. Some of the films from the early period, such as those from the silent era and the early decades of south Indian cinema, are not available for us to examine, so I have tried to gain insights through contemporary writings that have survived. Secondly, these magazine and newspaper articles provide insights into the attitude of the writers to this new medium and how their approach affected the development of Tamil cinema.

The questions I would like to raise are how did the writers receive cinema? What was the reaction of the government to this entertainment form? In other words, what was the nature of the discourse that followed? If the nature of the discourse changed over the years, what were the factors that brought about this change? I would argue that from the days of its prehistory, cinema in south India has been neglected and despised by the writers and the educated class. This apathy has affected the nature and growth of Tamil cinema. I argue that the filmmakers and artistes are not the only people who are responsible for the quality and content of Tamil cinema.

### The moving picture

At the turn of the twentieth century, traditional art forms such as Carnatic music, classical dance and *kathakalatchepam* (musical narration) were thriving.

It was in this cultural ambience that silent cinema appeared. Unlike other arts indigenous to India, cinema came as an entertainment form that was totally a child of technology. In fact, its initial attraction was one of curiosity; people flocked to see the pictures that moved. It came as a new mechanical medium of visual narration. Cinema, which bypasses the need for literacy on the part of the audience, arrived among a predominantly illiterate people. It opened up a new world of vicarious experience to large masses of people whose span of experience was severely limited by poverty and by restrictions on physical travel. Before long films began to influence public opinion on matters relating to nationalism, social reforms and war in a manner no other medium had done before.

Public, commercial exhibitions of films had begun even in 1900 and during the silent era that lasted until 1931, many cinema houses were built in towns. From 1916, when the first feature film of south India *Keechakavatham* (The Slaying of Keechakan), was made in Chennai, nearly 124 silent feature films were made in south India, in addition to the many documentaries. Along with the Mumbai and Kolkata-made films, hundred of movies imported from America and Britain were screened in the cinema houses in the Madras Presidency. Even before the end of the silent era, film viewing had been established as an entertainment. Yet this momentous arrival was not taken note of by writers.

## The initial response

Cinema made its appearance when each stratum of this strictly hierarchical society had its own entertainment forms, with very little interaction between each other in this plane. As a recreational form, cinema came cutting vertically across the stratification. Cinema houses emerged as one of the earliest democratic spaces, where all comers could be together without the distinction of caste, class, race or religion for a few hours. Anyone who could afford a ticket could go and watch a film. The reaction of the upper class to this egalitarian character of a cinema show was negative. If anyone, whatever his or her station in life, could go and watch a film, then obviously it could not be a respectable pastime. Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar, a judge and a playwright, who appeared as a witness before the Indian Cinematograph Committee in 1927 stated, 'The majority of the people who attend cinemas in the presidency are by far the illiterate class.' (ICC 1930).

By the end of the nineteenth century, railways and postal services had been established in the Madras Presidency. In Chennai and Coimbatore, textile mills were set up and a working class was emerging. To the growing urban labourers cinema came as a favoured pastime.

The popularity of cinema among the workers was another reason for the elitist apathy towards cinema. It was seen as an entertainment of the working class that did not deserve any serious notice.

People watched the tentative beginning of a new art form even as it struggled through its initial years and the reaction was one of indifference. In the cultural history of other societies, we could also observe that during the initial years of its growth, cinema faced opposition from many quarters. In America and Britain such an attitude has been well documented. The Catholic Legion of Decency in America led the fight against cinema from the front. In Britain writers such as Bernard Shaw ridiculed cinema. It was seen as a threat to the traditional values and social mores.

In the Madras Presidency also, not many writers considered cinema worthy of any notice and did not write about its arrival. A permanent cinema house had been built in Mount Road in 1900, and it was soon followed by a few more in the same area. By the 1920s, cinema houses had also appeared in towns like Coimbatore and Tiruchi. But when you look at the Tamil magazines of the silent era 1916 to 1931 there is hardly any reference to cinema. There are also rarely any notices of film showings. The poet, Subramanya Bharathi, who wrote extensively on current events in dailies, did not make any mention of the phenomenon of cinema, though he refers to a play he saw. Had he lived longer (he died in 1921), until the talkie era, he would certainly have taken note of cinema. He was keenly interested in both Carnatic and Hindustani classical music, which formed an important entertainment component of early Tamil films. His contemporary, writer and publisher A. Madhaviah, who wrote until 1925 does not refer to this new fangled entertainment, though in one of his novels, a scene is set in a drama house (Madhaviah 1898: 266 68). The world of columnists and writers did not notice the arrival of a cultural colossus among them. Tamil magazines such as the weekly *Anandavikataan* (published since 1926) carried articles about novels and about the plays staged in Madras. But they rarely referred to cinema. English dailies like *The Hindu* and *The Madras Mail* took notice of the English films and carried news and reviews but ignored films made in Madras.

Once cinema was established as an entertainment, even in the silent era, film magazines appeared as an adjunct to film culture. S. K. Vasagam started the first film journal of south India, *Movie Mirror*, and the English monthly, in 1928. After running this for three years, Vasagam launched *Amusement Weekly,* part Tamil and part English, which lasted long into the talkie era. *Cinema Ulagam*, a Tamil monthly devoted to cinema, came in 1935, followed by several other such magazines. These journals, devoted exclusively to the film industry, carried mostly news about the artistes and production details (Baskaran 1981: 82).

## Talking pictures

The arrival of sound in the cinema of south India, with the screening of the film *Kalidas* in 1931 at Kinema Central (the present day Murugan talkies) in Madras, triggered a migration of artistes from the world of company

drama to cinema. As long as cinema was silent, it remained an autonomous art. There was very little interaction with stage. Similarly, there was not much interface with musicians or writers as these two categories of artistes had little to do with silent films. The filmmakers of that era needed stunt men who could jump from heights and ride horses and women who could dance; it did not have much interaction with other entertainment forms. But the talkies needed artistes who could sing and there was need for musicians. The early Tamil films were all remakes of successful company dramas, and so the filmmakers sought out the artistes from the drama companies. An exodus from the world of commercial drama began; musicians, songwriters, actors and set designers moved en masse into the glittering world of cinema (Armes 1987: 32).

Before the arrival of cinema in south India, the itinerant, commercial drama companies, known to historians as company dramas, were the staple entertainment. In the 1920s, around two hundred and forty companies were operating in Madras Presidency. The company drama artistes as a class had been stigmatised in Indian society and when they moved into cinema, this stigma was extended to the world of cinema (Seizer 2005: 31 32). So for the writers and the intelligentsia, cinema was of little consequence. When we examine the 'Who's Who' of Madras of the 1940s, we do not find a single name from the film industry. Though this was the general trend, there were some writers who took notice of cinema. Kalki (given name R. Krishnamurthy) was one of them. In the early thirties, he wrote a column in the weekly *Anandavikatan*, under the penname 'Karnatakam' on performing arts in which he also wrote film reviews.

In the silent era, the Chennai-based film industry had to compete with American and British films as well as films made in Mumbai. It was a struggle for survival. But the arrival of sound created a safe market on the lines of language; Tamil and Telugu films came to be made. The film audience increased and with regular patronage ensured, Tamil cinema took giant leaps. As new cinema houses and studios appeared, the pleasure of viewing films began attracting moviegoers from the upper strata of the society.

As cinema became a great leveller, writers realized that they could no longer ignore the presence of this medium and began writing about it. However much of their writings were against cinema, pointing it out as a pernicious influence on society. Characteristic of the response from the writers was what Baskaradas wrote. A nationalist and himself a songwriter for films, writing in the Tamil monthly *Cinema Ulagam* he recorded that every Tamilian should be ashamed of the contents of Tamil movies. He went on to add that there should be a campaign against the evil effects of films (Baskaran 2004: 37). Writer Kalki echoed the attitude of writers when he wrote that one couldn't ignore the presence of cinema, whether one likes or dislikes it. If there was any reference to cinema in their writings, it was one of derision. Even as more and more people got into the habit of watching films, there was no sign of writers taking cinema seriously and no

sign of critical writing. It was at this point that the debate whether cinema is an art form at all started. It was carried on in a number of magazines for some years.

Instead of trying to understand this new art form and comprehend its characteristics, the writers spent their time and space deriding it. There was no attempt at understanding the nature of this new medium, and of its potential, nor to develop an appreciation for it. In 1935, writing in *Anandavikatan* about the film *Nandanar* in which K. B. Sundarambal had played the lead role, Kalki wrote that the buffaloes and the palmyra palms had acted well in the film. Many of the film reviews of the thirties were in this vein. In 1936, writing in the magazine *Silver Screen* writer Chitti (given name P. K. Sundararajan) said, 'Writing about Tamil talkies is like having to swallow a bitter medicine.' (Chitti 1936). Though the number of people who went to cinema houses increased in thousands, the writers avoided the subject. While a lot of space was devoted to music and dance in popular magazines, not much attention was paid to cinema. The writers did not develop a sensitivity to cinema, as many of them had to music and dance. Great films of the world, such as Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, were not noticed when they were screened in Chennai.

## The screen and the government

The main concern of the British government was the potential of cinema as a means of propaganda in the hands of the nationalists. Otherwise, they were quite indifferent to this new medium. They did not extend to cinema the importance they gave to print. The phenomenon of film shows first attracted the notice of the government only as a fire hazard. Large crowds gathered for these shows held in tents made of canvas. So a set of rules was laid down to prevent any fire accident. Other than this concern, there are very few records and documents dealing with cinema preserved in the archives. Only when a film had a problem with the Board of Film Censors or if it caused a law and order problem did it generate any governmental record (Baskaran 1981: 126).

Though the British government took note of the Indian film industry because of its propaganda potential, they did not extend any help to its growth. Their concern was to pre-empt the use of cinema as an instrument of political propaganda. In 1921 W. Evans, a cinema expert in the British government was sent to survey the cinema scene in India. With remarkable foresight, he saw the possibility of cinema being used for political purposes. He recommended closer censorship of films. On the other hand, the British government did facilitate the distribution of films made in Britain, what is referred to as 'Empire films' by film historians. The Indian Cinematograph Act of 1916, which laid down the basis for the control of cinema as a medium and as an industry, completely ignored the issues concerning the growth of cinema in India.

A few years later, after a series of questions in the British Parliament about cinema in India, a committee was set up under T. Rangachari, a Chennai-based lawyer, to take a close look at the state of cinema and give recommendations to the government. Witness after witness appearing before the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927 28 described cinema as an entertainment of the masses. The committee sent out questionnaires to 4325 individuals and out of this only 320 responded, a mere 7.4%. The chairman of the committee stated, 'The attention of the Government has been concentrated almost entirely on the question of censorship and the trade aspect of the cinema has been largely neglected. The public also have been apathetic and scarcely an interest has been displayed in the subject of production and exhibition of Indian films' (ICC 1930).

The committee recommended many steps to nurture the nascent film industry in India. But the British members of the committee recorded a dissenting note and none of the recommendations of the committee, such as creating a department of cinema in the Commerce Ministry, was implemented. The apathetic attitude of the writers has to be seen in the context of this indifference of the government. Along with the ruling class, the writers also seem to have concluded that cinema was not worthy of any attention.

Academic institutions and the educated class ignored cinema. They formed exclusive drama clubs such as Suguna Vilasa Sabha and Immanuel Drama Club and staged plays by Shakespeare and Moliere. They studiously distanced themselves from company dramas and cinema, which were closely linked forms of entertainment associated with the working classes.

In 1939, S. Satyamurti the Congress leader who supported the cause of cinema and the industry, displaying admirable foresight, proposed in the senate of the Madras University that cinema should be introduced as a subject in the university. But the senate rejected the move. In 1946 a proposal to start a Film Institute and Film Council, was made in the Central Legislative Assembly. But it was struck down through a cut motion. This apathetic attitude persists, in many ramified forms.

## Enter the classical musicians

The Music Academy was founded in 1929 in Chennai to promote south Indian classical music and dance. A few years after this, in 1931, talkies arrived on the scene. In the first decade of talking pictures, almost all the artistes were from the stage and they brought with them drama music and transplanted it on the screen. Soon film music emerged as an independent cultural phenomenon and increased the hold of cinema on people. The gramophone industry, coupled with the availability of inexpensive gramophone machines, popularised film songs. The elitist and subaltern cultural divide began to be reflected in the discourse about music. Classical musicians distanced themselves from cinema in the early years of the talkies. In independent India, for many years, film songs were taboo in the state-run All India Radio.

In the first four years of talkie production, filmmakers from south India made their films in the studios in Kolkata, Sholapur or Mumbai. It was only in 1934 that a sound studio appeared in Chennai. Soon it was evident that the film industry had taken root. New cinema houses were built and old drama halls were converted into cinema houses in many towns. By 1936, there were 124 permanent cinema houses and about 100 touring units in the presidency. Cinema had emerged as a sound commercial proposition. In 1935, at least one actor, K. B. Sundarambal had been paid a hundred thousand rupees for a role in a film and the significance of this piece of news was not lost on the other performing artistes.

Once filmmaking was established as an industry and became commercially successful, many classical musicians entered cinema. As the opportunity to earn money and fame in cinema increased, one by one the classical musicians gravitated towards the studios. Composer Papanasam Sivan entered as a songwriter and a composer. Musical luminaries of the day such as V. V. Sadagopan, G. N. Balasubramanyam, N. C. Vasanthakokilam, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Ayyer, M. S. Subulakshmi, Dandapani Desigar and nagaswaram player Rajarathinam Pillai, all began acting in films. Rukmini Arundale, a proponent of high culture performed a dance in a film *Raja Desingu* (1936). At one point, almost all of the leading musicians were engaged with cinema.

In the eyes of the writers, this development bestowed on cinema a respectability it had hitherto lacked, particularly with those writers who were interested in music. They began to take notice of Tamil films and write about them. However, their writings show that they missed the cinematic characteristic of a film and wrote only about its music component as if they had been to a concert. A critic, writing about the film *Tukaram* (1938) in the magazine *Manikodi,* wrote about the singing of the lead player Musiri Subramanya Ayyer rather than his acting. Films that had leading lights of the Carnatic music scene in the cast received good reviews, such as *Meera* (1943) that had M. S. Subulakshmi in the lead. This was one way of distinguishing the writers' involvement with cinema from that of the working classes.

The era of classical musicians in Tamil cinema lasted only for a short while, just for a decade. When the technique of playback singing of recording the song separately and synchronizing with the visuals thus separating acting and singing was introduced, the classical singers had to leave the world of cinema**.** Cinema preferred artistes who could act. A uniquely Indian category of film artistes, the playback singer, came into being.

## Patriotic cinema

The second development that earned Tamil cinema respectability in the eyes of the writers was its involvement with the nationalist cause. The practice of introducing nationalistic symbols such as the *charka* and the Gandhi cap had begun during the silent era itself. In the wake of the Non-cooperation

Movement of 1919, some Indian filmmakers began to lace their filmic narrative with political propaganda**.** Some films, such as *Baktha Vidur* (1921), which had a scene depicting Vidur spinning using a *charka*, a powerful symbol of nationalism, were banned in the Madras Presidency**.**

When artistes from the world of company drama, with its tradition of political activism, came into cinema, they brought with them a repertoire of plays and songs with political overtones. In the wake of the Civil Disobedience movement, when the struggle for independence gained a fresh momentum, there was an increased reflection of patriotic ideas in films. Songs were used as vehicles of propaganda in films to hoodwink the censors. In the general election of 1936, following the Government of India Act of 1935**,** the Congress party won and a ministry led by C. Rajagopalachari governed the Madras Presidency. During the Congress interregnum of these two years, 1937 to 1939, film censorship, which in British India was with the provincial government, was practically lifted. A series of patriotic films was released. *Harijana Singam* (Lion among Harijan, 1938), *Desamunnetram* (Uplift of the Nation, 1938), *Thyagaboomi* (Land of Sacrifice, 1939) and *Mathruboomi* (Motherland, 1939) belonged to this category. The Gandhian agenda for social uplift, such as removal of untouchability, temple entry, use of hand-spun and hand-woven cloth and temperance were handled in these films as issues.

Writers and the leaders praised such patriotic films and began to discuss cinema in public platforms. A number of nationalist leaders took part in the events in the film world, like premiere or special screening of films with a nationalistic appeal. Quite a few leading film artistes took direct part in politics. V. Nagaiya was a delegate to the Gauhati Congress. K. B. Sundarambal and M. V. Mani campaigned for Congress and M. M. Chidambaranathan picketed toddy shops. Seethalakshmi, lead actor of the film *Ramanujam* (1938), took part in a passive resistance campaign and was imprisoned for one and a half years. However, the bulk of the filmmakers stuck to politically innocuous subjects such as mythological episodes and stories from folklore. Their films continued to be the target of attack by the writers. Writing in 1946 the poet Bharathidasan, in a long poem lamented the obsession of filmmakers with mythological subjects. He wrote about Tamil cinema, 'My mind which longed for its arrival (in Tamilnadu)/ Due to the machinations of the capitalists / now wishes this curse be over'. Like Bharathidasan, there were other writers who believed that cinema, being a mass-based medium should be concerned with social and political issues.

Similarly, the nationalist leaders continued to discount cinema. The lone exception was S. Satyamurti to whom reference has been made earlier. Though a number of film artistes took part in the struggle for freedom, and though many filmmakers in south India made repeated reference to contemporary social and political issues in their films, cinema did not enter the discourse of nationalist leaders. Gandhi's statement in 1939 in which he included cinema among evils like gambling and horse-racing which he left

alone 'for fear of losing caste', and also Rajagopalachari's statement that cinema was a poison to the society, typified this attitude (Bandyopathyay 1993: 141). A number of writers were also influenced by this stand. Swaminatha Sarma, who ran the journal *Jothi,* quoted Hitler in support of his plea to improve Tamil cinema. He pointed out that Hitler had said that any art or literature that causes degradation of the society should be restrained by legal measures (Sarma 1946).

## The *Manikodi* group of writers

One of the earliest magazines to take a serious look at cinema was *Manikodi.* Some nationalist writers were concerned about the growth of pulp magazines and their content. While society had many serious issues to handle, these magazines made no attempt to engage with them. So, this group of writers started a magazine called *Manikodi* in 1932. One of the concerns of these writers was cinema. This created journalistic history by occasionally carrying a serious article on cinema, different from the run-of-the mill piece in contemporary magazines. In 1939 when the Madras Presidency Cinema Conference was held, this magazine covered it through a critical essay.

Some writers from this group later moved into the film industry to contribute directly; B. S. Ramaiya entered filmdom as a scriptwriter and then emerged as a director. He wrote a seminal book titled *Cinema?* in 1943 in which he explained to Tamil readers the characteristics of cinema. In addition to writing about the various devices in cinema such as lighting and editing, he wrote about the ideas of Russian filmmakers Eisenstein and Pudovkin (Ramaiya 1943). He was active as a scriptwriter for more than two decades. S. D.S.Yogi and Pudumaipithan wrote scripts for films. The films in which these writers later worked, however, were all based on stories from mythology and folklore, the kind of films against which many of them had fulminated earlier. Va. Ra. wrote, independently, about film artistes. The editor of the magazine, K. Srinivasan (aka Stalin Srinivasan) was appointed the first chief film censor of Madras state in independent India. However, it must be borne in mind that *Manikodi* had a comparatively small readership.

## In the grip of cinephilia

By the fifties the hold of cinema on the Tamil people had increased. The electrification of rural areas in post-independence India facilitated the popularity of cinema. Touring talkies, another unique feature of Indian cinema, took film exhibition into remote rural areas. Stars and fan clubs became part of the popular cultural scene.

A stage came when it was difficult to ignore the presence of cinema. Though a number of writers discussed cinema, they believed that it was

beneath their status to enter into a discourse on the subject and did not want to be known that they were writing on cinema. So they used pseudonyms. Even those writers who were known by their pen names used another nom-de-plume when they handled the subject of cinema. In the fifties and sixties in the Tamil magazines, most of the articles on cinema have been written under pen names. In 1947, Vallikannan (given name R. S. Krishnaswamy) wrote a monograph on the depiction of gods in Tamil films and he wrote it under the name 'Koranathan'. Similarly, in 1968 poet C. Mani (given name S. Palaniswamy) wrote an essay in the little magazine *Nadai* on film songs under the pen name 'Selvam'. While checking the articles on cinema in the magazines of the forties and fifties, mostly written under pseudonyms, I could trace the identity of only a few authors. However, the prejudice against cinema persisted among writers. When a filmmaker wanted to adapt Ku. Azhagirisamy's novel *Dr. Renuka*, the author refused permission as he thought that his work would be trivialized if made into a film (K. Sarangan, Personal communication).

Beginning in 1949, with the film *Velaikari* (Servant Maid), a number of ideologues from the Dravidian movement, who had been successful playwrights, entered cinema, first as dialogue and songwriters and later as film producers. The radical rhetoric they used, and the flowery Tamil they employed proved to be major attractions in the films (Pendakur 2003: 99). Dialogue writers who had remained anonymous hitherto came into prominence and acquired star status. The ascendancy of the two stars, M. G. Ramachadran and Sivaji Ganesan, increased the popularity of cinema and established an aristocracy of film artistes. Their admirers formed fan clubs in thousands and it emerged as a politically powerful network (Pandian 1992: 110). The beginnings of what Susan Sontag described as cinephilia an obsessive engagement with cinema could be observed. The society seems to be consumed by films. Leading writer Jayakanthan, later to win the Gnapith award for literature, wrote a novella *Cinemavukku pona sithalu* (The construction worker who watched a movie) which dealt with the life of a building worker; she is obsessed with a star after watching one of his films. Jayakanthan wrote in the preface, 'Ignorant and naive people, they have lost their self respect because of these film stars. The stars, directors and producers should take responsibility for the degeneration of mind, conduct and sensibility of these people.'

## The leavening influence of little magazines

Though there have been magazines that took a different path from the popular magazines, little magazines came on the literary scene in a steady flow only in the 1960s. *Saraswathi,* a magazine launched by a group of writers from the Communist Party of India in 1955; and the monthly *Ezhuthu,* launched by in 1960 by writer Si.Su. Chellappa, carried articles on cinema. *Pregnai,* which was active in the mid-seventies, provided space for writings

on cinema. *Kanaiyazhi*, published from Delhi, showed interest in this subject. In the seventies, *Thamarai,* a monthly edited by the communist leader P. Jeevanandam, had occasional pieces on Tamil cinema. Many writers in Tamil Nadu who were influenced by European cinema and by the parallel cinema movement in India beginning with Satyajit Ray, wrote in these magazines

However, writers who attacked cinema and those who reviewed the films carried on the discourse in literary terms, not in terms of cinema, not in terms of the characteristics of cinema. They did not take note of the formation of cinematic conventions. Cinema was not recognized as a visual medium and discussed in its own terms. This is because the writers were largely unfamiliar with the nature of cinema, of the nature of images. A film review of the period was largely a review of the story, dialogue and songs, all in literary terms, as if the film were a piece of fictional literature. The images, the lighting, or the mise en scene were rarely discussed. In fact, even now in much of the writing on cinema in popular magazines this characteristic persists. However, mention must be made of two writers who wrote about cinema in these magazines; one was Dharma Arup Sivaram and the other is Venkat Swaminathan. (Dharma Arup Sivaram wrote under different names, such as Pramil.) They discussed films in terms of images and displayed knowledge of the nature and possibilities of cinema (Baskaran 2004: 219 and 206).

## The change in perspective of writers

For nearly four decades, cinema in Tamil Nadu was subjected to this negative approach. Only in the seventies did the cinema discourse change its trajectory. A number of factors were at work. Some scholars from academia began looking at Tamil cinema seriously and this had an effect on the writers. The engagement of Dravidian leaders with Tamil cinema and the involvement of film stars in politics attracted the attention of the scholars. Robert Hardgrave was one of the earliest to devote attention to this subject (Hardgrave 1973). Charles Ryerson pointed to this area as an important one in some of his writings. With the emergence of the new discipline of Culture Studies, cinema as a subject of research grew in popularity (Ryerson 1983).

Secondly, the setting up of the National Film Archives and the film appreciation courses they conducted created an awakening at least among some writers. Professor Satish Bahadur of the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, and P. K. Nair, the Curator of the National Film Archives, were the key figures of this development in 1978. They jointly conducted a series of film appreciation courses in Chennai in which some influential writers, including Sundara Ramasamy, Na. Muthuswamy and Ashokamithran enrolled. A similar course was conducted in Madurai, organized by the Yathra Film Society, in which a few more writers of little magazines

participated. The leavening influence of these events was soon reflected in the little magazines such as *Pregnai,* which carried articles championing the cause of serious cinema. This opened the eyes of many writers to the splendour of cinema, in addition to giving a fillip to film society movements in these towns.

Literary magazines like *Thamarai, Ezhuthu* and *Saraswathi* began taking cinema seriously. A discourse on cinema slowly emerged. The International Film Festival of India that was held in Chennai in 1991 offered an opportunity for many writers to see acclaimed films from other countries such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *Sheltering Sky* (1990).

## The on going debate

In recent years, the engagement of scholars from academia with subaltern studies brought cinema into focus and films were used as sources of information to understand society. Symptomatic of this awareness, The Madras Institute of Development Studies conducted a workshop on Tamil cinema in 1997 in Chennai (MIDS 1997). Established writers such as A. Marx, A. R. Venkatachalapathy and Ambai (given name C. S. Lakshmi), who write prolifically in magazines, participated in this workshop that was aimed at an understanding of Tamil cinema. It pointed out that scholars could gain an understanding of history and society by examining films. Researchers working on various aspects of Tamil society, be it music, politics or literature, all dip into Tamil cinema to gain insights into the society they are studying.

Cinema as a subject has suffered neglect for many years, and adequate jargon relating to this medium in Tamil had not been developed. Universities, colleges and schools that have provided place for music and dance, completely ignore cinema. This severely restricts a meaningful discourse in Tamil of cinema. Even now, there is no Tamil term for cinema. Terms that are unique to the art of cinema have not been brought into parlance and this hinders a serious discussion on cinema, in terms of cinema. When there is no discourse, it is difficult for writers and readers to develop a sensitivity to this art form. Serious discussion on cinema is carried on mostly in little magazines or scholarly journals such *Kalachuvadu, Uyirmai, Theeranadhi*, all monthlies, *Puthiya Parvai*, a fortnightly and *India Today* (Tamil) a weekly, carry serious articles on Tamil cinema and also film reviews. There are writers specializing in the subject of Tamil cinema such as Amshan Kumar, P. Sivakumar, Sezhiyan and A. Ramasamy who write in these magazines. Occasionally a debate arises.

One example is an interesting debate carried on in recent times in journals such as *Nizhal*, a monthly devoted to film history and aesthetics. Some writers argue that popular Tamil films have a grammar of their own and that they should not be evaluated in terms of the common grammar of cinema or the principles of aesthetics of cinema. I believe that the grammar

and logic of cinema is universal and this stems from the fact that cinema is a visual medium. We understand the external world through a logic that is universal to all human beings. While there can be local cultural expressions, the basic logic of cinema is common to all societies and a writer dealing with cinema has to be familiar with this.

Still, the writings on Tamil cinema in magazines, the subject of this paper, have not made a perceptible impact on the Tamil screen. Elsewhere there are instances where writers have made meaningful contributions to many cinemas, such as French and, closer to home, Malayalam. They have interacted with cinema in terms of adaptation, criticism and review. Such an interaction is yet to emerge in Tamil cinema.

## References

Armes, Roy. (1987) *Third World Film Making and the West*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bandyopathyay, Samik (ed.) (1993) *Indian Cinema. Contemporary Perceptions from the Thirties*. Jamshedpur: Celluloid Chapter.

Baskaran, Theodore S. (1981) *The Message Bearers. The Nationalistic Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India 1880 1945*. Chennai: Cre A.

Baskaran, Theodore, (ed.) (2004) *Chithram Pesudhadi* (Look. A Pictures Speaks) (Tamil). Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu publications.

Brandon, James R. (1967) *Theatre in Southeast Asia*. New York: Harvard University Press.

Chitti. (1936) 'Rasanaiyum Nunukkamum', *Silver Screen,* 1 August.

Hardgrave, Robert L. (1973) 'Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK', *Asian Survey,* March.

ICC. (1930) Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee. 1927 28. Vol. III Calcutta: Government Press.

Madhaviah, A. (1898) *Padmavati Charithiram* Madras: Katha Classics.

MIDS. (1997) *Workshop on Tamil Cinema, History, Culture and Theory*. 15 19 August. Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai. (Monograph).

Pandian, M. S. S. (1992) *The Image Trap, M.G.Ramachandran in Film and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Pendakur, Manjunath. (2003) *Indian Popular Cinema. Industry, Ideology and Con sciousness*. New Jersey: Hampton Press.

Ramaiya, B. S. (1943) 'Cinema?' (Tamil), *Jothi Nilayam*. Chennai.

Ryerson, Charles. (1983) *Regionalism and Religion. The Tamil Renaissance and Pop ular Hinduism*. Chennai: Christian Literature Society.

Sarma, Swmainatha Idhuva. (1946) 'Cinema? (You Call This Cinema?)' *Sakthi,* May.

Seizer, Susan. (2005) *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage. An Ethnography of Special Drama Artistes in South India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

# 8 Cinema in the countryside

## Popular Tamil film and the remaking of rural life

*Anand Pandian*

> Any man today can lay claim to being filmed.
>
> Walter Benjamin (1968: 231)

On a hot March morning in 2002, I set off by foot for the southernmost orchards of the Cumbum Valley, a triangular vale tucked between the mountains of the Western Ghats and the plains of Tamil Nadu in southern India. Farmers throughout the valley were preparing to plant another crop of onions, and many laborers were at work that day raising orchard soils into the small divided beds most suitable for planting and irrigating onion bulbs. I came across my friend Pandian, a young wage laborer who had managed to save up enough money to take a half-acre plot of orchard land on mortgage three years back. He was working alongside the Dalit laborers he had hired to heap the loose red soil of the field into small rows of rectangular beds. Leaning over at one point to scrape a bit of dry soil into a low-lying hollow on the field, Pandian broke out suddenly into a few lines of song, drawn from the 1987 film *Velaikaran* "Making beds in the orchard, I'm looking, looking . . . " "This is the work," he told me when I looked on with bemused surprise. His wife Ayyammal later told me that her husband often sang this song as he worked on the orchard tract: "Isn't that the work he does? He sings of that."

This was by no means the first time that I found cinema bent to suit the needs of daily life in rural Tamil Nadu. Throughout my fieldwork on the subject of agrarian social reform in the southern Tamil countryside, I was struck by the extent to which film had crept into the intimate texture of rural experience. Scenes and songs from commercial Tamil film streamed endlessly from tea stall televisions, speakers mounted on street corners and rooftops to signal special occasions, and living rooms tuned nightly to the same popular channels. Many of my interlocutors turned most often to didactic lyrics and dialogues drawn from such films in order to navigate the ethical trials of everyday life. Young men and women professed a close identification with or even a love for one or another popular actor or actress. Older men and women spoke in turn to blame cinema for the moral depravity of contemporary youth. A surprising number of families could

point to relatives who had sought a place in the distant film industry of Chennai, several hundred kilometers to the north. Each of these phenomena testifies to one of the most prominent ways in which the rural citizens of the Cumbum Valley identify the very nature of the present: as a *cinema kaalam* or an "age of cinema."

The identification of the rural present as an especially cinematic time is greatly indebted to a significant development in Tamil commercial film production that began in the 1970s: the emergence of a genre of cinema dedicated to the realistic depiction of rural life onscreen. These "nativity" films as they have been termed by moviemaking professionals are shot extensively in rural locales, depicting peasant protagonists, staging dialogues in regional dialects and idioms, and introducing folk rhythms and instruments into cinematic soundtracks. Many among the hundreds of these films have been staged in the Cumbum Valley and the surrounding countryside, often by filmmakers hailing from the region itself. I was startled to find certain elder villagers react with cynicism to my own first earnest attempts to record their field and folk songs, voicing a suspicion that I intended only to sell their oral traditions to moviemakers for a handsome profit! That the Tamil film industry has been extraordinarily concerned in recent decades with depicting rural custom and culture onscreen is widely obvious.

What I seek to do in this essay is to chart some of the most significant points of intersection between Tamil commercial film and everyday life in the Tamil countryside today. I am less concerned here with what these films *mean* and more with what they *do*: that is, the myriad ways in which Tamil celluloid has interposed itself as the language and landscape of daily life.[1] Rather than addressing the narrative unity of particular cinematic texts, in other words, I attend to the multiple and dissonant ways in which fragments of cinema come to work as incitements to *live* in a particular fashion. Cinema has emerged as one of the most powerful and supple means by which rural people in south India grapple with the challenges and imperatives of modernity.

Each portion of this essay calls attention to one of four aspects of such popular engagement with film in the countryside: cinema as an arena of spectatorial pleasure and desire; as an instrument of everyday moral practice; as a way of articulating the character of quotidian rural experience; and as a field of active rural participation in production. I rely on evidence culled from over a year of ethnographic fieldwork concerning modern agrarian developments in the Cumbum Valley, a fertile and well-irrigated agricultural region west of Madurai in southern Tamil Nadu.[2] The tales that follow focus in particular on the village of KG Patti near the head of the valley, a settlement of over one thousand households populated primarily by Kallar, Gounder, and Dalit castefolk. By anchoring this essay in a series of encounters and anecdotes, I seek to convey how filmic residues have worked themselves so closely into the fine grain of Tamil rural experience.

***

On a June evening in 2002, I snuck off to the Yuvaraja theater in the town of Cumbum with my young friends Bose and Malai. We were on our way to see *Thulluvathoo Ilamai* (Youth Leaps About), a new film about the trials and pleasures of adolescence directed by Kasturi Raja. As we bumped along on my motorbike down the gravelly road from KG Patti, Malai said that this was their own *thulli thiriyum kaalam* or "time to leap about and wander" refusing to heed their parents, resisting the pressure to wed, indulging in whatever mischief suited them. Both of these young men, just a few years younger than me, easily related to the story and especially its closing statement that youth should be allowed by their parents, teachers, and other wards to enjoy themselves freely. Throughout the film, Bose and Malai pointed out nearby locations that they recognized onscreen: a bus stand, a college campus, another regional movie theater. Relishing the tales of a young man's first exposure to razors, cigarettes, beer, and pornography, they remarked again and again about the "reality" of the film. Although they were rural electrical workers and the story narrated the exploits of educated urban kids, the film invited wider masculine identification with its visual and aural pleasures.

The Yuvaraja theater was packed with hundreds of people that night, a rare event as far as I had seen. Forms of cinematic spectatorship have changed a great deal since the first tin-roofed movie sheds were put up in the larger towns of the Cumbum Valley several decades ago. Nearly every village in this relatively prosperous region now has at least one satellite cable television network running lines to individual houses and making cinema broadcasts available on a daily basis. By no means does every home have a television, but with at least a couple present on even the poorest streets of each village not to mention most of the tea stalls and even some of the grocery stores films are far more easily accessible to rural residents today than the scattered halls that once monopolized their presentation.

One consequence of these proliferating screens is that the viewing or reception of cinema has assumed a far more fragmentary form than in earlier years. Rural viewers are much more likely to catch a few minutes of a film onscreen in a moment of rest after an afternoon meal, on a visit with a friend or relation, or in the midst of a lull in a tea stall conversation, than by means of a trip to a cinema hall screening. This is even more the case with respect to popular Tamil film songs, which are not only screened independently on televised programs but also mixed together and loudly replayed at most domestic festivities. As I will argue in what follows, this fragmentation of transmission greatly shapes the nature of its rural reception.

The attractions of the cinema leave their many marks on the lived spaces of the countryside in other ways as well. Here as elsewhere throughout the state, fan clubs are a ubiquitous means of both social affiliation and distinction, among young men in particular (Dickey 1993). In 2001 and 2002, when I conducted fieldwork in the Cumbum Valley, clubs devoted to younger stars such as Vijay and Ajit as well as older stalwarts such as Rajni Kanth,

Vijay Kanth, and Satyaraj were common. Groups of young men would celebrate the weddings of their friends by plastering public walls with printed posters of congratulation, usually distinguished by the image of a favored star. A rival crowd of youths might retaliate in turn by identifying their own congratulatory posters with a notable villain or antagonist to this particular actor. Glossy color portraits of cinema stars are also circulated among friends as framed gifts on such occasions. Although barber shops and roadside stalls are also plastered with posters for Hollywood pictures and pornographic

*Figure 8.1* Young men act out a scene from the 1999 film *Sethu* in the midst of a temple festival.

"blue films," the prevalence of these Tamil film idols testifies to the continued appeal of commercial Tamil cinema among contemporary rural youth.

Much of what is attractive in these films to young men and women alike is the image of a romantic love cast in an inevitable tension with social and familial expectation (Inden 1999). Although almost all of these rural youths would ultimately bend to the convention of an arranged marriage, I met hardly any who had not nurtured the fantasy of a romantic attraction pursued to public recognition, if not clandestine consummation. The latter prospect bedeviled most of the parents and grandparents of adolescent boys and girls that I knew, who often blamed the obvious evidence of bus stop flirtations, riverside glances, and furtive love notes circulated by pint-sized messengers on the tempting spectacles of film itself.

This silhouette of love had grown so threatening that many parents admitted to arranging marriages for their children at ever younger ages, seeking to bypass the dangers of adolescence altogether. An elderly wage laborer named Karupayi *amma* had married her own daughter off at the age of 15 for this reason in this "age of cinema," she told me, the desires of young boys and girls could no longer be restrained. For her and for many of her peers, cinema was a recurrent lesson in corrupted wants, one that displaced what they saw as the more virtuous traditions of the past. When I accompanied her and a small group of women laborers on a weeding expedition one morning, for example, Karupayi *amma* complained that the pair of teenage girls in the group neither knew nor enjoyed the folk *kaattu paattu* or "field songs" that the older women were singing: "Our songs aren't fit for them," she observed. And indeed, while these older women playfully sang and repeated their folk verses for me with an exaggerated and comical gusto, I noticed the two young girls singing a few recent film lyrics to each other in a quieter riposte, each teaching words that the other did not yet know.

As a young and unmarried man conducting fieldwork in south India, I rarely had the chance to speak directly with younger women concerning these controversial themes. It was clear to me, however, that these girls were not alone in taking cinema as an arena of pedagogy. Other elder men and women that I knew turned to cinema itself for a language of ethical instruction and moral critique, rather than for an exemplar of modern moral degradation. It is to this latter possibility that I turn now.

***

I knew Manivannan as a massive middle-aged man with a heart of equally generous proportions. Unlettered and mostly unschooled, he had spent most of his life felling hardwood trunks from the mountain forests surrounding the village, until the strain of this illicit enterprise led him to buy a small herd of goats instead. I tagged along with him one July morning as he drove these animals into the fallow stubble to the south of his village, where we saw women harvesting sesame on scattered expanses in the distance. As

we ambled along, we began to speak of the rash of recently unveiled adulteries in the village. "A man should not behave just like cattle," Manivannan observed. "He should not feel desire for the things of another." These were lines from a film song whose name he had forgotten. But he went on then to muse on another animal in verse

> The heart is a monkey,
> man's heart is a monkey
> Let it leap, let it escape and run,
> and it will land us in sin,
> it will shove us into attachment.

These were lines I often heard repeated in the village. A monkey could be coached even to ask men for money, Manivannan went on to explain, arguing instead that "it must be habituated." But those who failed to train their own monkey natures should be tossed aside, he suggested, like one rotten fruit among a basket of tomatoes.

"The heart is a monkey" or *manam oru kurangu* was the most popular song from the 1966 Tamil film of the same name, scripted by Tamil playwright and critic Cho. Ramaswamy as a loose adaptation of *Pygmalion*. This was only one of the many film songs and dialogues from numerous periods and genres that the men and women of the Cumbum Valley regularly invoked as guides to proper self-conduct. A ploughman, for example, once noted to me that although one could reform the habits of an unruly bull, men would change only as a result of their own volition, citing lyrics to this effect sung by MGR in the 1961 hit *Thirudaathee* (Don't Steal). In the midst of a heated debate about the difference between sincere and "thievish" love among youths, a teenage grape orchard laborer brought up the narrative of Thangar Bachan's 2002 *Azhagi* in order to insist on the virtues of an amorous devotion even in the face of its impossibility. And Manivannan's own brother Mohan paused to carefully recite the lines I had overheard him singing as we worked together on his orchard one October morning: "man desires the soil, the soil desires man  the soil wins in the end but the heart hides this from us," a truth proclaimed by Rajni Kanth in the 1995 *Muthu*.

The "social" films of mid-twentieth century India were clearly marked by their overt concern for moral redemption, presenting a hero who must navigate  as Vasudevan (2000) has observed  between rival spaces of virtue, villainy, and respectability. The explicit moral pedagogy of films such as *Thirudaathee* continues to resound in everyday discourse in the Cumbum Valley, brought into the present by the replay of popular lyrics over public loudspeakers, by regular televised retrospectives, and other channels of transmission. But the appearance of Tamil film as an element of moral instruction in everyday life has another broader yet hazier horizon intimated by the brief examples I have just presented. The narrative unity of individual films as emblems of moral propriety is of less concern here than

the exemplary value of particular scenes, lyrics, or dialogues to the pursuit of a desirable way of acting, feeling, or thinking. It is these cinematic fragments, drawn as pieces from the archive of available film, that come to matter most in the imagination and exercise of an ethical life.

My woodcutter friend Manichamy, for example, reciting yet another line from an unknown film in the midst of another conversation on his small doorstep one afternoon, told me that filmic lyrics whose philosophies he appreciates are "recorded" in his heart while the others are simply forgotten. Although references to such lines were an inseparable part of his discourse on the necessary resistance of a "good man" to the temptations of "crooked paths," he could rarely identify the films that he had drawn them from, the actors who had spoken them, or the scenes that they had punctuated. Rather than calling my attention to particular films, he would preface each quotation with a more general invocation: "as they have sung in that time" or "as that poet has said." These lines appeared in the space of everyday conversation as anonymous reverberations. The repetition and recirculation of older moral themes by means of cinema  the visage and diction of a roaming poet and devotional saint that actor Muthuraman assumed in 1966, for example, when singing of the heart as a monkey  draws moral tradition forward into the present as a tumbling cascade of fragments.

Rural men and women in south India today find their ideas of virtue among many different arenas of moral pedagogy: cautionary tales printed in vernacular newspapers; lessons on character from schoolbook texts; rhetorical claims of public leaders; religious discourses broadcast through temple loudspeakers and personal cassettes; popular proverbs, jokes, and folk verses shared in tea stalls, courtyard stoops, and working fields; and indeed, didactic lyrics and dialogues from popular cinema and television serials. Tamil film emerges here as one among the many archives of elements with which one may assemble the image of a well-lived life: one that is significant, I might stress, for the lettered and unlettered alike.[3] But more particularly, in recent years Tamil cinema has come to provide for rural citizens an image of the very life they are already living in the present. I turn now to the closure of the gap between cinema and countryside in commercial Tamil film, and its consequences for the texture of rural experience.

***

Every now and then in the Cumbum Valley, a quiet morning or afternoon would be interrupted by the sudden bursting of firecrackers and the loud broadcast of a single song from the 1993 Tamil film *Kizhakku Chimaiyilee* (In the Eastern Country). As its horns and drums rose to a stirring crescendo, some of the first lines of this song would proclaim a moment of arrival: "Your maternal uncle comes carrying gifts for you, he is bringing golden anklets to give to you." These lyrics and the particular scene that they ornament celebrate the generosity and concern with which a brother

*Figure 8.2* A marching band plays a song from the 1993 *Kizhakku Chimaiyilee* as a party of maternal uncles arrives at a ritual ceremony.

fulfills the social expectation for his care of his sister's children. The film itself is a cinematic ode to the customs and traditions of the Piramalai Kallar caste, a community to which its director Bharatiraja belongs. Among Kallar households as well as those of many other castes in the region today, this one song serves as the ordinary means of marking the moment in family rituals and ceremonies when a maternal uncle arrives to discharge his obligations. Film has come to provide a language for the social life of kinship and attachment.

This was only one of the many ways in which I found cinematic references and likenesses flashing up repeatedly among the foundations of everyday rural life. A young man and I were picking our way down a riverbank when he expressed a desire to wait for a few minutes and wave his legs in the water "like cinema." Another youth described how he had eloped across this very river with his lover several years ago, averring that "it happened just like cinema." An elder man described how he had come to this village on his own as a youth, in the same way that Sivaji Ganesan had once been abandoned as a baby in the forest of a particular film. Another elder man showed me his outstretched hands when I ran into him working on his orchard tract. "See the toiling hands," he said, gesturing toward a 1976 film of the same title "like MGR." And I was sitting one afternoon

under the shade of a tamarind tree with my friends Bose and Malai, chatting about certain cultural practices in the region, when one chided the other for his many references to Tamil films. "You shouldn't speak about cinema," Malai said probably with the integrity of my anthropological interview on his mind to which Bose retorted sharply: "*Dey*, they're making cinema about nothing but our culture!"

There is no question that the close resemblance today between village life in the Tamil country and the universe of Tamil cinema has much to do with the turn of many south Indian filmmakers toward the quotidian trials of rural life itself. The "nativity" or folk quality of their films can be traced back to the genre of commercial moviemaking that emerged in the mid-1970s with the aim of conveying the countryside in a realistic idiom. The *man vaasanai* or "scent of the soil" often attributed by critics to this cinema derives from its wide use of rural locales for shooting, regional dialects for scripting, and folk elements in its soundtracks. Three of the most important exponents of the genre director Bharatiraja, music director Ilaiyaraja, and lyricist Vairamuthu hail from the Cumbum Valley and the surrounding countryside. In his many interviews, Bharatiraja has consistently represented himself as a "villager" at heart, keen on evoking in his films the everyday savor and affective resonance of forgotten modes of rural conduct: a markedly ethnographic *verité* (Shanmugasundaram, 1997). The "soil" stands in this cinematic imagination as a metonym for the village itself in all its purity and difference from the norms of urban civility. Vairamuthu himself described *man vaasanai* to me in an interview at his office in 2002 as "an idiomatic expression of our culture."

S. Kaali (2000: 174) has called attention to the way in which Tamil nativity films from the mid-1970s onward shifted narrative agency from the hero to the village itself as a "collective actant." What I find most striking is the way in which individual rural actors today seize upon these representations of the village environment as a means of articulating the significance of their own deeds within it. In other words, what is at stake in the reception of such cinema by rural Tamils is the character of their own lives and practices rather than the narrative meaning of the cinema to which they turn. Suffused by their auteurs with the resonance of the rural landscape, these films are taken by rural subjects as a way of expressing the quality of their own struggles with the substance of the countryside. The soil itself is laden with a cinematic texture. This is clearest when farmers rely on filmic residues to speak of their own agrarian experience.

On a March morning just one week after cultivator Pandian had sang of making crop beds the incident with which I began this essay I ran into cultivator Logandurai tending to his own small plot of onions in a nearby tract. A middle-aged farmer from a well-respected family in KG Patti, Logandurai had spent most of the previous night drawing water to irrigate bed after bed of onion shoots. The electric current powering the motor in the well that he relied on had suddenly cut off before this task was complete.

He had returned this morning to water the soil that remained dry. The field was far from the well and the stream of water flowing into its channels was thin and sluggish. I squatted on a bund to chat with Logandurai as he waited for the flow to slowly fill each rectangular bed. And then he too began to sing. "In desire I raised a bed and planted a single shoot," he said with a smile as he crouched down to loosen a wall of soil dividing a dry bed from the running stream. I laughed in surprise and asked if he knew which film this song had come from. "Isn't it Ramaraj," he asked, naming a Tamil actor once noted for his rustic films. I learned later that it had come from *Enga Ooru Kavalkaran* (Our Village Watchman), a 1988 Tamil film that did indeed star this man.

*Enga Ooru Kavalkaran* depicts a romance between an honest and diligent village watchman and a young woman named Puvayi, who belongs to an agrarian household of a different caste. An invocation to the goddess Meenakshi at the very beginning and references to the Vaigai River's flood-waters make it clear that the film is set in the Madurai countryside of southern Tamil Nadu. The song sequence that Logandurai quoted from follows one of the first scenes of the film, when Puvayi leads other women of the village in the transplanting of paddy seedlings from a nursery bed into a wet field. She gives voice to its lyrics as she dances through these fields with the other women, chasing after goats and other animals through a lush green terrain. The song is a paean of amorous and religious devotion, set to orchestral melodies and the gentle rhythm of a folk beat. Puvayi sings of herself as the earnest lover of a distant male god, beseeching him to come and protect the crop so that it ripens fully. Delivered in a local dialect, the lines of the song suggest that she is concerned about the fruition of much more than the plants that she is dancing among. The soil bed raised "in desire" here lies within the landscape of her own heart, which will ripen only with the fulfillment of her love for him.[4]

These qualities of the song might appear to present a certain puzzle. Why would a middle-aged cultivator in the midst of his agrarian labors assume the voice of a young woman in devoted love? But when I asked Logandurai why this song had come to mind at that particular moment, he mentioned none of these features of its cinematic setting. The lyrics had instead provided a language with which to convey the nature of his own work the previous night and that morning. "With how much desire, irrigating water the whole night. Wasn't able to irrigate four sets of beds  then how would it be?" he asked. He described the hopes and desires with which he had struggled to raise these shoots: clearing the residues of the previous crop; ploughing the soil countless times; making a sleepless journey by truck to purchase these onion bulbs; losing even more sleep watering the crop. A line had been wrested from a filmic love song to convey the affective resonance of an altogether different kind of embodied experience. But this seizure of a filmic fragment was prompted by a specific likeness between film and rural life. The image of a raised soil bed brokered a recursive relation between

*Figure 8.3* "Making beds in the orchard, I'm looking, looking . . ." Pandian liked to sing as he and Ayyammal worked on the tract that they had carefully cultivated.

cinema and the everyday: each had come to rely on the other for its depth and texture.

Closely sutured into the fabric of rural existence, Tamil "nativity" films aid in what Appadurai (1996) has described as the "production of locality." Cinema not only generates persuasive representations of the countryside, but also infiltrates these places and their inhabitants themselves as an instrument of imagination and interpretation. With these relations in mind, I want to turn briefly to the means by which everyday experience is recomposed as filmic artifact in the universe of Tamil rural cinema.

***

In the 1980 film *Kallukkul Iiram* (Moisture Within the Stone) Bharatiraja portrayed himself directing a film shoot in a Tamil village, and the trail of desire, threat, fascination, and ultimately destruction that shadowed the divisive enterprise.[5] His films have consistently set the village milieu against the larger world in a relation of hostile tension, V. Chakravarthy (1986) has observed. But the very movement toward the rural that Bharatiraja and his colleagues propelled has now thoroughly caught much of the Tamil countryside within the machinery of cinematic production itself. The village, in other words, must be understood as a locus of filmmaking as well as public reception. Take the Cumbum Valley, for example. Bharatiraja himself was

born here in the small town of Alli Nagaram, some forty kilometers north of KG Patti. Music director Ilaiyaraja maintains a waterside bungalow just a few kilometers upstream from the village, along the same river. Rising director Bala hails from the village of NT Patti no more than a few kilometers to the north of KG Patti. Many in the region have tapped these and other kin relations to seek a foothold in the Tamil film industry as artistes, technicians, and crew. But more to the point perhaps, numerous films have been shot here.

Tamil filmmakers rely on a dispersed network of location managers in order to identify appropriate places for shooting their features. There are certain areas like the Pollachi countryside of western Tamil Nadu that have hosted the making of literally hundreds of commercial films and televised serials.[6] In the pursuit of novelty and diversity of visual spectacle, location managers continuously seek to identify new sites suitable for film: increasingly, of course, in exotic locations beyond the boundaries of India itself. But as nativity continues to maintain a certain niche in the Tamil commercial film market, camera crews are drawn on a regular basis to regions like the Cumbum Valley as well. In my first few weeks in the area I was surprised to discover that one film the 1985 *Rasathi Rosakili* was shot almost exclusively in the village of KG Patti itself. Some of my closest interlocutors here had themselves landed bit parts in the narrative. I turn now to this experience of theirs in order to broach one more question concerning the intimacy between cinema and rural life: how does it feel to find oneself onscreen?

Directed by S. Devaraj, *Rasathi Rosakili* is a tale of terrestrial moral failure and cosmic revenge. Kuda Thevan secretly poisons his own widowed uncle in order to enjoy the latter's abundant wealth and possessions. He and his wife raise the widower's only son Surattai as a guileless farm boy, planning to wed him to their own daughter in order to secure their claim to the dead man's lands. Surattai falls instead for his own poor cousin Rasathi, and the two become lovers. The unscrupulous Kuda Thevan kills Surattai and stages the murder as a suicide. But the young man returns to walk the earth as a furious and vengeful *pey* or demon, terrorizing his antagonists until they stumble into and drown within the same well where his body had been dumped. Rasathi inherits Surattai's possessions on behalf of their unborn child, and a satisfied demon ascends a white beam of light into the heavens.

Close to two decades later, many men and women in KG Patti had stories to tell concerning the making of the film. The artistes and crew had settled into "Boatman" Raju's large house within the village itself for several weeks of shooting. Comedian Goundamani would sit on a porch asking old women to gather around him, I was told, while his diminutive sidekick Senthil searched the village lanes for iced lime sherbet. Cultivator Logandurai himself spoke of teaching the actress Sulochana how to carry bundles of threshed paddy on her head. Another man described how he and his friends had lingered then as children on the outskirts of the working crew

"we would wander around only with them," he said. When I tracked down a cassette copy of the film in Chennai and arranged to have it screened on the village's closed-circuit cable service, those who watched it with me could point out familiar locations onscreen: the threshing mill, the Ganapathi temple, the road to Suruli Falls, and so on. Certain things had even remained the same in the intervening years, I was told: Devarasu, for example, still poured tea at the same grocery store of his that he had tended as an extra in the film.

At the same time, however, I was surprised to discover that *Rasathi Rosakili* was not the most popular of movies in the very village where it was shot. Many simply found it boring, deriding it as an "old-style" production and a tedious "saw" or *rambam* as painful as the experience of cutting one's own neck with a dull blade. Others argued that it had failed to closely represent the character of life in the village: the nuances of regional dialect or the way in which women sat together outside in the evenings to talk and share gossip. It was suggested by some that such criticisms of the film stemmed from the jealousy and disappointment of those who had been left out of its scenes. But even those who had won a small place within it seemed less than enthusiastic about their role in its making. When I asked Logandurai if this was a good film, he laughed and said that it was "rustic" and solely about agriculture. Meanwhile, Devarasu complained of being represented as a "supply-master" or servant in the film. Yelled at and disrespected by a customer onscreen, his place in the story was a reason for regret rather than pride.

A more particular problem lay with the manifest intent of the film, which begins with an image of producer and writer Rama Pandian standing behind a podium to inform his viewers that the scenes to follow were based on a "real event." Born in an adjacent Cumbum Valley village himself, Rama Pandian studied sociology at Madras University before embarking on a lucrative career in shipping. The presentation of rural culture in Tamil film serves a specific purpose, he told me as we spoke on the porch of his Chennai home: "it reveals the heart." He had scripted *Rasathi Rosakili* as an allegory for the story of his own uncle Chinnasamy Chettiar, who had clashed with a powerful landlord named Kottaichamy Thevar in the 1950s. Kottaichamy's henchmen had reportedly murdered Chinnasamy in the mountains above the Cumbum Valley, disguising the deed as an elephant attack. When a stray buffalo forced Kottaichamy's car to veer off the road into a tamarind tree soon thereafter, killing him too, it was widely suggested that Chinnasamy himself had assumed the form of this animal as a vengeful demon. Rama Pandian had seized upon this incident to produce a cinematic censure of the "rowdyism" of his native milieu, the "atrocity" perpetrated by a caste different from his own. That the film was a "scolding" of the Kallar community that dominated KG Patti village was well known.

Caste clashes are an undeniable feature of public life in the southern Tamil countryside today, and they have been tackled quite successfully in

numerous Tamil films.[7] The failure of *Rasathi Rosakili* to win appreciation from its own subjects lies perhaps in the paradoxical character of its claim to realism: because it was too real and at the same time not real enough because, in a sense, it insisted too crudely on the shame of rural society itself. Those who seek to cast the quotidian life of the countryside in the register of collective fantasy always run the risk of lingering on forms of experience that their own subjects find increasingly undesirable. Rama Pandian's film dwelt on aspects of life in the Cumbum Valley that many here identify as the relics of a less civil age. Tamil rural cinema captures and preserves for posterity what its makers themselves find appealing and unappealing in this milieu. But pleasure in such representations depends on the vitality of a popular desire for what they represent. Few may love a village film whose very subjects begin to appear as unlovable themselves.

***

I did not come to the Cumbum Valley to study cinema. Yet its traces were inescapable at every turn. I asked people of the region to speak about their own lives, and found them speaking their own experience instead by means of film

> "My story is like a cinema story."
> "The history of my life deserves a cinema."
> "My story could make four pictures, that's how much I've suffered."
> "I could even sell the tale of my hardship as a cinema script one day."
> "Even if the tickets were 100 rupees it would pack the houses, this story would make that good a cinema."

Statements such as these, which I often heard, testify to a widespread sense among the rural people that I knew that their everyday lives were somehow cinematic in their very nature. These statements imply both that these were lives appropriate for the cinema, and that cinema in turn was an appropriate medium for the narration of their trials. This may also be true of course for the urban audiences of Tamil cinema, and in particular its urban spectacles; in calling attention to these rural spirals of experience and representation, I have intended only to show what an examination of such recursivity might disclose.

In these pronouncements of a markedly cinematic life we must also recognize an element of pride in the face of hardship, a complex feeling that has been nurtured in part by Tamil cinema's close attention for nearly thirty years to the everyday trials and tribulations of rural existence. But we must also ask at the same time whether social suffering in rural Tamil Nadu today is at least partly due to a waning of public interest in the countryside itself as a realm of advancement and wellbeing. As economic rhetoric today dwells incessantly on the urban middle classes, and Tamil cinema also turns

toward their exploits in localities as far flung as London, Sydney, and Los Angeles, the image of the village begins to blur, decay, and fade from view. The future of a vital rural cinema in south India appears as uncertain as that of a vital rural life.

## Notes

1 "We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier," write Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 4): "We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multi plicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed."
2 A manuscript based on this research concerning the cultivation of the soil, the cultivation of an ethical life, and the colonial and postcolonial politics of col lective identity is forthcoming.
3 For an analysis of MGR as moral paragon, see Pandian (1992).
4 The language of the song plays on the landscape poetics of Tamil devotional verse. For a discussion of this literary genre, see Cutler (1987).
5 See Kaali (2000) for a discussion of this film.
6 The region is often described as a "mini Kodambakkam" in reference to the Chennai seat of the Tamil film industry, and I intend to closely study it in future research.
7 See Rajan Krishnan's contribution to this volume for a discussion of this theme.

## References

Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Benjamin, W. (1968) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.

Chakravarthy, V. (1986) 'Bharatirajavin Cinema', *Ini*, October.

Cutler, N. (1987) *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Dickey, S. (1993) *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Inden, R. (1999) 'Transnational Class, Erotic Arcadia and Commercial Utopia in Hindi Films', in C. Brosius and M. Butcher (eds) *Image Itineraries: Audio Visual Media and Cultural Change in India*. New Delhi: Sage.

Kaali, S. (2000) 'Narrating Seduction: Vicissitudes of the Sexed Subject in Tamil Nativity Film', in R. Vasudevan (ed.) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Pandian, M. S. S. (1992) *The Image Trap*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Shanmugasundaram, S. (1997) *Bharatiraja: Mannum Makkalum*. Bangalore: Kaavya.

Vasudevan, R. (2000) 'Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture', in R. Vasudevan (ed.) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

# 9 Imaginary geographies

## The makings of the "south" in contemporary Tamil cinema

*Rajan Krishnan*

> Each new form of state, each new form of political power, introduces its own particular way of partitioning space, its own particular administrative classifi cation of discourses about space and about things and people in space. Each such form commands space, as it were, to serve its purposes; and the fact that space should thus become classificatory makes it possible for a certain type of non critical thought simply to register the resultant "reality" and accept it at face value.
>
> Henri Lefebvre

### The failure and success of Love

Something unprecedented happened in Tamil cinema at the beginning of 2005. It was a film released on the Pongal[1] day, called *Kathal* (Love), which became a blockbuster overshadowing all other films including *Tirupaachi*, starring Vijay, who is the recent heartthrob and heir-apparent to the Super Stardom of Rajni Kanth. What makes the success unusual is that *Kathal* is a small budget film with blunt, in your face realism; something that when it rarely happens will only be an off beat film with short runs and select screenings but can never aspire to be a blockbuster. However in the case of *Kathal* not even the aftermath of the tsunami could dampen the sensation the movie made in the box office in the districts worst affected by the calamity, as a report in rediff.com claims (Poornima 31 January 2005).

*Kathal* is a film that deserves a full length analysis rather than my limited discussion of it here as providing token to my larger argument in the paper. It shares some of the credos of Italian neo-realism, e.g. the entire film being shot on location and the casting of large number of non-professional actors (with the exception of the hero and the debutant heroine.) A small boy picked up by the director in the streets of Madurai, who performed so smartly in the film, is reminiscent of De Sica's child actors. I am not sure that the film would fit the Bazinian or Deleuzian frameworks of analysis of Italian neo-realism but that need not deter us from saying that *Kathal*'s break with the visual and narrative codes of Tamil cinema is substantial and

hence its huge success a sort of puzzle, as Tamil cinema has generally been wary of realism of this sort. It can be said that for all its difference the theme of the film is love, which is perhaps a narrative feature nearly omnipresent and mandatory in all Tamil films even when it only makes a marginal contribution to the story or plot. Be that as it may, my interest here is in another emergent trope in Tamil films that *Kathal* shares whole heartedly. It is the narrative construction of southern Tamil Nadu as a distinct entity submerged in pre-modern violence, caste bigotry and anarchy. More than the few other films we will take a look at in this essay, it is *Kathal* with its benchmark realism that renders bare the polar descriptions of modern, metropolitan Chennai and the South as its non-modern other and in particular Madurai, the second largest city in the state.[2] Of all the existing major cities, Madurai is the most ancient in terms of historical references; Chennai/ Madras on the other hand has its origins in the recent colonial past.

The film *Kathal* opens with shots of Madurai city and a school in which the heroine, who belongs to the Mukkulathor or Thevar caste, studies. She had decided to elope with her Dalit boyfriend and we learn about her family from the photograph she ponders over with tears. The caste identities of the characters are verbally unsaid in the film but anyone who knows the everyday markers of the castes can immediately guess them. As she meets the young man at the bus stand and boards the bus going to Chennai, we are treated to long, charming segments of flashbacks in which we learn about how love developed between them. Meanwhile, the girl's father, a ruthless caste leader who runs a liquor shop and *Kattai Panchayathu,*[3] along with his younger brother-henchman, finds out about the elopement and launches a search. The young couple, on reaching Chennai, seek asylum in a low cost bachelor's quarters famously known as "mansions," where a friend of the young man is already an extra resident. The friend is a street vendor and is yet to become a paying resident of the already crowded room into which he had squeezed himself. In spite of this precarious situation, the friend and later other mansion inmates help the couple register their marriage, find a job for the young man and a house for the couple to start living in. The girl's uncle and his men manage to get a lead to the friend's whereabouts in Chennai from the young man's mother and track him to his pavement shop. The girl's uncle convinces the friend that the girl had misunderstood them and they would not stand in the way of her choosing her partner. The friend takes him to the dwelling of the newly married couple where the uncle appeals to them to come with him back to Madurai, promising support to their married life. They return with him and other men to Madurai, only to realize that they had been trapped. Her father, kinsmen and womenfolk all combine to make her remove the *thali*[4] threatening to kill the young man who is anyway beaten to a pulp. She acquiesces in order to save his life and is whisked away. The boy becomes mentally deranged. The film closes with a sequence several years later in the neighboring town of Dindugal, when the girl, now (re)married with a child, finds her ex-lover/ "husband" wandering

in the street as a filthy insane vagrant. She is overwhelmed by the sight and runs out in the middle of the night to locate him in the streets. Her humane (present) husband, who follows her, takes the inarticulate lunatic also under his custody and admits him in a home for the insane, to offer solace to his wife.

*Kathal*, in all its realist mise en scene, makes Madurai a place where caste determines one's identity. In a subtle coding, Madurai is also a place where anonymity is difficult  the girl's uncle turns up at the bus stand even as they were waiting to board the bus. They usually meet under a culvert and not in a public space like a restaurant, park or cinema theatre. In Chennai, no one talks about caste. Among the bachelors, about a hundred of the mansion inmates, who proudly celebrate the wedding of the couple, no one is anxious about their caste. And it is not only the non-family bachelors, even the families that the couple approaches for renting a house and, in one sequence, casual onlookers from a flat are undisturbed by the age and circumstances of the young couple and the role of caste. Except for the initial harassment of the heroine by the sex starved bachelors of the mansion, Chennai provides an ideal asylum to the couple and for once the public spaces are considered safe for them. They spend a whole night watching films and traveling in buses, something unimaginable in Madurai in the narrative logic of the film. In Chennai, it seems that not only does caste not determine one's identity, but that anonymity is a shield in public spaces. Chennai and Madurai come to stand for different temporalities, Chennai a city of modern, free individuals and Madurai as populated by the pre-modern castes, clans and kinship. I argue that *Kathal* is able to successfully employ the trope of the pre-modern south only in the wake of whole range of films and media representations which contributed to its constitution. Our problem here is not just whether the narrative of *Kathal* is plausible, authentic or real. When we call something "imagined," "constituted" or "socially constructed" such a thing need not necessarily be dissociated from the real, or whatever shreds and complex networks of the real that would lead to such imagination or construction, as Ian Hacking has explained (Hacking 2000). Taking the lead from him, I propose that it is necessary to avoid the true or false debate when we consider the workings and the constitution of the trope of southern Tamil Nadu.[5] In *Kathal*, I see a classic expression of the trope that Tamil cinema has been constituting for the Tamil psyche, which is torn between the threatening pre-modern assertion of caste and an allegedly "egalitarian," free market space of modern individuals or citizens. Such a split of the Tamil self is articulated in the constitution of the geographical identity of Southern Tamil Nadu which serves as a metonymic extension of the caste identity of Mukkulathor. It is not incidental that the figure of Thevar or Mukkulathor (the caste comprising the three aristocratic clans Kallar, Maravar and Agamudaiyar) comes as the best epitome of undying "essence of caste"; as we shall soon see, as with most other cases this particular figure of Thevar and accompanying violence has its origins in the colonial era.

## Picturing the south

Let me first give a sample list of recent Tamil films that deploy the trope of Southern Tamil Nadu and give short notes on how exactly the "south" figures in these films: *Saami* (2003), a Vikram film; *Gilli* (2004) and *Madurey* (2004), both Vijay films; and *Attakasam* (2004), an Ajith film. *Saami* and *Gilli* were commercial blockbusters and the other two films were moderately successful.

Saami, the short form of Auruchaami, is the name of the police officer protagonist who comes to Tirunelveli to re-establish the rule of law in the town. The town is in the grips of hooliganism and is controlled by a thug called Perumal Pichai. He has a huge crime network and hence, predictably, a considerable political clout as he can swing the elections in eight southern districts. He is too strong for the police machinery to handle and in fact the hero makes a deal with Perumal Pichai agreeing to be on latter's payroll. As we may guess, that is only a ruse to buy time to trap the villain and in the end, amidst the usual orgy of violence, the villain is slain and law and order is restored. There are two things that should attract our attention in the film. One is the choice of Tirunelveli, the southernmost of the smaller cities in Tamil Nadu. We don't have a film which opens with Coimbatore, Vellore or Thanjavur beset by lawlessness and hooliganism. In choosing Tirunelveli as in the grip of anarchic violence, the film almost appears to copy the depiction in the highly popular TV serial *Chithi*. In this serial, a flashback sequence shows a riot hit Tirunelveli with a woman sub-inspector leaning out of a racing jeep firing at fleeing miscreants. The images were repeated every day for several weeks as part of the montage of visuals in the background as the credits for the serial rolled. Why is Tirunelveli vulnerable to such terrible scenes of anarchy and lawlessness? The second issue, which may in part answer the question, is that the villain in *Saami* has his caste network as a criminal network. All cities may have rowdies and criminal gangsters. In the south, it is combined with caste, thus providing a unique cement to the power of the criminal network. While the modern state is compromised by electoral politics allowing such hooligans to exercise control over politicians or elected representatives, it is nevertheless capable of producing neutral individuals like Saami in its administration who can annihilate the anti-state bodies and their caste-criminal networks.

*Gilli* is an even more powerful narration of the recalcitrant south. The hero is a childlike but valiant youth from Chennai, a son of a police officer and a *kabadi*[6] player. He goes to Madurai for a state-level *kabadi* match. As soon as he arrives in Madurai he witnesses a gruesome daylight murder in the station in which a group of people, led by the villain Muthupandi, pull out a passenger and hack him to death. We learn that the murdered person is the heroine's elder brother who was embarking on journey to find her a groom. Muthupandi, who is the local gang leader with a huge sickle-bearing retinue, is the heroine's fanatic suitor punishing him for the attempt. Muthupandi's father, a minister in the state cabinet, is absolutely bound by

the wishes of the son. The heroine who is interested in higher education abroad is dismayed by the brutish gangster's fanatic and obsessive pursuit. Both her educated elder brothers are killed while trying to stop the advances of the gangster. The girl desperately tries to escape with her certificates to Chennai but is again ensnared by the villain and his men. The hero, accidentally appearing on the scene of encounter between the girl on the run and her pursuers, who he had already seen perform the daylight murder, decides to rescue the girl. In a daring, spell binding sequence of escapes and chases, he manages to hoodwink the hysteric gang-leader, his army of men, and the police force deployed by the minister, and smuggles her into his own house in Chennai. More incredible than all these heroic deeds, he further manages to get her a passport, US visa he clarifies to her that it is only a student visa and also a flight ticket in just a couple of days. Now it is all about keeping her safe and taking her to the airport, but the city is already invaded by the villain and his men and, what is worse, the hero's father is ordered by the minister to search for the girl who the dutiful police officer finds hiding in his own house. The hero, with the help of his *kabadi* team mates, who are also his bosom friends, manages to escape with the girl from his house. He once again hoodwinks the villain and his men and successfully puts her on the plane. He then returns to play the *kabadi* finals. However, he is unable to concentrate in the game as he realizes that he had lost his heart to the girl he rescued. With a similar realization, the heroine decides to give up her trip to the US and returns to the *kabadi* field. In a fitting climax the hysteric villain and suave hero fight it out in the stadium in the full glare of floodlights, at the end of which all forces of barbaric hooliganism are vanquished and the hero's family and the heroine unite in the liberal space of individual choice and love.

If *Kathal* is a down to earth, realistic flick of young lovers eloping to Chennai in search of refuge, *Gilli* is a racy thriller of fantastic chase sequences. The images of lorry loads of sickle-bearing, country bomb-throwing men giving chase to the young couple as they drive towards Chennai lend a mythical dimension to the violent south. However, it is the contrast between the villain and the hero that powerfully signifies the difference. The hero is an assertive young man who plays *kabadi* against the prohibition imposed by his police officer father. He is supported by his loving mother and a feuding but loving sister in his efforts to hoodwink the father. His crucial decision to help the heroine to escape from the clutches of the villain is a disinterested manly gesture of supporting the weak against the mighty. It is only in the process of escape and hiding that he slowly becomes interested in her, in spite of himself and probably only in response to her feelings for him. The villain on the other hand is a hysterical, neurotic character who cannot even admit the selfhood of the heroine and respect her choice to reject his proposal. His violent nature is primordial and beastly. He kills without batting an eyelid. In a telling sequence, the villain, who tries to explain his feelings for the heroine blurts, "I love you" (in English) without proper emphasis on

"I" and "you." This brilliantly captures his inadequacy. In another sequence in Chennai, we see the villain traveling with his father in an air-conditioned car on an axial road. As the vehicle stops at a signal, he glimpses the hero and heroine riding a two-wheeler standing at the signal right next to his car. He hysterically yells at them and his father points out that they can't hear him. He tries to open the doors but he has no space as other vehicles have boxed the car in. Meanwhile, as the two-wheeler makes a move as it gets some space, the villain frantically shatters the front pane of the car, crawls out of the car like a caged animal breaking free and runs in their direction unmindful of the city traffic. His father, the minister, later points out to him that it is not his village but Chennai, where the son has to restrain his wild temperament, failing which he might cost his father his office. The beast in the city is finally quelled in a one on one combat with the hero, which the heroine forces on the villain by throwing a challenge to his masculinity. Aptly his sickle, raised to attack the victorious hero and the heroine, attracts electricity from a damaged transformer and he is electrocuted.

In *Madurey*, it is the city of Madurai again pitted against Madras. The opening subtitle introduces Madurai as "the Madurai burnt by Kannagi."[7] Madurai is the battleground between the hero, who is the district collector, and the villain, a public figure in the city who indulges in a range of illegal activities that affect the public welfare. The villain is a rich businessman and belongs to a traditional rich family which is probably once again of Mukkulathor caste as can be made out from his language and caste pride. He claims that his family has been controlling Madurai from the days of the Kings to the days of electoral democracy. He still wants to be powerful and has no qualms about indulging in hoarding, adulteration and black-market profiteering. He again has substantial political clout, and the local MLA (elected member of the state legislative assembly) is simply at his service and state ministers fear the villain. The villain creates a subterfuge in which the collector is accused of killing his own PA, a woman who personally supports the collector's efforts. The collector goes underground and lives incognito with the PA's family in Chennai. He gathers evidence against the villain and meets the Chief Minister who absolves him of the false accusation. The hero goes to Madurai once again as the collector and takes on the villain. The perverse villain distributes incredibly low cost cell phones all over Madurai with time bombs planted in them. In the climactic sequence, the hero confronts the villain in his palatial house. Here the villain claims that he has taken revenge on the public and after 11 am whenever anyone's cell phone rings and the receive button is pressed it will explode. The hero, undeterred, ties him up and takes him in an LPG container racing through the city. The villain does not understand the hero's action until the van nears the cell phone tower. The hero parks the container beneath the tower, ties the villain to it and sets fire to the container creating a huge explosion annihilating the perverse villain and saving the public in one go.

The whole film is about the how the caste-clan-criminal network of the villain prevents the functioning of the law-enforcing machinery and causes untold suffering to the public, going to the extent of plotting mass murders. Though again corrupt politicians necessarily compromise with such locally entrenched power holders, the state is capable of generating such figures as the collector who is supported by the unseen Chief Minister, the figurehead of the state, who would eradicate such a scourge. Chennai as the seat of governance once again rescues Madurai from lawlessness and hooliganism.

*Attakasam*, featuring Ajith in a double role, distributes the criminal network to both Chennai and the "south." However, there are subtle and significant differences in the way the gangsters are situated within the larger society in the two places. While the criminal gang has a shadowy presence in Chennai, in Thuthukudi, the southern port city, the gangsters have a far greater social presence. The police force is something to contend with in Chennai, even if the Don has a certain clout and is feared. In Thuthukudi, the police are completely subservient to the power exercised by local gangsters. The hero, Ajith No. 1, grows up in Chennai as a mechanic and owns a garage. His twin, Ajith No. 2, was separated from the family as an infant, and grows up to be a powerful gangster in Thuthukudi. When the city-bred Ajith happens to go to Thuthukudi and the police station in the town, he is surprised to find the police fearing him and acting servile. Only much later, he realizes it is because he is a look alike of his long lost brother. Another interesting sequence in the film is when the city-bred Ajith is forced to take the place of the Thuthukudi gangster, he escapes from the latter's rivals and travels to several places in the south to evade their clutches. This travel involving other towns in the south results in mapping the entire south as gangster infested in an imaginary geography of Tamil Nadu. Highlighting the places helps to distance them from Chennai as another kind of terrain which the Chennai-born hero traverses out of compulsion amidst danger and crisis.

It is necessary here to pause for a moment to consider the counter-example of *Thirupaachi* (2005), in which Vijay starred, that was released along with *Kathal*. This film, as if to balance the earlier Vijay hit *Gilli*, totally reverses the attributes of south and Chennai. The hero lives near Thirupaachi, a place famous for manufacturing sickles. He wants his sister to live comfortably in a city. However, Chennai is in the grip of gangsters whose writ runs large, each parliamentary constituency of Chennai being dominated by a dreaded hysterical criminal. The hero from the south takes on all the gangs single handedly and annihilates the gangsters. Though there is a reversal in terms of where a life-supportive environment prevails, the south's association with sickles, rituals and folk deities is strongly reinforced. Interestingly, the hero from the south tells the villain: "You only use the sickle, I make it. You use it only to attack people; I use it like it is part of my body."

The films discussed here may not exhaust the range of representations. However, I am sure there is sufficient reason to think that a clear dichotomy between Chennai and the south has come to exist in Tamil film narratives.

## Other makings of the south

Before we see an account of how the south in Tamil Nadu came to be portrayed as such an entity in Tamil cinema as detailed above, we may benefit from taking a look at another famous portrayal of the south that of the Italian south famously known as *mezzogiorno*. While the discourse on the Italian south is vast and has several dimensions including the contemporary secessionist political movement in Northern Italy, the origins of the south as a discursive entity is fascinating.

Italy was leading Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But by the sixteenth century, the centers of capitalist development had shifted to Holland and England. By the seventeenth century, at the time of the industrial revolution, Italy was seen as a backward nation. Nelson Moe, who has produced an illuminating study of the making of the Italian south, says:

> Model to and "master" of Europe since the fourteenth century, during the1600s Italy was dramatically upstaged by countries to the north and west of the Alps: Holland, England, and France. What was taking place in fact was a massive shift of geopolitical and economic power away from the Mediterranean world as a whole. As Fernand Braudel writes, from the mid-1600s on "the Mediterranean lay firmly outside the mainstream of history which it had almost exclusively dominated for centuries on end" Hence forth the north would dominate the south, within Europe and across the globe.
>
> (Moe 2002)

This resulted in a range of discourses on the backwardness of Italy in the "advanced" countries of Europe. Italy's proximity to Africa was pointed out and in spite of its glorious past it was placed low on civilizational scale. From the British Prime Minister Gladstone to the German poet Goethe to the French enlightenment philosopher Montesquieu, everyone had things to say about the deplorable condition of eighteenth century Italy.

Nelson Moe has argued that in the nineteenth century, during the time of Italian unification and the birth of the nation, the intellectuals of the Italian north appropriated the discourse of southern backwardness from the developed northern Europe and in their eagerness to join the "progress" of those nations they consigned backwardness to the country's southern half. In other words, to dispel the impression that all of Italy is "south," a southern Italy had to be created as an entity of imaginary geography. The industrial development in northern Italy helped to distinguish it from agrarian south which was seen as backward. Gramsci's famous treatise on the "Southern Question" deals elaborately with the particularities of the Southern situation from the point of view of broad unified social change. In the latter part of twentieth century, southern Italy also became famous for mafia networks. The problem of southern distinction has persisted in so many registers and representations

that it has led to a separatist movement in the North calling for bifurcation of the country in the contemporary era. Umberto Bossi leads a populist party called *Lega Nord,* which proposes that the rich Northern Italy should be called Padania. Michel Huysseune captures the present state of the issue best when he says, "although they dismiss the Lega's Padanian identity, many scholars interpret Italy's North-South divide as a normative dichotomy between a modern, civic North and a backward, less civic South an opinion contested only by a minority." (Huysseune 2002: 207)

It is precisely the normative dichotomy between a modern, civic Chennai and a backward, less civic South that is portrayed in Tamil film narratives. We are obliged to think about how such a portrayal would come to prevail at this particular moment in history and what its historical roots were. I suggest that a larger examination as proposed by this paper would reveal how Tamil cinema has related to happenings and discourses in the society as well as the protocols of authenticity it has allowed it to develop. Unlike the codes and aesthetics of realisms, the protocols of authenticity depend on consensual notions of culture and a loud display of cultural markers like dress, food and most significantly for Tamil cinema, the dialect.

I will now turn to three interlinked aspects that relate to the portrayal of the south in Tamil cinema. First, we will see the place of the south during the genesis of colonial modernity; then the recent history of caste clashes in the south and third a quick outline of the history of representations connected to these issues in Tamil cinema. I will conclude with advancing a brief hypothesis on the enunciatory location of modernity as a possible key to the problems discussed.

## The south of colonial times

The East India Company built Fort St. George in Chennapattinam (also known as Madras) and made it their administrative headquarters. As they slowly took over the functions of rulers, Chennai was becoming the capital city for South India and to this day, it is common in north India to call all South Indians "madrasi" after the city the colonizers founded to control and rule South India. The late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century saw many rebellions of the rulers and chieftains in the south known as Palayakarars and confrontations of the British with them, which are known as the Poligar wars. Chennai as the seat of modern governance and the south-in-opposition perhaps begins with this era. Kattabomman, the Marudhu Brothers, Poolithevan and Yusuf Khan have all been part of popular memory as heroes of the resistance. Kattabomman, Poolithevan and the Marudhu Brothers have had their celluloid representations and Maruthanayagam (apparently the original name of Yusuf Khan) is an unfinished mega-film project of the actor-director Kamal Hasan.

If the Poligar wars are one key to the popular memory of south, the recalcitrance of the Kallar dominions is part of that story and is another

key element of the lore of the south. In a recent essay, Anand Pandian has detailed how the south presented an administrative problem to the British (Pandian 2005). In fact, the Nayak rulers of Madurai preceding the British dispensation, had the same problem. The problem was to bring the Kallars, who controlled large tracts of land, to pay taxes and accept the sovereignty of the kings, and later the British government. In 1886, the Madras Board of Land Revenue stated that the Kallars were "in their origin soldiers out of work." Many of them served as armed retainers to local kings and chieftains throughout the southern Tamil country. Kallars were also kings in principalities like Pudukkottai. Though the Poligar rebellions had ended by the early nineteenth century, the system of *kavalkarar* (which means the protector or watchman) and Kallar authority as *kavalkarar* continued until the end of the century. The Kallars were invested with the duty or authority to protect the wealth of the peasantry and merchants and in turn were allowed to levy a fee. In the ambiguity of the authority or sovereignty of the Kallars, their collecting the undefined fee came to be seen as depredations where there was no agreement on what was their due, and where the Kallars allegedly started the practice of extortion from the very people they were supposed to protect. In one instance, they sent a palm leaf missive requesting the farmers to send money (40 chakrams) and 20 sheep to defray the expenses for an upcoming festival. The Nallthevanpatti Kallars who sent the missive claimed that they had become a proud and independent people despising and holding in contempt both the order of the Poligars and those of the Circar (British government).

Anand Pandian's essay details a particular shift that occurred in the late nineteenth century. The British government instituted a survey of the agrarian conditions in the south. One local government official inserted a question in a questionnaire he sent as to why the peasantry should not dispense with the protection of the Kallars and arrange to protect themselves collectively. He could not have raised a more appropriate question as the peasantry's unhappiness with the domination of Kallars in the guise of an anachronistic protectorate was reaching a high. The peasants assembled and initiated a collection of funds to repulse the intrusive presence and domination of Kallars. Through such collective efforts the peasants demanded that the Kallars leave their villages and go away to their "own" lands. This lead to widespread violence against Kallars in which the state machinery was also complicit, as it sought to remove their customary rights and duties and substitute it's own monopoly rights in the protection of citizens. In Anand Pandian's explanation, it is suggested that the Kallars had a peculiar kind of sovereignty through their claim to protect the peasants and their property, and that this status needed to be removed if the modern forms of sovereignty and government of the modern state were to be asserted.

This story is necessary for us to understand two different things: the history of consolidation of caste identities in southern districts and the anti-modern position occupied by the Kallars and Thevars from the early days of colonial statecraft. It was after this anti-Kallar movement that the colonial state

came to declare Piranmalai Kallars as a criminal tribe, declaring a people to be naturalized criminals and making a region of the south the domicile of the unlawful.

## Eruption of the south: caste conflicts of the 1990s

The postcolonial Indian state, developmental economy and electoral democracy have all contributed to massive changes in the social fabric. One significant aspect is the sustained renegotiation of caste identities and status. In Tamil Nadu, the political mobilization of non-Brahmin castes which started in the last decades of colonial rule (1915 47) resulted in two Dravidian (read non-Brahmin) parties ruling the state for the past 38 years (1967 2005.) However, though the Dravidian parties sought to consolidate all non-Brahmin castes, there were significant caste identities that have not been fully assimilated by the parties, according to M. S. S. Pandian (Pandian 2000). Apart from the major Dalit castes of Pallars and Parayars, Thevars of the south and Vanniyars of the north have also remained not fully assimilated into the Dravidian parties' non-Brahmin/ backward caste identity.

It is important here to note what a crying shame and perhaps a paradox is untouchability. The practices of untouchability still exist; not in isolated places but largely widespread. More than a hundred years of political mobilizations, democratic self-governance since 1947 and seventy-five years of humanist narratives of cinema have not eradicated the forms of untouchability and discriminations against Dalits. People who laid the foundations of popular democratic politics like Gandhi and Periyar were categorically against untouchability. The inspiring life of Babasaheb Ambedkar who played a leading role in drafting the Indian constitution making provision for compensatory discrimination and his works, charge Dalits to fight against discrimination. Following the Ambedkar centenary celebrations in 1990 all over Tamil Nadu, there was widespread assertion of Dalits against discrimination and untouchability. As Pandian has described, the northern districts of Tamil Nadu saw confrontations between Vanniyars and Parayars and the southern districts between Thevars and Pallars (also known as Devendra Kula Vellalas or Devendrars.) The conflicts in the southern districts were far more intense and bloodier than those in the north. Again, as Pandian has noted, in the north the Vanniyar political formation from the late eighties Pattali Makkal Katchi has attempted to include Dalits in its mobilization. In recent years the Dalit Panthers of India, led by Thirumavalavan and the PMK led by Dr. Ramadoss have been working together under the aegis of the Thamil Pathukappu Peravai (Tamil Protection Forum.) No such attempt to integrate the Thevars with the Dalits appears to have taken place at any point of time.

In the years 1995 98, the southern districts witnessed widespread clashes between Thevars and Dalits. Though termed as clashes the severity of the attacks carried out by the Thevars far outweigh any defensive or offensive

violence by the Dalits. The narratives of the gory incidents in which whole Dalit settlements were burnt and people were indiscriminately killed, shocked the urban middle class beyond belief. In one incident, the village of Kodiyankulam, where Devendrars of considerable economic advancement lived, was brutally attacked by a posse of the police force which destroyed the properties and looted money and cash. In the widespread riots that followed the naming of a transport corporation after a Dalit leader, Thevars unleashed an orgy of violence against several Dalit settlements displacing a large number of people. When Puthiya Thamilagam, a Dalit party, led a procession of tea estate workers in the city of Tirunelveli, the caste-ist police force unleashed a Jallianwala Bagh style attack driving people into the Tamiravaruni River and death. These incidents, widely reported in the media, caught the imagination of the urban public, leaving an indelible impression of the south as a place of primordial violence.

Tamil cinema has always responded to images created in the popular mind. It is my argument that the southern caste conflicts of the nineties is the main reason why the south has come to be portrayed as backward, less civic and given to sickles and primordial violence. While this may make sense in the popular "logic" of imagination, critical thought should hasten to warn of the dangers of stereotyping and the limitations of representative practices of cinema, particularly given the salience and circulation of cinema in Tamil Nadu. What should be of even more interest is the self-legitimization of State-driven, capitalist modernity implicit in the process of exteriorizing the south. It is worth remembering that the city of Chennai is in the throes of transformation as part of globalization. An IT corridor, Tidal Park, and four lane roads are creating a new ethos in Chennai. It has a compelling and urgent need to make the urban modern middle-upper class life normative if it is to join the global urban network.[8] The production of an internal other comes in handy as we saw in the case of Italy.

## South in Tamil cinema

There are two sides to the legacy of representations of the "soldier out of work" caste groups of the south. While Maravar has had positive connotations in wider discourses as a persona embodying bravery, Kallar has been an unlawful entity. These elements are often intertwined and, as we cannot afford to look at too many films in the history of Tamil cinema, I will briefly mention the case of *Madurai Veeran.* While one will have to note that it was a popular folk ballad, *Madurai Veeran* first produced as film in the thirties and the more popular second version filmed in the fifties starring MGR as *Madurai Veeran*, links Madurai with *veeram* (valor) at the surface level. However, the narrative of *Madurai Veeran* rings a bell as the hero is invited to Madurai to quell disorder, thievery and establish the rule of law. Anand Pandian mentions that the ballad informs us of the difficulties of the Nayak kings in restraining the Kallars.

Leaving such snippets of pre-history for further research, I would like to propose that in recent times, it is a Kamal Hasan film of high authenticity markers called *Thevar Magan* (1992) meaning "Son of Thevar" that can be said to have inaugurated the era of the south being represented as primarily a sickle bearing space. In the film Sakthivel, Kamal Hasan returns from the USA with his "modern" girl friend. He is torn between his desire to start a hotel in a city leading an urban life with his girl friend and his loyalty to his father, who is committed to the village and community led by him. The age long enmity of his father's brother towards his father is rekindled by the former's jealousy of the foreign returned son, resulting in a fresh bout of quarrels, deaths and destruction. Sakthivel is forced not only to stay in the village to help his family and clan, but give up his modern self and girl friend. In spite of all his efforts, in the end, he is driven to hold a sickle and behead his villainous cousin. With destiny overtaking his efforts to refashion himself, the film ends with his entreaty to fellow Thevars to take to education rather than to sickles. As has been noted, the educational accomplishments of the Thevars in the south do not seem to match those of the Devandrars who they treat as inferior.

Though made with the good intention of problematizing the Thevar subculture of violence, the film appears to have led to reification of martial qualities and the caste pride of the Thevars. The songs from the film praising Thevar lore are allegedly used in all Thevar functions. *Thevar Magan*, with the license given by authenticity, helped Tamil cinema to shed its inhibitions about caste identities with mixed results. A number of films celebrating the land owning castes were made. Ultimately, the south became the place where "rural" attained new authenticity which came to be positioned against the "modern" Chennai. One example would be Bharathi Raja's *Kizhakku Seemai* which was sort of an epic of a rural family feud centered on cockfights and family pride.

## Enunciatory location of modernity: Chennai

Before concluding, let me make a brief speculative detour about the term *seemai*. I take the lead from the illuminating discussion of Tamil spatial terms of semantic drift like *Ur* and *Nadu* by Valentine Daniel (Daniel 1987). The lexicon gives it a range of meanings: boundary, limit, country, territory, province, district, Western country especially England and an impertinent person. While *seemai* as a prefix is added to several things imported or foreign or exotic,[9] in the language used in Tamil cinema, it appears that *seemai* as a suffix is added only to the towns and areas in southern Tamil Nadu like Sivaganga. As for directions, both east and south have taken the suffix *seemai* but north and west do not appear to have taken the suffix in Tamil cinema. "*Kizhakku Seemai*" and "*Therkathi Seemai*" have been used but not "*Merku Seemai*" or "*Vadakkathi Seemai*." I would like to suggest that such semantic boundaries of usage are determined by the enunciatory

location for a language at a given point in history. The current usage of *seemai* to mean foreign lands, prefix to things foreign or exotic and suffix to south, south-east and southern geographical entities is probably the result of certain exteriorization and exoticization of the south in the language used in cinema which has Chennai as its enunciatory location.

What has concerned me in this paper is that, while Tamil cinema has largely argued in favor of the rural, agrarian and pre-modern values and lifestyles, even while accepting love-marriages across social segmentations and propagating humanist egalitarian ideals, the present dichotomy between modern, civic Chennai and the backward, less civic south can be used for setting up urban, middle/upper class, consumerist life as normative.[10] While it is necessary to seriously engage with the real problems of the south, it is also necessary to be wary of self-legitimizing discourses and narratives of modernity which offer modern political rationality and "progress" of capitalist modernity as the only alternatives to savagery and caste bigotry in an unsurprising continuation of European enlightenment discourses.

## Notes

1 It is a time honoured tradition to release a bunch of films on three special festive occasions in Tamil Nadu: Pongal, usually celebrated on January 14th, Tamil New Year's day on April 14th and Deepavali which is celebrated some time between October 15 and November 15.
2 The south of Tamil Nadu is now understood to be constituted by eight revenue districts: Madurai, Theni, Virudhunagar, Ramanathapuram, Tuticorin (Thoothukudi), Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari.
3 *Katta Panchayathu* is where locally powerful men resolve conflicts and adjudicate disputes enforcing their diktat through recourse to violence.
4 Known as Mangal Sutra in north India; sacred thread, a thin rope or metal chain, in which certain symbolic objects hang, made of gold when it can be afforded, tied around the neck of the bride by the groom and is to be worn by the woman all through her life as long as the husband lives. Even though the place of *thali aka mangalyam* in the histories of Tamil cultures is a matter of debate and speculation, its presence in Tamil cinema and its narrative significance has been huge and ubiquitous.
5 Ian Hacking's intervention from philosophy of science also deals with the widespread use of the 'social construction' argument in the social sciences. When we say something is constructed we are not saying that the thing is 'false'. We are only bringing the process of its coming into being as an entity for consideration.
6 *Kabadi* is played by two teams of 12 players each on a 12.50 metre by 10 metre rectangular court in which a player, while holding his breath, dashes into the opponent team's area, touches some player(s) and/or wrestles out to come back home safely without releasing his breath and thereby scores point for his team. *Kabadi* can be debatably described as a subaltern sport in Tamil Nadu.
7 Kannagi, a key character from the ancient Tamil epic Silapathigaram, set in a period two millenniums ago, lived in the Chola capital Kaveripoompattinam. Her husband was wrongly given a death penalty by the Pandian King when the former came to Madurai. Kannagi, a chaste woman, burns the city in her wrath. The purpose of the subtitle in the film is ambivalent: it seems to say that Madurai is still not disinfected of injustice. However, the hero's name is Maduravel

called in short Madurey. The villain also wants to burn the city since then he too would be remembered like Kannagi

8 I gratefully acknowledge a project carried out by M. S. S. Pandian and A. Sri vatsan for information on this point.

9 I thank Prof. Tho. Paramasivam, Manonmaniyam Sundaranar University, for adding to my understanding of the term as referring to things considered exotic.

10 What I suggest is that the dichotomy of Chennai vs. the south initiates a radi cally different coding of nativity and modernity than what constitutes a depar ture for Sundar Kali (2000) in the making of neo nativity films.

## References

Hacking, Ian. (2000) *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Huysseune, Michel. (2002) 'Imagined Geographies: Political and Scientific Dis courses on Italy's North South Divide in Secession', in Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huysseune (eds) *History and the Social Sciences*. Brussels: University Press. Available online at: http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/orderbooks/secession/
secession 08.pdf (accessed 11 August 2006).

Kali, Sundar. (2000) 'Narrating Seduction: Vicissitudes of the Sexed Subject in Tamil Nativity Film' in Ravi Vasudevan (ed.) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Moe, Nelson. (2002) *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pandian, Anand. (2005) 'Securing the rural citizen: The anti Kallar movement of 1896' *Indian Economic Social History Review*.

Pandian, M. S. S. (2000) 'Dalit Assertion in Tamil Nadu: An exploratory Note', *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*. July Dec.

Poornima. (2005) *Pongal releases sink!* Available online at: www.rediff.com/movies/ 2005/jan/31spice.htm (accessed 11 August 2006).

Valentine, Daniel E. (1987) *Fluid Signs: Being a Person in the Tamil Way*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

# 10 Encounters with 'India'

## (Ethno)-nationalism in Tamil cinema

*Vijay Devadas and Selvaraj Velayutham*

Oh Tamil!
Tomorrow is ours
Oh Tamil!
The Nation is also ours
Say my house is Mother Tamil Nadu
Be firm that you are an Indian

(Song lyrics from the film *Roja*)

For millions of Indians, wherever they live,
a major part of 'India' derives from its movies

(Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 10)

Mani Ratnam's much acclaimed and award winning film *Roja*, released in 1993, is a story about the personal ordeal of a newly-wed, innocent village girl from the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Her husband Rishi is a cryptologist working for the Indian Government. He is assigned a post in an Army Communication Centre in Kashmir where he is abducted by a group of Kashmiri separatists who demand the release of their leader Wassim Khan in exchange. Roja who doesn't speak Hindi or English pleads in Tamil and with hand signals to politicians and military officials to help secure the release of her husband. But Rishi manages to escape in time without any assistance from the Indian authorities. The movie ends with the reunion of Roja and Rishi and the terrorist leader Wassim Khan still in prison in India. The climax of the narrative thus not only secures the Indian nation but more crucially reinforces the hegemony of a secular (Hindu) postcolonial Indian nation as constructed by the nation-state.[1]

The highlight of this movie is not so much that it is set in the disputed territory of Kashmir or its emotive depiction of the impact of terrorism on the lives of the people concerned but the powerful rendition of an unproblematic secular, postcolonial version of nationalism. The film established Mani Ratnam as one of India's most successful commercial film directors. The movie was also dubbed in several languages including Hindi, Telugu and Marathi. The Hindi and Telugu versions of the film were a major box-office hit and it held currency for a national audience.[2] In its later versions,

*Roja* became the focus of a lively scholarly debate on chauvinism, secularism, nationalism and national identity.[3] However, while these debates approached the film as a film with 'India' as its theme, they fail to interrogate the original moment, the characters and their narrative trajectory through the film. As Vasudevan (1997: 161) points out, most critics failed to observe that 'in the original version, language functions to highlight differences of identity which are entirely suppressed in the Hindi version: the protagonists come from Uttar Pradesh, not Tamil Nadu'. Even in the Telugu version, Vasudevan observes that the locations were not always from Tamil Nadu. It is worth noting that in the Tamil version, the name of the village in Tamil Nadu appears on screen. Moreover, the fact that the characters were Tamil caught in a frontier political dispute on the north-western border of India, and that Roja, a girl from a small remote village, who never left the village, hardly spoke any English, let alone a word in Hindi was completely ignored. These circumstances weren't merely accidental but poignantly highlight that even if Mani Ratnam's intention was to transcend regional and linguistic differences and celebrate the triumph of nationalism in the face of terrorism the border dispute and the language spoken by army officials were both alien and incomprehensible to the Tamil audience as experienced by Roja. The India represented in the film *Roja* slips between what Homi Bhabha (1994) termed as the *pedagogic* and the *performative*, simultaneously normalising and rupturing the imagining of the nation through the spectre of separatism, the threat to national security, linguistic divergence and cultural alienation. For the Telugu and Hindi audience, this disavowal of the Tamil subject engaging in national politics suggests in some sense the impossibility of a Tamil presence within the national narrative or space. It raises the question: does this mean that Tamils and Tamil cinema cannot articulate the nation for a non-Tamil speaking Indian audience?

It is commonly argued that Tamil cultural nationalism enacted through political movements such as the Dravidian movement led by Periyar R. Naicker (who founded the Justice Party in 1917), C. N. Annadurai (who led the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)) and his predecessor M. Karunadhi and M. G. Ramachandran (founder of the All-India Anna DMK (AIADMK)) was instrumental in the politicisation of Tamil culture and identity, which in many ways has worked against the notion of a homogeneous and unified Indian nation-state. The symbiosis between cinema and politics which is a unique characteristic of Tamil society with the past six Chief Ministers coming from the world of cinema further enshrined the political role of Tamil cinema in propagating a Dravidian and Tamil-centric nationalism. While both these connections are true of Tamil cinema, there is little written about the ways in which Tamil films construct and articulate the Indian 'nation' through the cinematic apparatus.

It is our argument that Tamil cinema has had a central role both in the colonial struggle and the postcolonial construction of Indian national

identity. To demonstrate this, we offer a critical survey of films in Tamil cinema history that both celebrates and unsettles the notion of an imagined India. We contend that Tamil cinema has always maintained an ambivalent relationship with the idea of the 'Indian' nation. At times, it has constructed a hermetically closed and homogeneous version of the nation (and nationalism) where the Tamils are represented as an entity embodying and embracing the singular identity of the nation. Conversely, the figure of the nation is contested through counter narratives which celebrate an essentialised notion of Tamil cultural and linguistic identity and which serve to challenge Hindi-centred nationalistic discourses. This ambivalent relationship is a response that is rooted in and emerges from the history of South Indian (Dravidian) secessionist politics, the anti-colonial movement, the post-colonial nation-building project, the DMK and AIADMK rule, national conflicts and more recently the threat of terrorism.

In attempting to establish Tamil cinema's (dis)engagement with the national project however complicit or contentious it may be, we also seek to complicate the notion of a national cinema in the Indian context.[4] The fact that Hindi language cinema or Bollywood is considered as India's national cinema and all the others labelled as 'regional cinemas' has meant that non-Hindi language cinemas are excluded both in popular and scholarly discussions as worthy of speaking or representing the nation. The term regional cinema accentuates the peripheral existence of non-Hindi language cinemas. This reinforces Mumbai cinema's special location (since the arrival of sound) both in the colonial and in the later postcolonial imagining of the Indian nation in the shadows cast by a north Indian, majoritarian Hindu and Hindi-speaking identity. The hegemonic and homogenising tendencies of an Indian national cinema effectively reduce the national cultural meanings produced through the lens of regional cinema as insignificant or irrelevant. While within the context of the Indian film industry, Tamil cinema is not seen as a national cinema, it is nevertheless a cinema concerned with the idea of the nation. We argue that any study of an Indian national cinema must acknowledge the contributions of regional cinemas to the overall imaginings of the Indian nation.

## 'India' in Tamil silent era cinema

The year 1916 marked the birth of Tamil cinema with the establishment of the first studio in Madras, the India Film Company, and the release of the first South Indian feature film, *Keechaka Vadham* (The Destruction of Keechakan), produced by R. Nataraja Mudaliar. While films made during this early period were mainly drawn from and based on traditional mythologies, they began 'to reflect, however dimly at first, the dynamic of the contemporary social and political currents' (Baskaran 2002). To begin with, there was a great deal of synergy (sharing of technological knowledge and expertise) between the various cinematic enterprises that arose across the Indian subcontinent. During the screening of silent films, title cards or

'inter-titles' as they were known, were used to convey the story and dialogue. As the Tamil film historian Randor Guy (1997) notes, these inter-titles were written in more than one language, which meant that films made in Madras were also screened all over India with the respective language inter-titles.

Not surprisingly, cinema emerged as a site where a large gathering of people assembled, breaking down caste hierarchies and fostering a sense of collective solidarity. In the words of Sivathamby (1981: 18), for the time 'all Tamils sat under the same roof'. And as anti-colonial struggles were gaining momentum across British India, filmmakers employed the allegories of morality and ethics found in Hindu mythology to politicise the freedom movement to circumvent the censors. However, it must also be emphasised that the filmmakers of this time were aware of the limitations of allegory, and supplemented this with the use of explicit symbols of nationalism as a means of social critique. One such film is Dwarkadas Sampat's *Bhakta Vidur* (The Saint Vidur, 1916), which was advertised as a *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) film, marking its political thrust and location, and in one particular scene, 'one of the main characters is imprisoned and in his cell he is depicted spinning thread and wearing a Gandhi cap, both palpable symbols of nationalism' (Baskaran, 2002). The marking of the film as *swadeshi* connects it to the swadeshi movement that was taking place as part of the larger independence struggle. The movement called on the people to boycott colonial British products and production techniques and revive domestic-made products through domestic production techniques. Such an intervention is a larger critique of the colonial project itself, which was built upon the logic of industrialisation. In another scene, Vidur, the saint, appears 'as Mr Gandhi, clad in Gandhi-cap and khaddar shirt'[5] (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 226). Added to these overt references to the independence movement in India at the time was a live musical score performed at every show that played a 'stridently nationalistic song in praise of the *charkha* (spinning wheel and Congress Party symbol)' (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 226) and called on the viewers to identify with the patriotic struggles that were going on during this time, in the wake of the Rowlatt Act (1919), and wage a war against the British rulers. On these grounds, the Indian Cinematographic Act banned the film.

Other Tamil films produced during this time, such as *Dharmapathini* (The Devoted Wife, 1929) and *Anadhaipenn* (Orphan Girl, 1931), marked a shift from the genre of mythology to 'the tradition of the socially conscious cinema' (Baskaran 2002) but nevertheless continued to draw attention to the political situation of that time by embracing and propagandising Gandhi's programme of social uplift. This was a time when Gandhi declared:

> the movement for freedom ... must first of all be 'a movement of self-purification', [and] withdrew from political action and concentrate[d] on what he called his 'constructive program' of cotton-spinning, home-spun weaving, and social reform, especially the fostering of Hindu-Muslim

> unity and the uplift of *harijans* (children of God), who still lingered in the dark corridors of Hindu society as untouchables.
>
> (Wolpert 1965:135)

The political rhetoric of Gandhi, premised upon the ideology of purification, was well embraced by the films aforementioned. *Dharmapathini*, for instance, confronted the issue of alcoholism and the domestic ruin it caused, while *Anadhaipenn* focused on the issue of a young woman abandoned by her father for insisting that she wished to marry the man she was in love with. They were, as Baskaran (1996: 7) suggests, charged with 'nationalistic ideas'. What we see during the period of the silent films in Tamil cinema therefore is the construction of an undifferentiated postcolonial idea of the nation, coalesced around an anti-colonial, pro-Gandhian sensibility.

## Gandhian nationalism and Tamil talkies

The arrival of talkies in 1931 saw the production and release of the first Tamil talkie *Kalidas*, which narrates the tale of Kalidas, a third century Sanskrit poet and playwright. While the central plot was not explicitly political, two song numbers, which were disconnected from the plot, and which were nationalistic in flavour linked 'the film to the Civil Disobedience Movement of the period: one song called for national unity [and] the other was in praise of the spinning-wheel [the symbol of Gandhi and the Congress Party]' (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 236). One particular director of Tamil cinema who took up the cause of the nationalist movement systematically through films was Krishnaswamy Subramanyam, who directed, amongst others, *Balayogini* (Child Saint, 1936), *Seva Sadanam* (House of Service, 1938), and *Thyagabhoomi* (The Land of Sacrifice, 1939). All three films store up references to Gandhi and the message of social reform or uplift as the first step toward independence and put forth a powerful critique of the caste system in India. In *Balayogini*, Subramanyam deals with the sanctity of caste, depicting the story of a Brahmin widow and her daughter who are compelled by circumstances to seek refuge in the home of a lower-caste servant after being cast out of their homes by wealthy relatives. The transgression that takes place enrages the Brahmins in the village, who react by setting the servant's house on fire. The engagement with the hierarchy of caste and the disruption of these categories upset the Brahmin community, who viewed the film as sacrilegious but this only spurred Subramanyam on to direct *Seva Sadanam* two years later, where he defends the cause of women's equality before making *Thyagabhoomi*. This is how Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1994: 263) describe the film:

> [*Thyagabhoomi* is] Subramanyam's best-known film and Tamil cinema's biggest 30s hit … a spirited contribution to the Independence movement, displaying Gandhian themes. Sambhu Sastry … is portrayed as

> the Gandhi of Tamil Nadu, sitting on a dais spinning with a charkha. The film includes inserts from documentary footage of Gandhi. The story, first published in the journal *Ananda Vikatan*, tells the story of Sastry the Brahmin priest and his daughter Savithri … It opens with Harijans waiting in front of a closed temple during a cyclone. Sastry is punished for sheltering them and he goes to Madras where, together with the Harijan Nallan, he embarks on Gandhian social uplift programmes including picketing liquor shops.

Further to this, they add that *Thyagabhoomi* pioneered 'the integration of melodrama with a symbol-laden political idiom later adopted by the DMK film, it has many scenes that resonate with local political meanings' (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 264). The film uses documentary footage of Mahatma Gandhi and makes an explicit reference to the Temple Entry Movement as depicted in the opening scene with the *harijans* waiting at the temple doors. The reference here is to the Vaikam *satyagraha* (passive resistance) from 1924 to 1925, which offered Gandhi the first opportunity to act on behalf of the *harijans* who were denied entry into temples and the use of roads outside the Vaikam temple in the state of Kerala. Gandhi negotiated with the Nambudri Brahmin trustees of the Vaikam temple and managed to convince the temple authorities to open the temple roads to all. Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, who first declared the *satyagraha* at Vaikam as the most important event in India, one year later recounted that the protests did not have the desired result. In fact, up until 1936 the Dalit community was not permitted to enter the temples. More crucially, while the Temple Entry Movement did manage to mobilise a large sector of the Hindu community, it was an insufficient strategy insofar as it failed to dismantle the entrenched caste system.[6] Such a self-critical reading of the event, however, does not take place within the film, which appeared some time after the first temple entry movement and three years after the removal of caste sanctions. In fact, it cannot be articulated, precisely because it goes against the very pure, uncontaminated, discourse of Gandhian nationalism and against a collective, unitary vision of anti-colonial Indian nationalism. The unproblematic representation of the Congress-led Gandhian form of nationalism reflects, as Dissanayake (1994: xvi) astutely observes, the way in which 'cinema is strategically used to reinforce the myth of the unitary nation and to interpellate the textual subjects as willing members of the nation.' What is going on here therefore is 'the principle of hermeneutic containment' (Mishra, 2002: 85), a selective and unproblematised rendition of the independence movement and Gandhi's call for social uplift without critically engaging with some of the failures of the independence project. The use of 'the principle of hermeneutic closure' as a discursive regulator (after Foucault), one that normalises and determines what can and cannot be articulated through the cinematic apparatus functions powerfully to mediate a version of what Dower (1986: 20) calls a 'virile national mentality'.

The consolidation and circulation of an untainted and unproblematic version of the nationalist movement led by Gandhi appear in various other films including *Vimochanam* (Salvation, 1939), *Matura Bhoomi* (Motherland, 1939), *Iru Sahodarargal* (Two Brothers, 1936), and *Gumastavin Penn* (Clerk's Daughter, 1941). In *Matura Bhoomi*, for instance, H. M. Reddy directs a nationalist allegory, focusing on an Indian king's resistance to Alexander the Great. It ends with a strong pronouncement of the triumph of nationalism and of personal sacrifice, most poignantly reflected through Kamundi, 'the real heroine … [who makes] her screen debut as a fiercely nationalistic character of the same name who throws out her husband Jayapala … when she learns that he is a Greek spy' (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 262). The affirmation of the national collective over the individual self, and the willingness of the individual to sacrifice for the collective national good, strongly resonates with the ideological thrust of much anti-colonial struggles where discourses of nation, land, origins, memory and heritage became foundational. Such conceptual categories permeate across the film, and two songs *Bharatha Desam* (The Country of Bharat) and *Namadhu Janma Bhoomi* (The Land of Our Birth) proved particularly popular with the audiences, 'the latter becoming a marching song widely used in schools' (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 262). In *Naam Iruvar* (The Two of Us, 1947), the narrative is framed by an opening which marks the anniversary of Mahakavi Subramaniya Bharathi, the renowned poet of Tamil nationalism and Indian freedom struggles and an ending that jubilantly celebrates Gandhi's 77th birthday. In addition, other national symbols and nationalistic slogans proliferate extensively across the film. The constant use of 'Jai Hind' as a means of greeting used by characters in the film is one such example.

It can therefore be argued that the narrative form of Tamil cinema participated in bringing to the fore a discourse of pan-Indian nationalism, homogenous in nature and committed to the nationalist struggle. In addition to the explicit references of support for the Congress Party through cinema, 'many [Tamil] film artists began taking direct part in politics and in the process lent their charisma to the nationalistic cause. Some went as delegates to National Congress sessions and many appeared with national leaders on political platforms' (Baskaran, 2002). In addition, as was the case during the silent era, most of the early Tamil talkies were often shot in Bombay, Pune or Calcutta where studio floors were hired and films were made by directors and technicians who did not know Tamil (Baskaran 1996). In some sense, Tamil cinema has always been historically intertwined with other locations of production in India while at the same time participating in the nationalistic project.

## Tamil ethno-nationalistic cinema

Alongside the nationalistic films, and as early as the late 1930s, there emerged a number of films that marked the entry of what Thoraval (2001:

318) calls 'an ethno-linguistic "nationalism", anti-Hindi and anti-north (India), and as its corollary the putting forward, in literature and on the screen, of the glories, languages and culture of the ancient "Dravidians"'. Films such as *Ambikapathy* (1937) and *Kambar* (1938) sought to open up a representational space within cinema for the dissemination of a sense of Tamil cultural nationalism. The release of these films coincided with the radicalisation of the Dravidian ideology in the 1930s, particularly after 'the introduction of compulsory Hindustani in 1938' (Barnett, 1976: 52), which saw the Dravidian movement engage in agitation politics against the Congress Party, which it had been supporting until then. The antagonism surrounding the compulsory introduction of Hindi as a national language marked the beginning of the affirmation of Tamil identity 'rooted in the Tamil literary movement of the early nineteenth century' (Chadda, 1997: 71).[7] Such a political position, one that strongly affirms Tamil nationalism as a separatist discourse, and as antithetical to the idea of a singular nation, is well played out in the two films through the figure of Kambar, the eleventh century Tamil poet who authored the Tamil version of the Ramayana. We suggest that the appeal to the spectre of Kambar in both films must be read as attempts to prise open the hegemony of Hindi and at the same time affirm the ideology and political thrust of the Dravidian movement. *Kambar* was released at the same time that anti-Hinduism agitation took hold in Tamil Nadu over the central government's decision to introduce 'Hindustani in certain schools as a compulsory subject' (Barnett 1976, 51), when 'the hope for rejuvenation of the Dravidian movement' (Barnett 1976, 65) began to have a firm grip on Tamil Nadu politics. The cinematic representation of Dravidianism played out through such films which, while not as dominant as those affirming the nationalist struggle, marked 'the cinema of Madras ... by two contradictory tendencies' (Thoraval 2001, 318). The latter tendency was to turn inward into an unproblematic, uncontaminated, and unchallenged notion of Dravidianism based on linguistic and cultural differences which became key categories that were mobilised during the period of the DMK and later AIADMK stranglehold of Tamil cinema.

The use of cinema for political purposes, namely the construction of an imagined community based on linguistic homogeneity, was one of the central themes that preoccupied postcolonial Tamil cinema. Compared to the lack of a body of work discussing the representation of the idea of the nation within early Tamil cinema, there exists a wide body of scholarship examining the relationship between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu, specifically the ways in which both the DMK and AIADMK mobilised cinema and disseminated the ideology of Dravidianism through the cinematic apparatus in postcolonial India. These studies have clearly established that a symbiotic relationship existed between Tamil cinema and Tamil Nadu politics (see Hardgrave 1973; Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993b). More crucially, this period signalled the robust contestation over the category of the nation, the terms upon which the idea of a postcolonial Indian nation is constituted

and the terms upon which such collectivities are constructed. It must be emphasised that while 'Tamil film became politicized as early as during the all-India national struggle; [it] remained for long inaccessible to wider audiences. DMK's mobilization phase coincided ... with rapid rural electrification' (Widlund 1993: 11). The use of the visual medium for political purposes during the DMK period was in large part an effect of the postcolonial nation-state's modernisation imperative as Nehru had imagined it. This is only one side of the argument however, because while there were approximately 1,500 cinema theatres in Tamil Nadu by 1971, 'it was only [the] DMK who initially saw and took advantage of cinema's potential for propaganda use' (Widlund 1993: 11). The DMK's strategic use of cinema, its symbiotic relationship with Tamil cinema in postcolonial India is significant insofar as it called into question the version of the imagined national community set up in and through the anti-colonial struggle. At a thematic level, films such *Velaikari* (Servant Maid, 1949), *Mandhirikumari* (The Minister's Daughter, 1950), *Parasakthi* (The Goddess, 1952), *Madurai Veeran* (The Soldier of Madurai 1956), *Sivagangai Seemai* (The Land of Sivagangai, 1959), *Veerapandiya Kattabomman* (The Hero Kattabomman, 1959), *Parthiban Kanavu* (Parthiban's Dream, 1960), *Pavamannippu* (Forgiveness of Sins, 1961), *Kappalotiya Thamizhan* (The Tamil Who Launched a Ship, 1961), *Tangaritinam* (Precious Stone, 1967), *Engal Thangam* (Our Beloved, 1970), and *Agraharathil Oru Kazhuthai* (A Donkey in the Brahmin Enclave, 1977) returned to the general theme of 'caste and language [which] were the principal bases of Tamil nationalism' (Chadda 1997: 71) so as to engender a radically different version of the postcolonial nation.

*Velaikari*, which was a film adaptation of a play by C. N. Annadurai, was released with 'the founding of the party' (Baskaran 1996: 104) and supports the main tenets of the DMK: 'the film is laced with anti-caste, anti-religious and socialistic rhetoric' (Baskaran 1996: 105). In effect, the narrative functioned to critique the caste-based, religiously driven, capitalist imperative that informed the postcolonial Nehruistic construction of the larger Indian nation. Supplementing such a narrative thrust, which we also see in other films such as *Mandhirikumari*, *Pavamannippu* and *Engal Thangam*, is another ideological projection, that of glorifying Dravidian cultural heritage. The use of the cinematic medium to affirm the hegemony of Dravidian culture has been well documented, particularly in the works of Dickey (1993b) and Hardgrave (1973) among others. The kinds of arguments advanced here focus upon the centrality of the medium to the political culture of Tamil Nadu, particularly the way in which cinema was used to champion 'the Dravidian Movement for non-Brahmin uplift in South India' (Hardgrave 1973: 290). Drawing from their earlier studies, we wish to extend the argument that the use of the celluloid screen for the mobilisation and projection of a Tamil ethno-nationalism functioned to contest the original narratives of the nation. The reinterpretation of the origin of the nation, through the glorification of Dravidian culture, seeks to suggest, as

'many Tamil scholars [have] pointed out, that Saiva Sidhanta, a specifically Tamil or Dravidian religion, predated the spread of Sanskritic civilization and establishment of Brahminical priesthood in India' (Chadda 1997: 71). While any affirmation of a narrative of origin(ary) is highly suspect (thanks to the poststructuralist intervention!), we argue that an appellation to a different point of origin of the Indian nation is poignant and powerful insofar as it interrupts the hegemonic version of the origin of the nation. The way in which *Parasakthi*, for example, draws upon Dravidian culture and politicises it can be seen through the opening film-song which reiterated the splendour of Dravidian heritage and the main themes of the film (triumph of rationalism over religiosity, anti-priesthood, self-respect). M. Karunanidhi (who wrote the screenplay) commented that the 'intention was to introduce the ideas and policies of social reform and justice … and bring up the status of the Tamil language as they were called for in DMK politics' (Hardgrave 1973: 292). The recoding of the status of the Tamil language and its relocation as central to the formation of a Tamil-nation became foundational not only to the political strategies of both the DMK and the AIADMK, but also became the mainstay of the ideological thrust of much of Tamil cinema. Here, the references to the legends and heroisms of the deities of Tamil Nadu (*Madurai Veeran*) and Tamil anti-colonial resistance (*Sivagangai Seemai*, *Veerapandiya Kattabomman* and *Kappalotiya Thamizhan*) dominate.

Similarly, Tamil film scholars like Hardgrave (1973, 1975), Pandian (1992), Dickey (1993a, 1993b), and Widlund (1993), have argued in their work that the centrality of the figure of M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) to the production and dissemination of a specific form of Tamil nationalism was articulated through the DMK and later the AIADMK. Here is Dickey (1993b: 55) at length on this point:

> Annadurai asked the young M. G. Ramachandran to star in one of his movies in the early 1950s. Ramachandran was a great success, and soon became a member of the DMK party. He and other movie stars were utilized to 'decorate' party functions and draw crowds. MGR began to use the DMK colours of red and black in his movies (after the switch to color in the late 1950s) and made frequent allusions to party policy and rhetoric, much of it anti-Congress. Injections of political spice became very popular in the 1950s and '60s, and it was said that no movie could succeed without some reference to the DMK. MGR, the main star allied with the DMK, gained a large and devoted following and soon controlled many aspects of his movies, using himself as the saviour of the poor.

Films such as *Nadodi Mannan* (Vagabond King, 1958), *Enga Vitu Pillai* (The Son of our Home, 1965), *Nam Nadu* (Our Country, 1969), *Adimai Penn* (Slave Girl, 1969) and *Engal Thangam* reproduced a stereotypical

image of a philanthropic, everyday hero: 'typical roles, like that of a vagrant who becomes king due to his exploits and who decides that each citizen should get a house and livestock' (Thoraval 2001: 321). The success of this formula is evident: MGR entered politics in 1953, used cinema strategically as a means of political communication and was Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu between 1977 and 1986. At the same time, the shift in political dominance of parties that MGR was associated with testifies to the success of the cinematic formula. The DMK, with which MGR was aligned until 1972, dominated state politics until the declaration of Emergency in 1975; it then lost the 1977 state elections to the AIADMK, the party that MGR founded. This shift in power block manufactured through the star status of MGR (and the off-shoots such as fan clubs, which Dickey (1993b) has examined closely in terms of its relationship to state politics) further testifies to the way in which the manufacturing and interpellation of an ethno-communal nationalism confronts the nation-state's subscription to an Indian nationalism through the instrument of cinema. In other words, it prises open the surety of the nation, built on the idea of a 'people', and 'turns the reference ... into a problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of modern social authority' (Bhabha 1994: 146) that takes place through the machineries of the nation-state. More precisely, in cataloguing the list of films above, which is by no means exhaustive, we have strived to demonstrate that the early postcolonial rendition of the idea of the nation, as reflected through Tamil cinema, both intervenes into a specifically ordered version of Indian nationalism and problematises the notion of a national cinema.

Another important feature of the DMK films that subverts the protocol of cinema itself is the strategic use of dialogue for political purposes. As Baskaran notes, the strategic use of dialogue took form at a particular time,

> when writers began using dialogue to echo the ideas of the Dravidian movement ... [and] reached its apogee when some leaders of the Dravidian movement entered the film industry as dialogue writers and used films for propaganda purposes, as C. N. Annadurai did with *Velaikari* ... M. Karunanidhi ... with the film *Marudanattu Ilavarasi* [and later] *Parasakthi* (Baskaran 1996: 64 5)

In addition, the use of dialogue did not obey the normal cinematic conventions of film dialogue, in that the leaders of the political party who scripted the dialogue wrote speeches 'that [were] meant for crowds at a political rally [but which were] delivered to the film audience' (Baskaran 1996: 67). The imposition of political oratory as cinematic dialogue was strategic insofar as it opened the possibility of exploiting film, converting it into 'a public address system ... where characters address not their fellow characters in the film but the camera in other words, the audience' (Baskaran 1996: 67). The use of long dialogues that profess the achievements of the

Dravidian culture, the plight of the poor and the untouchables, and the urgent need for social reform and justice exemplifies the way in which cinematic dialogue is appropriated for political purposes. The DMK also engaged in a politics of subterfuge as a means of combating the Congress-led censorship regulation deterring the use of cinema for political purposes, through the coding 'of double meanings in dialogue' (Hardgrave 1973: 294). The explicit and exemplary instance of this occurred through the production of the

> character called 'Anna' the Tamil word for older brother and the popular name for Annadurai who appeared in almost all the DMK films as a wise and sympathetic counsellor. In an historical film, for example, the dialogue might go, 'Anna, you are going to rule one day,' at which the audience would break into wild applause
>
> (Hardgrave 1973: 294)

Another example of the subterfuge that Hardgrave cites can be seen in the historical film *Kanchee Talivar* (Leader of Kanchee, 1963) which narrates the story of a

> Pallava king whose capital was the city of Kanchee (Kancheepuram). Not without coincidence, Annadurai was from Kanchee, and he was known as Kanchee Talaivar … The censors demanded a change of title, but, after all, [since] it did refer to a Pallava kingdom … the DMK got the title.
>
> (Hardgrave 1973: 294)

The appropriation of cinematic protocols for political communication, specifically a brand of politics that was divorced from that advanced by the postcolonial nation-state, serves to further demonstrate the ways in which Tamil politics and cinema interrupts the national cinema's project of discursively constructing a sense of a national people through cinema.

## Between Tamilian and Indian

By the late 1970s, Tamil nationalistic films were no longer the mainstay. With MGR at the helm as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1977 86, Tamil cinema became less engaged with Tamil and Indian national politics. This is not to argue that Tamil nationalistic sentiments are no longer reproduced in Tamil films. Along with pro-Tamil dialogues, lead stars like Vijayakanth, Sathiyaraj and Vijay have regularly played roles that conjure a strong sense of Tamil identity.

However, the emergence of Mani Ratnam in the 1990s marked a decisive shift in the relationship between Tamil cinema and Bombay cinema and simultaneously called into question the notion of an Indian national cinema.[8] Labelled 'a "Wunderkind" at Madras' by Thoraval (2001: 338), Ratnam debuted with *Pagal Nilavu* (Morning Darkness, 1985) but established

his credentials with *Nayakan* (The Hero, 1987), an Indian gangster film made in a 'Hollywood style pastiche [which] was controversial from its release because it echoes several decades of anti-Hindu and anti-north Indian Tamil political films' (Thoraval 2001: 339). However, the haunting spectre of a politics of difference (of origins, histories, language, culture, tradition and so on), of cultural nationalism that briefly emerged with *Nayakan* was quickly put to rest with the release of his trilogy *Roja* (Rose, 1992), *Bombay* (1994), and *Uyire* (Beloved, 1998) which 'began impacting Hindi cinema [read: national cinema] in a hitherto-unprecedented manner, ... [as they] straddled the divide between the realist art cinema of Satyajit Ray and his followers, and the song-and-dance studded, populist idiom of Bombay cinema' (Kabir 2003: 143). On the one hand, therefore, Ratnam's work closed the gap, the aesthetic differences that marked Tamil cinema as a regional cinema and aligned its stylistic form closer to that of Bombay cinema. The nationalising of the aesthetics of Tamil cinema through these films thus functioned to link it up with the aesthetic style of the paradigmatic style of Indian national cinema informed through Bombay cinema. This kind of realignment through what we may call the nationalisation of the aesthetic served to consolidate the position of Bombay cinema as paradigmatic, as *the* national cinema, rather than interrupt and interject into the dominant mode of national aesthetics that inform an Indian national cinemascape. On the other hand, as Niranjana (2000: 153 54) notes, as do other authors such as Kabir (2003), Dirks (2001), Vasudevan (2001) and Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998), 'the conjecture of nationhood and modernity [in Mani Ratnam's trilogy opens a space] in which the new citizen emerges [and] also produces a secularism that proclaims its transcendence of caste and religion'. In other words, unlike the centrifugal forces that characterised the politics of Tamil nationalism in cinema earlier, the post-1990s Tamil cinema is characterised by a centripetal tendency that consolidates the nation beyond and across the ethno-communal divide to build a common unified Indian nation-state. *Roja* for instance, which was awarded the President's National Integration Award, emerged after the assassination of Rajiv Gandi in 1991 in Tamil Nadu by suicide bombers from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. It cleansed the state of Tamil Nadu of its guilt precisely by showcasing:

> a Tamil hero sacrificing himself for the Indian nation in Kashmir ... even as it dramatically enacts the sudden change in Tamil political relations with the national state; after 1991, the Tamil Tigers were designated as enemies of all Indian Tamils and Jayalalitha's government associated itself more comfortably with mainline Indian nationalism than any previous DMK or AIADMK regime.
>
> (Dirks 2001: 162)

The shift in imagining the idea of the nation beyond ethno-communal borders that emerges in *Roja* can also be seen in films such as *Bombay* and

*Uyire*, particularly in terms of the ways in which larger national concerns are centralised within the narrative thrust of the films. In *Bombay*, the patriotic love story between a Hindu boy and Muslim girl is set against the 1993 Bombay riots; *Roja* is a patriotic love story set against the backdrop of Kashmir terrorism; and *Uyire* is located against the tensions (linguistic, regional, religious and ethno-cultural) that 'have regularly strained the federal centre-state framework … [and which] threaten[s] the State's secular credentials' (Kabir 2003: 141).

In all these instances, the nation is constructed well beyond the older form of a Dravidian nation and invites into the Tamil cinematic world 'other' narratives that make up the nation, to constitute a much more heterogeneous, complex and contradictory form of the national imaginary. The nation on screen is no longer simply bordered by and through ethno-specificities but is much more in contest, where other narratives, struggles and differences that make up the nation are brought to bear much more forcefully to open what has been a closed semiotic of the nation in Tamil cinema. Further to connecting the film to larger political events, to a 'sense of crisis of the Indian State' (Kaviraj 1997: 28) Mani Ratnam's 'national oriented' films have squarely placed Tamilians within the discursive and representational framework of the Indian nation. At the same time however, Tamil cinema remains at the margins regardless of its engagement with the national question only because of its limited success nationally and its tag as a regional cinema. By and large, Tamil cinema continues to straddle the issues of maintaining a sense of Tamilness and belonging to the Indian nation. And this relationship we argue remains thoroughly ambivalent.

## Conclusion

Over the course of the discussion, this chapter has strived to demonstrate that a reading of the way the national question has been played out within Tamil cinema, the various ways in which the idea of the nation is conjured, and the relationship of Tamil cinema to the supra-national Indian nation have been ambivalent. The history of Tamil cinema, from its early inception to its contemporary stylised form, is marked by competing, contradictory and sometimes complementary discourses that seek to affirm a specific postcolonial state-sanctioned version of nationalism, support the anti-colonial project of establishing a sovereign nation, critique the ways in which the postcolonial supra nation is imagined, as well as avow this very problematic collectivisation under the category of the larger Indian nation. This has been the first concern.

The second has been to suggest that the ambivalent and ambiguous relationship that Tamil cinema has had with the Indian nation, specifically the terms upon which the nation is constructed, problematises the notion of an Indian national cinema, which has been forever linked to Bombay cinema (and the culture industry of Bollywood). In other words, we are, in the shadow of Schlesinger (2000: 25), suggesting that this kind of a formulation

constructs the nation and national cinema in the singular, 'as singular'. This is the foundational assumption that occupies film studies and its conception of a national cinema, Schlesinger argues, and which also occupies a large body of work on Indian cinema. The point here is that the singularisation of national cinema masks the heterogeneity of Indian cinema, veils the ideological forces, presuppositions and interests that formulate an Indian national cinema qua Bombay cinema, and simplifies the notion of an Indian national cinema. In effect therefore, the project of singularisation serves to discursively construct Bombay cinema as paradigmatic of Indian cinema. Against this, we wish to suggest that a turn to Tamil cinema as proof-text not only serves to critique the efforts at singularising national cinema, but also more importantly signals the urgency of pluralising the idea of a national cinema in India. In his study on Australian national cinema, O'Regan (1996) makes a similar argument, through an examination of the cinematic industry's economies of production and distribution, transnational finance arrangements, its relationship to other national cinemas, and the representational limits of the national cinema, to suggest that any attempt at theorising an Australian national cinema must begin from the presupposition that an Australian national cinema is always already 'a hybrid assemblage of diverse elements, statuses and films' (O'Regan 1996: 4). It is a similar assumption that must be the starting point for an interrogation of Indian cinema so that we move away from a hermetically closed vision of Indian cinema as Bombay cinema and more importantly, open the possibility of conceptualising the various ways in which Tamil cinema has been simultaneously collaborative, complicit, and antagonistic to the project of nation building and yet remains at the margins of Indian cinema.

## Notes

1 The terrorists who also happen to be Muslims in the movie are depicted as India's 'other' not identifying with the Indian nation or willing to be a part of it.
2 Similarly, Mani Ratnam's next blockbuster *Bombay* (1994) is set against the backdrop of the communal riots in Mumbai following the destruction of the A Babri Mosque. Here too, the story begins in a Tamil Nadu village where a Hindu journalist Shekhar falls in love and marries a Muslim girl, Shaila Bano. The newly weds elope to Mumbai and later are embroiled in the communal riots.
3 For more on the '*Roja* Debate', see; Niranjana 1994a, 1994b; Chakravarty and Pandian 1994; Srinivas 1994; Vasudevan 1997; and Dirks 2001.
4 The concept of a national cinema, as Dissanayake (1994: xiii) argues, 'privileges ideas of coherence and unity and stable cultural meanings associated with the uniqueness of a given nation. It is imbricated with national myth making and ideological production and serves to delineate alterities and legitimize selfhood.'
5 *Bhakta Vidur* marked Dwarkadas Sampat's first politically subversive, pro Gandhian, film. This political thrust was further continued by the studio (Kohinoor Film), which produced political documentaries representing Sampat's Gandhian nationalist adherence (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 226).
6 For an engaging discussion on the Temple Entry Movement, its pertinence as well as its limitations, see Chandra (1998: 230 234) and Zelliot (1992: 160 165).

7 It should be added that while the Dravidian movement found ideological (re) source in Tamil culture, civilisation and heritage as discursive foundations for the formation of a viable sense of cultural nationalism and autonomy in Tamil Nadu, the movement, 'spearheaded mainly by Tamil leadership, went through many phases, from the narrow anti Brahminism of the pro British Justice party to the more militant and radical Self Respect movement ... which dominated Tamil Nadu from the mid 1920s to the end of the 1940s' (Chadda, 1997: 72).

8 We should add that some of Kamal Hassan's films such as *Indian* (1996) and *Hey Ram* ('O God', 2000) also bring to the fore Tamilness within the national body politic.

## References

Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Barnett, M. R. (1976) *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Barnouw, E. and Krishnaswamy, S. (1980) *Indian Film*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Baskaran, T. (1996) *The Eye of the Serpent: An Introduction to Tamil Cinema*. Madras: East West Books.

(2002) 'The Roots of South Indian Cinema', *The Journal of the International Institute*, 9(2), University of Michigan: Scholarly Publishing Office. Available online at: www.umich.edu/~iinet/journal/vol9no2/baskaran cinema.html (accessed 23 August 2005).

Bhabha, H. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Burra, R. (ed.) (1981) *Film India: Looking Back, 1896 1960*. New Delhi: The Directorate of Film Festivals.

Chadda, M. (1997) *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Chakravarty, S. (1996) *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947 1987*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

(2000) 'Fragmenting the Nation: Images of Terrorism in Indian popular cinema', M. Hjort and S. Mackenzie (eds) *Cinema and Nation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Chakravarty, V. and Pandian, M. S. S. (1994) 'More on Roja', *Economic and Poli tical Weekly* 29(11): 642 644.

Chandra, B. (ed.) (1998) *India's Struggle for Independence: 1857 1947*. New Delhi: Viking.

Dickey, S. (1993a) *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. Cambridge: Cam bridge University Press.

(1993b) 'The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 52(2): 340 372.

Dirks, N. B. (2001) 'The Home and the Nation: Consuming Culture and Politics in *Roja*', in R. Dwyer and C. Pinney (eds) *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Dissanayake, W. (1994) 'Introduction: Nationhood, History, and Cinema: Reflec tions on the Asian Scene', in W. Dissanayake (ed.) *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Dower, J. W. (1986) *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Dutt, N. (2005) 'Expression of Freedom', *The Tribune* (14 August 2005). Available online at: www.tribuneindia.com/2005/20050814/spectrum/main1.htm (accessed 8 September 2005).

Dwyer, R. and Pinney, C. (eds) (2001) *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Garga, B. D. (1996) *So Many Cinemas: The Motion Picture in India*. Mumbai: Eminence Designs.

Gokulsing, K. M. and Dissanayake, W. (1998) *Indian Popular Cinema A narrative of cultural change*. Staffordshire: Trentham Books.

Gopalan, L. (1998) 'Tamil Cinema Conference', *Screen*, 39(2): 196 200.

Gupta, C. D. (1969) 'Indian Cinema Today', *Film Quarterly*, 22(4): 27 35.

Guy, Randor. (1997) *Starlight, Starbright The Early Tamil Cinema*. Chennai: AMRA publishers.

Hardgrave, R. (1964 65) 'The DMK and the Politics of Tamil Nationalism', *Pacific Affairs*, 37(4): 396 411.

(1973) 'Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK', *Asian Survey*, 13(3): 288 305.

(1975) 'When Stars Displace the Gods: The Folk Culture of Cinema in Tamil Nadu', *Occasional Papers Series, No. 3*. Centre for Asian Studies, University of Texas, Arlington.

Kabir, A. J. (2003) 'Allegories of Alienation and Politics of Bargaining: Minority Subjectivities in Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se*', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 1(2): 141 159.

Kaviraj, S. (1997) 'Introduction', in S. Kaviraj (ed.) *Politics in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Mishra, V. (2002) *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. London and New York: Routledge.

Nandy, A. (ed.) (1998) *The Secret Politics of Our Desire: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Niranjana, T. (1994a) '*Roja* Revisited', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29(21): 1299.

(1994b) 'Whose nation? Tourists and Terrorists in *Roja*', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24(3): 79 82.

(2000) 'Nationalism Reconfigured: Contemporary South Indian Cinema and the Subject of Feminism', in P. Chatterjee and P. Jeganathan (eds) *Subaltern Stu dies XI: Community, Gender and Violence*, New York: Columbia University Press.

O'Regan, Tom. (1996) *Australian National Cinema*. London: Routledge.

Pandian, M. S. S. (1992) *The Image Trap: M. G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Prasad, M. (1998) *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Rajadhyaksha, A. and Willemen, P. (1994) *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Schlesinger, P. (2000) 'The Sociological Scope of "National Cinema"', in M. Hjort and S. Mackenzie (eds) *Cinema and Nation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Sivathamby, K. (1981) *Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication*. Madras: New Century Books.

Spivak, G. C. (1989) 'Who Claims Alterity?', in B. Kruger and P. Mariani (eds) *Remaking History: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*. Seattle: Bay Press.

Srinivas, S. V. (1994) '*Roja* in Law and Order State', *Economic and Political Weekly* 29(20): 1225 1226.

Thoraval, Y. (2001) *The Cinemas of India*. New Delhi: Macmillan.

Vasudevan, R. S. (1997) 'Voice, Space, Form: *Roja* (Maniratnam, 1992), Indian Film and National Identity', in Stuart Murray (ed.) *Not On Any Map: Essays on Post coloniality and Cultural Nationalism*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

(2000) 'The politics of cultural addresses in a "transitional" cinema: a case study of Indian popular cinema', in C. Gledhill and L. Williams (eds) *Reinventing Film Studies*. London: Arnold.

(2001) 'Bombay and Its Public', in R. Dwyer and C. Pinney (eds) *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Widlund, Ingrid. (1993) *A vote for MGR: Transaction and Devotion in South Indian Politics*. Uppsala, Sweden: Department of Government, Uppsala University.

Wolpert, S. (1965) *India*. New Jersey: Princeton Hall, Inc.

Zelliot, E. (1992) 'Gandhi and Ambedkar: A Study in Leadership', in E. Zelliot (ed.) *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications: 160 165.

# 11 The diaspora and the global circulation of Tamil cinema

*Selvaraj Velayutham*

> Till now, you enjoyed novel, song and dance. The children of this lovely land, instead of crawling in the lap of this motherland, go abroad and suffer. When thinking of this, what a learned person once said comes to mind. If we ask, why is the sea water so salty? He said, it is because Tamils who have gone to foreign lands without having the means to live in their own country and the ceaseless tears shed by them are its cause. It seems, here my would be wife Kalyani has not seen her brothers. Reason; at an early age, they all went to Rangoon. Worse than this, so many families, young people, are in Malaya rubber estates, in South Africa and in Sri Lanka! They all must return to this motherland!

These are the opening lines from the movie *Parasakthi* (1952) scripted by M. Karunanidhi, the veteran politician and leader of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). It is to my knowledge the earliest reference to the Tamil diaspora found in Tamil cinema. The movie opens with a Bharatanatyam dance recital accompanied by a song that celebrates the beauty, wealth and glory of the Dravida Nadu (the land of the Dravidians) and, in particular, the Tamil country, its people, culture and language. As the performance ends, a member of the audience comes to the stage to congratulate the dancers and delivers this speech. The speaker describes the woeful existences of Tamils overseas toiling as plantation workers and coolies in Malaya, South Africa and Sri Lanka. And emphatically calls for their return back to the motherland.

Although it was the harsh socio-economic reality of Tamil Nadu which forced large number of Tamils to migrate overseas as indentured labourers and coolies, *Parasakthi* makes no mention of this. Rather the Tamil homeland is revered and idealised as a land of plenty and abundance. And it is only unfortunate that Tamils had to go abroad to seek employment. As has been well documented, the movie *Parasakthi* was the DMK's first major political and propagandistic movie (Hardgrave 1973, Baskaran 1996, Pandian 2000, Thoraval 2000). The story revolves around the protagonist Gunasekaran, played by Sivaji Ganesan from a middle-class migrant family living in Rangoon, Burma at the start of the Second World War. On his homecoming to Tamil Nadu to attend his sister's wedding, Gunasekaran falls victim to an embezzler and finds himself in a difficult situation, and

unable to meet his sister.[1] Following this misfortune, Gunasekaran begins acting like a mad person and takes on the role of a 'social critic' challenging and exposing social injustices suffered by disenfranchised and marginalised people in Tamil society.

In some sense, *Parasakthi* is not a movie about the Tamil diaspora per se. Even the idea of the 'returning migrant' is never interrogated but rather is used here as a narrative device to promote the DMK's political ideology and convey the message of anti-Congressism, anti-Brahminism, egalitarianism, social reformation, and Tamil nationalism (Pandian 2000). Nevertheless, *Parasakthi*'s recognition and articulation of Tamil labour migration and diaspora, a first in Tamil cinema history, is significant in itself. This is because, to a large extent, Tamil cinema remains inwardly focused. In its ninety years of existence, Tamil cinema has only occasionally ventured overseas to cinematically engage the diaspora despite the long history of Tamil migration overseas. Often, Tamil diasporic communities are absent in the films even though they exist in those locations. Unlike the character of Gunasekaran, when diasporic Tamils are depicted, they usually take on minor roles and are characterised as being wayward and uncultured. The overall intent is to generate comic effect or construct them as different, culturally incompatible and their habitus, in a Bourdieuian sense, dissimilar to an Indian Tamil. Tamil cinema's relative disinterest in dealing with the Tamil diaspora has to do with its highly circumscribed history.

Much of Tamil cinema's preoccupation has been in the generation of entrenched ideas of Tamil culture, tradition and ethno-linguistic nationalism. Its primary audience are Tamils. With an estimated population of 64 million Tamils in Tamil Nadu alone, and movies dubbed or made in other Indian languages (frequently into Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada and Hindi), it can be argued that the Tamil film industry is steadfastly committed to the local Indian market. Outside India, the Tamil-speaking population numbers around 8 million. Unlike the trends in Bollywood cinema since the late 1990s, where explicit connections are made to the Indian diaspora (largely Hindi speaking), catering to their sensibilities and cultural consumption, Tamil cinema has yet to discover the economic potential of its global audience. Tamil cinema remains very much a medium that caters exclusively to the Tamil population in India. As such, Tamil diasporic communities remain relatively insignificant in both Tamil cinematic content and marketing. Having said that, for the Tamils in the diaspora, Tamil Nadu and the specific popular entertainment form of cinema is a key site of Tamil cultural production and resource. In particular, Tamil cinema is highly significant in the reproduction of culture, tradition and identity in the context of the diaspora.

In this paper, I explore two inter-related issues concerning Tamil cinema in the global context. First, I examine the ways in which Tamil cinema represents Tamil diasporic subjects and communities and second, I map the global flows and consumption of Tamil cinema. I begin with a discussion of

movies that feature diasporic Tamils and locations. Although there are only a small number of movies that feature diasporic Tamils, they nevertheless provide a good indication as to how the homeland imagines overseas Tamils. My main aim here is to critically reflect on why Tamil cinema remains focused on itself in both the making and marketing of films as compared to Bollywood which has successfully captured a global market audience. I also examine the small but emerging field of diasporic Tamil film production. In the second half of the paper, I provide an overview of the history of Tamil migration and diasporic communities outside India and the global circulation of Tamil cinema in its various forms.

## Diasporic Tamils in Tamil films

As early cinema was dominated by mythological and historical stories (from the major epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, Puranas and folklores) there were no movies that tackled topics or issues relating to overseas Tamils. However, during the Second World War, as part of the 'war-efforts', the British colonial government funded several movies that incorporated overseas Tamils. These propaganda films were aimed at discrediting and overthrowing the Japanese military occupation. The movies *Manasamrakshanam* (1944), *Burma Rani* (1945) and *Kannamma En Kathali* (1945) were set against the backdrop of the Second World War and involved Indian subjects foiling Japanese war attacks and liberating Burma from Japanese rule. In *Burma Rani*, for instance, three British-Indian airmen shot down over Burma join the local Indian resistance movement to liberate the country from Japanese occupation. These films were essentially an attempt on the part of the British to bring the war closer to home. At the start of the war, there were an estimated 280,000 Indians living in Burma and more than 60 per cent were South Indians (Sandhu and Mani 1993). The depiction of Tamil migrants in Burma and their involvement in the war merely reinforced British colonial rule and the role of the diaspora in the colonial project.

With the gradual transition from the mythological to the 'social' genre in the early 1950s, Tamil cinema began referencing and representing distant places, scenes and people. Numerous films have been shot partially or entirely outside India. Significantly, the trend of shooting song and dance sequences in exotic and popular locations has become an established norm in Tamil cinema. In recent years, the pursuit of new and interesting overseas locations, albeit extraneous to the narrative and setting of the film, has intensified, so much so that at least one song and dance sequence is always shot overseas.

One of the earliest movies to be shot overseas was *Sivantha Mann* (1969). In this movie, the song and dance sequences starring Sivaji Ganesan and Kanchana were filmed in the Swiss Alps and Paris. In *Ullagam Sutrum Vallibhan* (1973) a James Bond style drama, M. G. Ramachandran plays a scientist who is being pursued by a villainous professor across Asia. The

movie was shot in Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Thailand. Singapore and Malaysia were the main locations for the shooting of *Priya* (1978), *Varuvan Vedi Velan* (1978), and *Ninaithaale Inikum* (1979). In *Jeans* (1998), we get a glimpse of a Tamil family running an Indian restaurant in Los Angeles. In *Nala Damayanthi* (2003), Ramji (played by Madhavan), a poor Palghat Brahmin, travels to Melbourne to work as a cook for a Tamil family to raise funds for his sister's dowry.

In addition to filming at overseas locations, Tamil movies have also drawn on returning migrants and Tamil diasporic subjects. As we saw earlier, *Parasakthi* introduced the returning migrant as a character in Tamil cinema. In *Thenali* (2000) and *Virumandi* (2003), KamalHassan plays the role of a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee suffering from war trauma and in need of psychiatric care and a returning migrant from Singapore caught in the middle of a clan dispute respectively. It is worth noting that the diasporic trope played out in these films continues to be entrenched in an older version of diasporic consciousness where the notion of a returning migrant holds centre stage. They do not therefore entertain the possibility that some migrants may not have any desire to return to their homeland. Neither do they complicate the 'in-between' status of the returnees and the likelihood that they may want to emigrate again.

Both Santosh Sivan's *The Terrorist* (1999) and Mani Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002) changed the representation of diasporic Tamil subjects. *The Terrorist*, a multi-award winning art film, was inspired by the death of Rajiv Gandhi in 1992 by a suicide bomber. It is an emotive and psychologically intense story of a pregnant, militant woman on a suicide mission, who has to choose between life and death. Although the film does not name names or places, it is not difficult to surmise that the woman is a Sri Lankan Tamil Tiger soldier. In *Kannathil Muthamittal,* another movie that uses the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict as its backdrop, a young Sri Lankan Tamil girl, Amudha, is abandoned by her mother and adopted by an Indian Tamil couple. When the news of her adoption is revealed, Amudha is eager to learn more about her biological parents. The rest of the movie takes the audience to Sri Lanka, set against the backdrop of high tension and suicide bombs. Here were two movies that highlighted for the first time some of the predicaments and impacts of the Sri Lankan conflict on women and children. Moreover, they deal with a diasporic community that hardly gets a mention in cinema.

Other instances where the film narrative engages with overseas Tamils include *Ninaithaale Inikum* (1979), *M. Kumaran son of Mahalakshmi* (2004) and *Pudukottaiyilirindu Saravanan* (2004). In *Ninnaithale Innikum*, Chandru (played by KamalHassan) is in a pop band about to embark on their first tour abroad. A female fan, Sonia (Jayapradha) appears in his hotel room. After a brief flirtation, she disappears but returns again sitting next to Chandru on the board the plane to Singapore. While in Singapore, KamalHassan is stunned to find Sonia dancing in a nightclub and later lying

intoxicated on a roadside. Finally, Sonia reveals all to Chandru. She had lost her money in Madras and agreed to smuggle drugs for a friend in exchange for a free ticket. She chanced upon Chandru and planted the drugs in his guitar. Unfortunately, Chandru did not bring his guitar to Singapore and so Sonia had to resort to dancing in a nightclub to pay off her friend. Eventually the thug is handed over to the police. Chandru and Sonia reconcile. In the film *M. Kumaran son of Mahalakshmi* the hero's father Eshwar abandons his pregnant wife and marries a Malaysian Tamil. The son Kumaran now in his late teens is forced to reconcile with his father in Malaysia. There father and son unite as Kumaran rescues his wayward stepsister from being raped. In *Pudukottaiyilirindu Saravanan*, the upcoming actor, Danush plays the role of a naïve young man going off to work as a labourer in Singapore (and Malaysia). After a scuffle with a fellow worker which results in death, Danush is forced to flee. In the meantime, he is tasked to escort Shalu (Aparna), a Singaporean Tamil girl to her parents in India. The two of them make their way overland travelling through Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar to reach Tamil Nadu in the end.

It is my argument that the representations and characterisation of overseas and diasporic Tamils in Tamil cinema are highly problematic and stereotyped. Often the spoken Tamil (especially the intonation) of the diasporic subjects is exaggerated to create a comic effect. In *Ninnaithale Innikum* and *Pudukottaiyilirindu Saravanan*, the diasporic characters speak Tamil with a Singaporean accent and this is ridiculed. Another major feature, as we have seen above, is that diasporic subjects (usually females) are generally portrayed as dubious and culturally unrefined characters. The characters of Sonia, Kumaran's stepsister and Shalu are all represented as stereotypical 'modern' women, dressed in western clothes the assumption here is that they lack modesty and are sexually liberated. While Tamil women in the diaspora enjoy greater autonomy and opportunities compared to India, this truth in many ways is caricatured in the movies. The independent, self-confident and successful diasporic Tamil woman automatically becomes an arrogant, 'loose' and sexualised object to be rescued by the Indian Tamil hero. He is morally upright and the guardian of Tamil culture and tradition. He intervenes and restores the Tamil cultural and patriarchal order. In the end, the diasporic women, once promiscuous, immoral and bad are transformed into good, traditional sari-clad women. Equally, the domestication of the socio-culturally 'wayward' diasporic heroine parallels the trends in what Kaali (2000) terms the 'Old Nativity Film' genre in Tamil cinema between 1950s and 1970s. Here, the hero, usually a rustic tenant farmer, finds himself taming an educated and urbane woman. According to Kaali (2000: 170), 'what the male lacks [in terms of caste, class or education] is disavowed and displaced onto the figure of the woman'. In the end, the rustic hero is reaffirmed as the site of cultural authenticity and rootedness. To paraphrase Mishra (2002: 267 269), Tamil cinema represents the homeland (the hero) as the 'crucible of timeless dharmic virtues' and those

'perennial values that a diaspora should aspire towards, and desire'. However, films depicting diasporic female subjects (as in the case of the Old Nativity Film genre) are also an expression of male fantasy, voyeurism and a desire for the exotic. The figure of the westernised, modern heroine is not only irresistible but signals the ambivalence in the Tamil imagination of place and identity that must be marked. Ultimately, as an object of desire, she remains powerless under the patriarchal and homeland gaze.

Of course, there is no compulsion for filmmakers to be concerned with the diaspora. Notwithstanding the genres, national or regional cinemas don't often narrate stories about their respective diasporas. Usually, it is the migrants and the children of migrants who engage in the making of films about the conditions of the diaspora and (dis)connections to the homeland (see Desai 2004). Of course, this does not mean that the diaspora is never articulated and represented in national or regional cinemas. In the case of Tamil cinema, they are often incidental, playing minor roles and functioning as plot mechanisms. While Tamil cinema has ventured overseas (especially in the production of song and dance sequences), its relationship with Tamil diasporic communities is blasé and at times deeply problematic. Even the existence of Tamil communities outside India does not appear on screens. In the Tamil cinema's version of the diaspora, diasporic Tamils are caricatured as having lost their cultural moorings and identity. Such representational idioms connect with early theorisations of diaspora which assume that those of the diaspora are culturally diluted, having foregone the space and time of the homeland.

It is well documented that since the mid-1990s, following the liberalisation of the Indian economy, there has been an 'increasing visibility of diasporic Indians in Hindi cinema'. As Malhotra and Alagh (2004: 28) point out:

> the Indian film industry has understood that Indian diasporic communities (particularly Indians residing in North America and Europe) represent an important audience in that these diasporic Indians not only have wealth to invest in India but also constitute a very important market for exploitation. Therefore, it is important to re-appropriate these Indians into the dream of the Indian nation.

While this is certainly true of Bollywood, Tamil cinema is lagging behind in the ways in which it addresses diasporic Tamils. The precise reasons as to why this has been the case is difficult to ascertain. However, it is my view that three factors have contributed to the parochial orientation of the Tamil film industry.

### *Economic potential of the diasporic and global audiences*

Tamil cinema's lack of interest in the Tamil diaspora may well be due to its focus of keeping the narratives and characters relevant to the local Indian

Tamil audience. The population of the state of Tamil Nadu remains the single largest market for Tamil films. For these audiences, films depicting diasporic Tamils appear to be less attractive. For them, Tamil cinema is about Tamils for Tamils in India. Even the second largest Tamil community outside India residing in Sri Lanka, as we have seen, is rarely represented in Tamil cinema.

As highlighted earlier, the turning point for Bollywood was in the mid-1990s. It corresponded with the opening of the Indian economy, which coincided with an emerging Indian middle class and an already existing middle class diasporic population in places like the United States and United Kingdom. This meant that Bollywood was able to produce and fashion movies specifically to appeal to this demography. As observed by many film scholars, the 1990s witnessed the arrival of affluence, wealth and wholesome middle to upper middle class Indian films based on a highly popular genre of domestic drama (Mishra 2002). In comparison, it seems that Tamil cinema in particular did not experience a similar wave of middle class appeal. This is further supported by the fact that the traditional pattern of migration of Tamils (especially under the British) to places like Sri Lanka, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia and Singapore, was mainly from the lower castes (Sandhu and Mani 1993, Satyanarayana 2002, Velayutham and Wise 2005). These Tamil migrants were predominately employed in the British colonial economy as coolies, rubber tappers, sugar cane cutters and so forth. Thus, the caste and class disposition of the Tamils overseas does not mirror the North Indian pattern of migration. By and large, many of the North Indians in the United States and Europe have been economically very successful. The main exception here would be the Indians in Fiji, Guyana and the West Indies. This is not to suggest that Tamils are entrenched in lower class positions. There is of course a large cohort of educated, professional, wealthy and successful Tamils living in the diaspora. However, this is certainly not a majority. So comparatively speaking, the diasporic Tamil population has not presented itself as a potential market for Tamil filmmakers.

Equally, the hegemony of Bollywood within the global Indian cinema market has had a major impact on not just Tamil but also other Indian language film circulation. Since Hindi cinema is in a dominant position when it comes to distribution channels and promotion outlets worldwide, that is to say, more films are shown in theatres, state-run and commercial terrestrial and satellite TV networks and film festivals, other Indian language films don't often have similar access. For instance, in the last five years, only one Tamil film was screened during the Sydney International Film Festival compared to an entire segment devoted annually to Bollywood films.[2]

### *Tamil identity and nationalism*

As I pointed out in the introduction, regional cinema in India, apart from the linguistic differences, also differ from Bollywood cinema in that they are

strongly based around state based nationalism. This is extremely significant because, while Bollywood represents to its local and global audience a kind of pan-Indian cultural identity whereby the territorial, cultural and ethno-linguistic identity of India's diverse population becomes narrowed and compressed into an Indian identity which exalts the notion of a Hindi speaking, Hindu, middle class Indian Tamil cinema persistently aims at anchoring Tamil identity. As Benegal (2002) argues:

> the cultural characteristics and representations in regional language films are specific to the region where the language is spoken and distribution is restricted to that region [ ... ] In South Indian film circles this characteristic is loosely referred to as 'nativity'. A film not imbued with 'nativity' was criticized for its lack of cultural moorings and considered devoid of authenticity and conviction.

### *The Tamil diasporic imaginary*

Interestingly, while Bollywood cinema showcases Indians in the diaspora as well as producing movies to appeal to them, what happens in the process is a kind of packaging of visual imageries, fantasy, and the desire for a different life as lived in the homeland and in the West. As such, recent Bollywood films represent a particular version of India (mostly beautiful, nostalgic, affluent and celebratory) that supposedly appeals to the diasporic audience. According to Malhotra and Alagh (2004: 25) 'the high visibility of diasporic Indians in Hindi cinema is intimately connected to Indian identities being transformed and differently imagined'. Taking this viewpoint, it can be argued that the low visibility of diasporic Tamils suggests that Tamil identity itself is held as fixed and narrowly defined. It may even be suggested that a Tamil diasporic imaginary is not as well developed as is assumed in Bollywood, albeit that there is clearly a huge, temporary, migrant population residing in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In this sense, Tamil cinema is packaged as is for the local and global market and with no or little impetus to offer something different.

In positing these explanations, I am not arguing that Tamil cinema is disconnected from its diasporic and non-Tamil speaking audience. It is argued that the genre of 'domestic dramas' and spate of movies that told stories of NRI (Non Resident Indians) life in popular Hindi cinema in the 1990s, were hugely successful in the Indian diaspora. Although they adopted similar genre format they weren't always about NRIs. As I show later, despite the large number of Tamils relocating overseas as economic migrants, Tamil cinema has not emulated Bollywood's strategy of capitalising on the NRI market. However, there is an emerging trend in Tamil cinema that may appeal to a global audience. In recent years, 'movies that base their stories in the Tamil village milieu are slowly losing flavour and

more city-based tales are being filmed' (*The Hindu* 30 December 2005). Movies that centre on and celebrate rural and farming life, caste affiliations and village-based stories are becoming infrequent. Instead, the city as a backdrop and middle-class centred scene settings are now popular cinematic devices in Tamil films. Perhaps this approach, while retaining the particularities of Tamil cultural practices and situated in an urban context, can generate global interest in Tamil cinema.

## Diasporic Tamil Cinema

The Tamil film industry located in Kodambakkam, Chennai is no doubt one of the largest in the world. Outside India, Tamil film production has had mixed outcomes.[3] Given that the Chennai film industry is well established and an average of one hundred films is released annually, there has been little need for alternative film production. In addition, the funding and resources available to diasporic filmmakers are minimal and the diasporic cinema market is relatively small, given the size of the Tamil population in these locations. Moreover, diasporic Tamil are less attracted to their local ventures as they invariably compare it with Tamil films from India. However, South Asian diasporic film production both in English and Hindi started in the mid-1970s in Britain, Canada and the United States. Some of the commercially successful films include Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1988); Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993); Srinivas Krishna's *Masala* (1991); and Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991).

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the Sri Lankan Tamil cinema and more recently emerging Malaysian Tamil cinema have provided some interesting offerings. According to Jeyaraj (1999), Tamil cinema in Sri Lanka has yet to grow beyond its nascent stage. One of the reasons for this, Jeyaraj argues, is that:

> Sri Lankan Tamils have been a constructive component of Sinhala cinema right from its inception ... The pre-1983 period saw a large number of Tamils become part and parcel of the Sinhala film industry as producers, directors, cinematographers, music directors, sound directors, technicians and musicians. In fact, the owners of some of the major studios and theatres were Tamils. But with the post-1983 developments in the island, the Tamil presence in Sinhala cinema has become virtually non-existent.

The Sinhala film industry largely financed and regulated by the Sri Lankan government has had variable successes. With Sri Lankan Tamils relying exclusively on South Indian Tamil films and the flourishing Sinhala film industry, the production of Tamil films in Sri Lanka was unviable as a business venture. The first Sri Lankan Tamil movie was *Samuthayam* (1962)

an adaptation of C. N. Annadurai's *Velaikkari*. This however, was shot on 16 mm film, and was produced and directed by a Sinhalese, Henry Chandrawansa. The first Sri Lankan Tamil film in standard 35 mm was *Thottakkari* (1962). A film based on a plantation worker and directed by M. P. S. Krishnakumar. Among some of the noteworthy Sri Lankan Tamil films are *Kuthuvilakku*, *Ponmani* and *Vadakkattru*. The first two dealt with the practice of dowry and the third with the tensions between migratory and indigenous fishermen and was shot against the backdrop of Neduntheevu Island in the north-west of Sri Lanka.

In Malaysia, the first locally made movie, *Naan Oru Malaysian* (early 1980s), was produced by Sugan Panchacharam. However, it was not well received by the local Tamil moviegoers. Other Malaysia Tamil movies such as *Chemman Sallai* (2005), *Andaal* and *Uyir* were released and received a lukewarm response. *Chemman Sallai* (The Gravel Road) is a period film set in a rubber estate. It portrays some of the social and cultural conditions of the Malaysian Indians living in the rubber estate (mostly through the British indentured labour), notably the hardship and poverty faced by Indian plantation workers. The female lead, a young girl, is determined to escape from her family's cycle of poverty. More recently, *Ethirkaalam* (2006) hailed as a movie made for Malaysian Indians tells a story of young people struggling to overcome gangsterism and anti-social behaviour.

Given the high cost associated with the production of full-length feature films, the limited talent pool and audience, Tamil diasporic film production remains relatively small. Since the on-going demand for Tamil films made in Chennai continues to grow, it is more likely that diasporic films will continue to remain on the periphery of Tamil film production.

## The Tamil diaspora and global Tamil cinema circuits

The Indian diaspora community is one of the largest and fastest growing diasporas in the world. According to the Government of India's *Indian Diaspora Report 2001* there are well over 20 million Indians living in the diaspora. Theorists of Indian diaspora argue that the dispersal of Indians across the globe took place at two distinct historical moments. Often referred to as a labour diaspora (see Cohen 1997), Indian migration occurs first during the European colonial period and again in the second half of the twentieth century. Mishra (2002) points out that colonial capitalism produced significant and large-scale movement of indentured labour to the colonies, establishing in his words, 'the old Indian diaspora of plantation labour'. The second occasion he argues is a 'late-1960s phenomenon distinguished by the movement of economic migrants into the metropolitan centres of the former empire as well as the New World and Australia' (Mishra 2002: 253).

It should be added that there is a distinct pattern to Tamil migration. The Tamils have a long history of migration. The earliest and most significant migration is said to have taken place in the third century from South India

to the island of Sri Lanka (former Ceylon). This large-scale movement predates Western colonial expansion. From the eighth century, through the expansion of South Indian Kingdoms as well as trade, Tamils are said to have settled in Southeast Asia. But as suggested by Mishra, the arrival of the Europeans (British, Dutch and French) to the East and the abolition of slavery led to establishment of the indentured labour recruitment system. Under the indentured labour system, workers were contracted directly by the colonial government to work in the colonies. This recruitment system was commonly adopted in North India. In South India, the *Kankani* (overseer) and *Maistry* (supervisor) system was more commonly used in recruiting workers. Under the *Kankani* and *Maistry* system, the British recruited workers indirectly through a village representative. It was a common practice of these village representatives to recruit family, kin and caste members. As a result, this system enabled the transplantation of a village based kinship network in the colonies. Along with the colonial labour migration (often involuntary), there was also a free and voluntary movement of people, particularly amongst the upper caste and class, who ventured abroad as merchants and professionals to exploit trade and business opportunities (Satyanarayana 2002). During this period, South Indians and in particular Tamils were taken to Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Mauritius, Reunion Island, Seychelles, and small numbers to Fiji, British Guyana, Suriname and the West Indies (Arasaratnam 1970; Sandhu and Mani 1993). Between the nineteenth and early twentieth century, millions of Tamils found themselves working on rubber, sugar, and tea plantations and the more educated as clerks and administrators in the colonies.

In the postcolonial period, the movement of Tamils has been triggered by two crucial circumstances. One, as highlighted by Mishra (2002), is the diaspora of late capitalism that emerges in the second half of the twentieth century, which saw the movement of professional and skilled Indian migrants to the West, especially the United States, Britain and Australia. These are highly educated, economically mobile and cosmopolitan Tamils who work as information, communication and technology specialists, engineers, doctors, health workers, and academics. To this, we should add the movement of temporary migrant non-skilled workers. These migrants are paid low wages and work in construction, oil refineries, factories and cleaning. There are at present a large number of men employed in the Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen), Singapore and Malaysia. Another significant circumstance that led to the large-scale involuntary migration of Tamils is the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict that began in 1983. Thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils fled the island as refugees seeking asylum in the United Kingdom, Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Given the different historical conditions and trajectories of migration, the Tamil diaspora is by no means homogeneous or unified. They have varying

affinities to the homeland. In some cases, it is not a homeland diaspora because of permanent settlement, loss of cultural roots and identity. For instance, the first wave migrants to Sri Lanka (also known as Jaffna Tamils) regard themselves as a distinct group from the Indian Tamils who came to work on tea plantations under the British. Similarly, Tamils in Fiji, South Africa, Reunion and Mauritius now in their fifth and sixth generation have developed thoroughly hybridised cultural identity and practices. In the case of Singapore and Malaysia where Tamil is recognised as an official ethnic category and language, Tamil identity is strongly maintained, hyphenated by the nation-state, i.e. Singapore-(Indian) Tamil or Malaysian- (Indian) Tamil. Stronger ties to the Tamil homeland (India and Sri Lanka) are maintained by more recent migrants and refugees. They return to India or Sri Lanka regularly, and reproduce the transnational social field and cultural and consumption practices. By far, the Tamil diasporic community forms the largest market for Tamil cinema outside India.[4] Although other diasporic Indians and non-Indians consume Tamil cinema, their numbers are relatively small.

The South Asian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai famously coined the term *mediascapes* (along with *ethnoscapes*, *technoscapes*, *finanscapes*, and *ideoscapes)* to describe the disjunctures of the cultural flows in the era of globalisation. According to Appadurai (1996: 35) *mediascapes* refer:

> both to the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media.

Using this concept as a starting point, I want to examine the distribution and circulation of Tamil films across the globe and the ways in which they reproduce a narrative and image-centred reality for its audience and in particular the Tamil diasporic communities.

Even though Tamil cinema does not specifically target or cater to its diasporic audience, as it has been the case with Bollywood, the Tamil diaspora remains as the single largest overseas market for Tamil films. As Dwyer and Patel (2002: 8) point out the:

> Telugu and Tamil language cinemas of South India are most notable and largest in terms of production and have the largest cinema-going public. These films are rarely shown outside of their heartlands, except where Tamil and Telugu speakers have settled elsewhere in India or overseas.

Over the years, the global distribution and sales of Tamil films, video cassettes, video compact diskettes, digital video diskettes, compact diskettes

and audio cassettes have grown steadily. Tamil films are screened regularly in state run television in Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius; cable and satellite networks/channels in Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius Australia, South Africa and New Zealand; and movie theatres in Sydney, Melbourne, Toronto, Dubai, Malaysia, Norway, Paris, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Germany, Switzerland, UK and USA. The diversification and commoditisation of movies in various media-formats has meant that movies now circulate at high speeds across the globe through both formal and informal distribution networks.

As pointed out earlier, compared to Hindi films, the formal network for the distribution of Tamil movies is relatively small and limited to locations where long-established Tamil communities live. As for more recent and emerging diasporic locations, such as Australia or Canada, informal distribution networks are more common. Indian grocery/spice shops that are run by a Tamil or a Sri Lankan Tamil hire and sell more Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Hindi films on VHS and DVDs than those operated by North Indians. In some sense, this network is dependent on the number and concentration of Tamils within a locality. As copyright infringements are less policed, the circulation of pirated copies of Tamil movies in both VHS and DVD formats is common. It is not surprising to find new releases on the movie shelves in grocery shops within a matter of days. Moreover, home recordings of movies also circulate among personal networks such as between kin and friends**.** Diasporic Tamils are also benefiting from the numerous Tamil cinema websites and blogs that have burgeoned in the last few years. These internet resources provide information on the latest movie releases, reviews and celebrity gossip.

The varied historical contexts and conditions leading to the formation of the Tamil diaspora and its continuing transformation (new waves of migratory patterns and communicative links to the homeland) have meant that it is not a static entity. It can be argued that the 'old' Tamil diaspora relates to cinema as a source of cultural heritage, form of entertainment and even cultural identity. For instance, in places like Singapore and Malaysia there are official state policies safeguarding and promoting the interests of the Indians/Tamils. For them, Tamil cinema represents not so much the ancestral homelands of their forbears but a cultural resource for articulating their sense of hybridised identity. Thus, culture in the sense of arts (high and popular) is born out of Tamil Nadu and consumed in the diaspora. The 'new' diaspora on the other hand  a large majority being temporary professional and labour migrants  maintain regular contact with Tamil Nadu. For them, the Tamil cinema offers both the immediacy and intimacy of home, nostalgia, cultural memory and belonging, and reproduction.

Along with the Tamil speaking audience, Tamil movies are screened with subtitles and occasionally dubbed into foreign languages for non-Indian audiences in Malaysia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Mauritius and South Africa. Five major markets are Malaysia, Singapore, Canada,


*Figure 11.1* Film poster in Japanese (Source: http://www.rajini.jp/).

Europe and the US. And about 60 per cent of the audience is Sri Lankan Tamils. More recently, the Tamil movie superstar Rajinikanth has gained enormous popularity in Japan. Rajinikanth fan clubs and websites have burgeoned. Rajinikanth's blockbuster film *Muthu* (dubbed as *Dancing*

*Maharaja*) ran for 23 weeks at a movie house in Tokyo. *Yejaman* (dubbed as *Dancing Maharaja II*) was the next big hit. In October 2005, Rajinikanth's *Chandramukhi* was screened at a theatre in Tokyo to a packed house.

## Conclusion

While Bollywood has forged ahead in terms of the global promotion and circulation of movies with impetus from the Indian diaspora, other Indian film industries are lagging far behind. The popularity of Bollywood extends beyond the Indian community. The mass global following of Bollywood is steadily growing. It is not just the movies but also songs, dance and other cultural repertoires associated with the industry that have gained popularity. Within this context, the South Indian film industry which is the largest producer in the country remains a non-entity outside of India. Labelled as regional cinema and saddled with the politics of Tamil nationalism, the Tamil film industry has not been able to break out of its introspective mould. For instance, subtitling in English or any other language is still not a common practice. Tamil films are not promoted at international film festivals and nominated for film awards. They are only distributed to places where Tamil speakers reside. It will be some time before Tamil cinema is recognised as a part of Indian cinema, a label which thus far designates the


*Figure 11.2* Tamil video/DVD store in Sydney, Australia, 2007.

Hindi commercial cinema produced in Mumbai. This is not to suggest that Tamil cinema must refashion itself in the image of Bollywood; rather it needs to go beyond the Tamil world, by reaching out to a non-Tamil audience, if it wants to be a part of world cinema.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Amanda Wise, Anand Pandian, Vijay Devadas and Francis Maravillas for their invaluable comments on this chapter.

## Notes

1 It is somewhat ironic that after the opening scene, the film shifts to Rangoon with an aerial shot of the city and takes the audience to Chandrasekaran's rather spacious and well presented family home. It is a far cry from the sorrowful state of overseas Tamils described in the speech earlier.
2 It is not uncommon for most International Film Festivals and specifically Indian Film Festivals held in the West to promote Hindi films given that Bollywood is seen as the sole representative of Indian cinema itself.
3 See Desai (2004) for an excellent reading and analysis of South Asian diasporic film (focused mainly on English and Hindi). More recent successes include Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), Deepa Mehta's *Bollywood/ Hollywood* (2002) and Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2002).
4 Of course, the Tamil diasporic communities also consume other Indian language films including Hindi, Bengali, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam, subject to availability.

## References

Appadurai, Arjun. (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Arasaratnam, Sinnappah. (1970) *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Bhabha, H. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Baskaran, S. Theodore. (1996) *The Eye of the Serpent: An Introduction to Tamil Cinema*. Madras: EastWest Books.

Benegal, Shyam. (2002) 'An Introduction to Indian Cinema', *ImagineAsia*. Available online at: www.bfi.org.uk/features/imagineasia/guide/intro indian.html (accessed on 13 March 2006).

Cohen, Robin. (1997) *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: University Col lege London.

Desai, Jigna. (2004) *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Dia sporic Films*. New York: Routledge.

Dwyer, Rachel and Patel, Divia. (2002) *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*. London: Reaktion Books.

Government of India. (2001) *Indian Diaspora Report*. Available online at: http:// indiandiaspora.nic.in.

Hardgrave, Robert L. (1973) 'Politics and the Film in Tamil Nadu: The Stars and the DMK', *Asian Survey* 8(3): 288 305.

Jeyaraj, D. B. S. (1999) 'For a Distinct Identity', *Frontline* 16(4): February 13 26.
Kaali, Sundar. (2000) 'Narrating Seduction: Vicissitudes of the Sexed Subject in Tamil Nativity Film', in Ravi S. Vasudevan (ed.) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Malhotra, Sheena and Alagh, Tavishi. (2004) 'Dreaming the Nation: Domestic Dramas in Hindi Films Post 1990', *South Asian Popular Culture* 2(1): 19 37.
Mishra, Vijay. (2002) *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. London: Routledge.
Pandian, Jacob. (1995) *The Making of India and Indian Traditions*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
Pandian, M. S. S. (2000) '*Parasakthi*: Life and Times of a DMK Film', in Ravi S. Vasudevan (ed.) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Sandhu, K. S. and Mani, A. (eds) (1993) *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
Satyanarayana, Adapa. (2002) '"Birds of Passage": Migration of South Indian Laborers to Southeast Asia', *Critical Asian Studies* 34(1): 89 115.
*The Hindu*. (2003) Friday June 13.
*The Hindu*. (2005) Friday December 30.
Thoraval, Yves. (2000) *The Cinemas of India*. New Delhi: Macmillan India Limited.
Vasudevan, Ravi S. (ed.) (2002) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Velayutham, Selvaraj and Wise, Amanda. (2005) 'Moral Economies of a Translocal Village: Obligations and Shame Among South Indian Transnational Migrants', *Global Networks* 5(1): 27 47.

# Index