

# **Tamil Nadu Politics and Tamil Cinema: A Symbiotic Relationship?**

**Selvaraj Velayutham, Vijay Devadas**

## **Abstract**

From the second-half of the twentieth century, a nascent Tamil cinema became increasingly influential in Tamil society and more prominent in political life. The Dravidar Kazhagam, founded by Periyar E. V. Ramasamy in 1944, morphed into the DMK and AIADMK, two dominant state political parties in Tamil Nadu. Through the medium of film, some of its leading lights, C. N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, M. G. Ramachandran and Jayalalitha, cultivated cinema audiences and the voting public in the political ideologies of the Dravidian movement and subsequently became Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu. The symbiotic relationship between politics and Tamil cinema has meant that political and social commentaries and the assertion of Tamil nationalistic ideas was commonplace in Tamil films. In recent years, Tamil cinema has become the vehicle for raising a wide range of concerns ranging from caste, class and gender and state/nation politics, marking a shift that focusses on everyday politics in the state. In this article, we present a critical survey of the role of Tamil cinema in disseminating particular realities and politics of identity that speak to an essentialised notion of Tamil cultural and linguistic identity, the concomitant disavowal of broader conceptions of Indian-ness or belonging to the Indian nation, as well as the use of cinema to address everyday politics in the State.

## **Keywords**

Tamil cinema, cultural sociology, cultural politics, culture and media

## **Introduction**

Cinema and politics have been intimately intertwined in South Asia since the establishment of the film industry in the region. Additionally, the film medium and stardom have been exploited by many to forge political careers in India, but a particularly unique link has been established between cinema and politics since the 1950s in South India (Prasad 2014). Most interestingly, this link has continued to the present in the state of Tamil Nadu. This article traces the politicisation of Tamil cinema, the most popular and powerful medium in the southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu. On average, 200 Tamil films are released annually, making the State one of the largest producers of films in India and globally. Cinema permeates life and it is as much a source of entertainment as it is a cultural edifice and an instrument of political communication. One of the first scholars to study the link between politics and cinema, Hardgrave (1964: 401), observed that 'cinema, one of the cheapest and most effective instruments of communication for social mobilization in India, has played a vital role in the creation of a national self-conscious Tamil people'. And thus, the symbiotic relationship between politics and Tamil cinema was cemented. As the Tamil film historian Theodore Baskaran (1996) asserts, films have become essential for the conduct of all political parties' mass campaigns and its use to influence the voting masses. To this end, Tamil cinema is much more than a popular form of entertainment and, in essence, it is a medium that serves as a tool for political communication from above and below; that is, it is used by State apparatuses, political parties and also grassroots movements to promote particular ideological positions. In this article, we provide a critical exploration of Tamil cinema and Tamil Nadu politics, arguing that there exists a strong symbiotic relationship that is, on the one hand, inseparable and enduring, and, on the other hand, transformative and reflective of the shifting political landscape of the State and society. Our discussion contributes to the emerging literature on how the media and, in this instance, cinema serve to advance political ideologies and how political practices are represented through films in South Asia (Udupa and McDowell 2017).

## From Mythologies to Nationalist Cinema

It can be argued that since its inception in 1916, Tamil cinema has engaged in political communication, that is, in the processes and practices of engaging with political issues, and rhetoric. While the silent era films were entirely based on Indian, or, specifically, Hindu mythical and religious stories, they did, as Baskaran (2002) noted, 'reflect, however dimly at first, the dynamic of the contemporary social and political currents'. Films, such as *Keechaka Vadham* (The Destruction of Keechaka 1916), *Draupathi Vasthirabaranam* (The Disrobing of Draupadi 1917), both of which were based on episodes from the *Mahabharata*, an epic Hindu text, and others, such as *Valli Thirumanan* (The Wedding of Valli 1921) and *Bhishma Pratignai* (Bhishma's Vow 1921), drew on mythologies for political critique and commentary principally through allegory. Specifically, by depicting 'tales of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, mostly from the large repository of Hindu myths' (Dwyer 2006: 15), these films were able 'to politicise the freedom movement' which was gaining momentum and simultaneously 'circumvent the censors' (Devadas and Velayutham 2008: 157), as the British colonial rulers were keenly aware of the power of cinema to mobilise the population. That said, Tamil filmmakers recognised the limitations of allegory and began to produce films that are part of what Baskaran (2002) called 'socially conscious cinema'. Films such as *Dharmapathini* (The Devoted Wife 1929) by A. Narayanan and *Anadhaipenn* (*Orphan Girl* 1931) by Raja Sandow were charged with 'nationalistic ideas' (Baskaran 1996: 7). They focussed on the political situation in colonial India and reinforced the political rhetoric of Gandhi and the Congress party. The political rhetoric in the films closely aligned with Gandhi's anti-colonial nationalist programme, ideals of self-purification and social reform. This was a period in which 'more "serious", non-mythological subjects' (Thoraval, 2000: 37) were produced. As Devadas and Velayutham noted, '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' (2008: 158).

These films are part of a larger corpus of Indian films made during this period that promoted a unified pan-Indian nationalism and which was central to forging a national identity and central to the creation of an anti-colonial collective sensibility. However, this pan-Indian nationalism worked through an 'irresolvable paradox [as] its articulation of

nationalism was [...] overtly Hindu' (Devadas 2013: 221). In other words, the political rhetoric of anti-colonial struggle was founded upon a sense of nationalism that had a specific Hindu religious grounding. The close alliance between Tamil cinema, Gandhian political rhetoric and Indian nationalism which advanced a strong political critique of colonisation and British rule continued into the period when talkies arrived in 1931. In the first Tamil talkie, *Kalidas*, named after the Sanskrit poet and playwright, two songs explicitly 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 Willemsen 1994: 236). While Tamil cinema perpetuated what we call nationalist films, such as *Balayogini* (Child Saint 1936), *Sevasadan* (House of Service 1938) and *Thyagabhoomi* (The Land of Sacrifice 1939), that were pan-Indian and Hindu in focus, these films, specifically *Balayogini* and *Thyagabhoomi*, are also simultaneously critical of the hierarchy of caste in Hindu society. To that extent, these films communicated a complex political rhetoric that nurtured a pan-Indian Hindu nationalism that is also self-critical, and reflexive of its very own practices. This trend was further complicated by the production of films such as *Ambikapathy* (1937) and *Kambar* (1938). These two Tamil musical period films narrate the story of *Ambikapathy* (son of the Tamil poet *Kambar*) and the life of *Kambar* himself during the Chola empire, respectively, as a way of celebrating the pride of Tamil culture and literary tradition. Barnett (1976) pointed out that these films were held up in protest against the introduction of Hindi in schools and the repressive policy of the Congress central government in 1938. The anti-Hindi agitation, which was initiated by E. V. Ramasamy and later by the Dravida political parties, still holds sway in Tamil Nadu.

These intermixes continued into the period of anti-colonial struggle against British imperial rule. On the one hand, Tamil cinema championed an allegiance to the Gandhian anti-colonial struggle with its commitment to Hind swaraj and collective self-development. On the other hand, these calls were also directed at caste inequalities, the impact of colonial rule and subjugation and the formation, as will see next, of Dravidian nationalism.

## **Dravida Cinema**

In his seminal work on *Essays in the Political Sociology of South India* (1979), Robert Hardgrave traced the ways in which the ascendancy of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the party of Tamil nationalism,

was built on a symbiotic relationship between political leaders and the medium of film. Unlike their predecessors, especially members of the ruling Indian National Congress (INC), who viewed cinema as 'a source of moral corruption', the DMK took 'film seriously as a vehicle of political mobilization' (Hardgrave 1979: 61).

The establishment of the Self Respect Movement in 1921 by E. V. Ramaswamy against Brahmanism and the Dravida Kazhagam (Dravidian Federation) in 1944 to advance his movement for social reform and uplift to demand a separate and independent state of Dravidastan (a homeland for Dravidians) had considerable mass appeal in Tamil Nadu. The anti-northern, anti-Hindi and anti-Brahmin ideological campaigns became popularised in Tamil stage plays and found their way to dominate Tamil cinema screen. The founding of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949 by C. N. Annadurai, a film writer, who was joined by M. Karunanidhi, another film writer, and a number of film actors, including K. R. Ramasway, S. S. Rajendran, Shivaji Ganesan and M.G. Ramachandran mobilised an entire generation of Tamil cinema audience around the Dravidian movement. Annadurai's screenplays, *Nella Thambi* (Good Brother 1948), *Vellaikari* (Servant Maid 1949) and M. Karunanidhi's *Parasakthi* (The Goddess 1952), not only attacked the upper caste/classes, Brahmanism and hypocrisy of religion, but also championed high literary Tamil and Tamil cultural identity. The rise of Dravidian politics, both in the political landscape as well as on Tamil film screens, came to fruition with the defeat of Indian National Congress in the general elections of 1967. The demise of Congress's 20-year reign in Tamil Nadu also marked the beginning of State-based party politics in Tamil Nadu and beyond. The political tussle between M. Karunanidhi and M. G. Ramachandran, following the death of Annadurai in 1969, resulted in the latter forming All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).

The nexus between the two pre-eminent Dravida parties and Tamil cinema has already been documented (see Baskaran 1996; Devadas and Velayutham 2008; Dickey 1993; Hardgrave 1973; Pandian 1992; Pongiyannan 2015). This nexus has produced six consecutive Chief Ministers, all hailing from the world of Tamil cinema. As Rogers (2009:

67) surmises:

Tamil nationalist, the DMK, used Tamil cinema as a vehicle for political communication when it was consolidating its political power in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this period, DMK party leaders Annadurai and Karunanidhi scripted popular films that portrayed MGR as a champion of the downtrodden poor, fighting exploitative high-caste agricultural landlords, or unscrupulous moneylenders.

Furthermore, the construction and articulation of Dravida and Tamil cultural identity through the cinematic apparatus became a central narrative trope from the 1950 to the 1970s. Dialogues were infused with ideas of the Dravida movement and as Baskaran (1996: 67) observes, 'film was just a public address system. The characters' address not their fellow characters in the film but the camera—in other words, the audience'. This mode of address or frontality, which served as a key aesthetic device in Tamil cinema in the 1950s and mid-1960s, was emblematic of the oratory and political speeches of DMK stalwarts of the day. Additionally, images of the rising sun, the colours black and red (DMK) and black, red and white (AIADMK), references to 'Anna' (C. N. Annadurai), and film narratives celebrating the ethos of social reform and justice served as important cinematic devices for political communication. Collectively, these cinematic techniques and mise-en-scene were instrumental to the success of films, such as *Nallathabi*, *Velaikkari* and *Parasakthi*. However, the frontal aesthetic in cinema dissipates in the wake of the political ascendancy of M. G. Ramachandran and his AIADMK party. M. G. Ramachandran, the star, image and persona took centre stage, subsuming the interventions of the Dravidian ideologues. As M. S. S. Pandian (2014) observed, the specific screen image that M. G. Ramachandran cultivated in his films as a saviour and constituent of the subaltern classes was critical to his political success. This period of popular Tamil cinema was thus uniquely placed as a medium for ideological dissemination and the mobilisation of its audience.

It is worth highlighting that a key figure in 'post-Dravida' cinema was actor Vijayakanth, who entered the film industry in 1979. Over a period of two decades in cinema, Vijayakanth fashioned his screen persona in the style of M. G. Ramachandran, as an action hero and authority figure who is a saviour of the oppressed, fighting corruption, atrocities and eradicating injustices. Most notably, Vijayakanth was able to enhance his popularity and mass appeal through his official fan clubs (*rasigarmandram*). These fan clubs, as Rogers (2009: 64) argued, 'offer the poor financial inducements and access to vital social resources—resources that are facilitated by community patrons who hold positions of authority within film star fan club networks'. Through his cinematic moral crusade and with the support of his fan club members, Vijayakanth formed the centre-left party *Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam*

(National Progressive Dravidian Federation) in 2005 and secured a single seat in the Tamil Nadu parliamentary election the following year. Between 2011 and 2016, he became the leader of the Opposition of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly while still keeping up his cinema appearances. Like his Dravida predecessors, Vijayakanth embellished his Tamil identity in his films and coined the phrase 'Tamilanendrusollada; Thalainimirnthunillada' (say you are a Tamilian; with your head held high) as the official motto of his fan clubs. At the same time, instead of denouncing the Hindi-speaking North and the central government, Vijayakanth 'deals with national issues through Tamil-ness' and thus reaches out to younger audiences who were born after the Dravidian Movement and relate to Indian nationalist projections (Pongiyannan 2015). In this sense, unlike M. G. Ramachandran, whose political foundations were built on the Dravidian movement and promulgation of his subaltern saviour identity, Vijayakanth was operating in a different ecosystem and speaking to a new generation. While his attempt at replicating the screen image and persona of M. G. Ramachandran only yielded small success, he nevertheless employed cinema to advance his entry into politics.

We have kept this section on the profoundly ethno-nationalistic Dravida cinema brief for two reasons. First, the link between Tamil politics and cinema has been well-theorised and documented (Pandian 1992; Pongiyannan 2015; Prasad 2014), and second, we want to signal that cinema has also shifted its focus, concerns and the political voices it offers. Dravida cinema is a politically significant part of the history of Tamil cinema. Even though national concerns and agendas are projected from time to time, the Tamil ethno-linguistic cultural identity that Dravida cinema cultivated remains salient even today. However, this is not Tamil cinema's sole preoccupation, as new political actors came to shape the milieu of political communication through the film medium.

## **Fragmented, Contested Politics from Above and Below**

With M. G. Ramachandran's AIADMK government in power (1977–87), the film exploits of the Dravida movement began to wane. The regionalist ideals of Dravidianism and Dravida identity eventually morphed into a more emphatic assertion of a distinctively Tamilian identity, as Tamil cinema became deeply territorial and anchored in the

cultures of the Tamil people, local dialects and localities. Unlike its counterpart, Hindi cinema (Bollywood) that sees itself as a pan-Indian cinema, Tamil cinema fosters and celebrates Tamilness. In the 1980s and subsequent decades, the political content of Tamil cinema became increasingly diffused and fragmented. The vertical contestations against an 'Aryan North', Brahmanism, the caste system and the imposition of the Hindi language were gradually overtaken by what we describe as 'fragment politics'. We use the term 'fragment politics' to differentiate it from the State-driven articulations of politics that dominated Tamil cinema. The latter is marked by a discourse of homogeneity and normalisation that produced a singular political rhetoric unified in its information production and dissemination: a move towards signalling unified Dravida and Tamil cultural identity. In contrast, we use the term 'fragment politics' to capture the heterogeneity of Tamil cinema and its engagement with the various modalities of Tamil social life, including gender, caste, nativism, ruralism (especially in the southern parts of Tamil Nadu), identity politics, spatialities and civil society (vigilantism, social activism, social justice, abuse of power, corruption, cronyism, etc). In the following discussion, we engage with selected modalities of Tamil social life articulated in Tamil cinema to underscore this notion of fragment politics. What we wish to demonstrate is that Tamil cinema has never been monolithic, not even during the hegemony of Dravida cinema. It always signals a multiplicity of ideas, where different articulations of politics and identities struggle to forge and disseminate representations of Tamil society and culture, and influence politics in the State. In this sense, the interconnections that Tamil cinema has with institutional and everyday politics should be understood as non-prescriptive, varying and contested.

## **Gender**

Tamil patriarchy and masculinity have remained potent symbols of Tamil culture. In Tamil cinema, male and female identities, bodies and gendered roles have remained fixed. As Velayutham (2008: 8) observed, 'Tamil femininity or womanhood is resolutely contained in the virtues of obedience, righteousness, chastity and purity'. Women are constructed to represent archetypal and passive social roles such as mother, daughter, sister and wife. Above all, women actors were the object of the male gaze and sexual desire. However, much of the inroads to challenge or present an alternative or gendered perspective only



emerged in the 1970s. Most notably, the director K. Balachander was at the forefront of telling the stories from a woman's perspective and in the process questioned conservative Tamil gender values and norms. These include films such as *Arangetram* (The Wedding 1973) about a Brahmin girl turning to prostitution to support her family, which focussed 'with particular sharpness on the status of women in south Indian society' (Jacob, 2009: 100). The violence enacted on her reflected the violence of Tamil patriarchy, social and cultural norms. There are numerous other films that expose the violence of masculine Tamil culture, including *Aval Oru Thodarkathai* (She is a never Ending Story 1974), *Avargal* (They 1977), *Aval Appadiththan* (That is How She Is 1978), *Uthiri Pookal* (Scattered Flowers 1979), *Metti* (Toe Ring 1982), *Oru Veedu Iru Vasal* (One House, Two Entrances 1990), *Kandukondain Kandukondain* (I have seen, I have seen 2000), *36 Vayadhinile* (At the Age of Thirty-six 2015), *Irudhi Suttru* (Final Round 2016) and *Magalir Mattum* (Ladies Only 2017), to name a few. *Magalir Mattum*, for example, focusses on three female school friends who, despite confronting and negotiating the pressures imposed on them by men in their lives, reunite after 38 years. The reunification functions to foster a safe space for women to share, collaborate and exchange perspectives: a safe space devoid of patriarchal regimes. At the same time, the need for safe space underscores that everyday life, everyday spaces, in Tamil society do not offer safety. Collectively, these films seek to expose the hegemony of patriarchy, and, to a large extent, it could be argued that these films articulate a feminist narrative. As Krishnakumar (2017) pointed out, with specific reference to the film *Magalir Mattum*, 'the impassioned and rebellious monologue of an unnamed housewife' is a powerful moment: when she asks

Naanga enna summaava irukkom? (Are we sitting idle at home?) [...] she launches into a high-pitched, breathless, and angry monologue directed at all the men who devalue her role in the household. Though she is not the hero and does not appear on screen again, she gets to deliver the monologue that sets the tone of the film.

The unnamed housewife interrogates the structure of patriarchal authority without foregrounding a victim narrative, a point that Raman (2017) noted was a feature of the feminist narrative of Tamil cinema in the 1970s–1990s.

The empowerment of women through feminist narrative films is given a further impetus in the 2017 film *Aramm* (Good Deed). This film focusses on the non-corrupt, pro-poor, District Collector, played by

Nayathara, who seeks to save a young girl who fell into the borewell. She battles against an incompetent bureaucracy and an intrusive media while organising the police and making important decisions on the rescue mission. As Krishnakumar (2017) suggested,

The feminism of Aramm is one of strength and vulnerability. As a cinematic endeavour, Aramm breaks the shackles of how women are portrayed. The film is entirely about Madhivadani's work—she is seen in just two outfits throughout the film, she has no romantic interest, no one speaks for her or paraphrases her. She commands respect and gets it, even if mostly by virtue of her post. Yet, towards the end of the film, she breaks into loud sobs, partly because she realises her own failings. She is not ashamed or scared of being a woman.

This is a rare film within the corpus of Tamil cinema, for here is a female hero who single-handedly takes on the bureaucratic machine and who succeeds in showing that women are able to take on leadership roles, contribute to the social good and foster an image of women as strong, sensible and at the same time vulnerable. While such films suggest that the politics of gender is changing, much more needs to be done to challenge the Tamil patriarchy and masculinity that define Tamil identity. As emerging Tamil cinema feminist scholars, such as Zamboulingame (2021), Saverimuttu (2021) and Karupiah (2021) argue, a majority of Tamil films continue to reproduce misogynistic and patriarchal representations of women.

## **Nativism, Casteism and Imaginary Geographies**

The late 1970s signalled a critical turn for Tamil cinema as a medium of political communication. India was spearheading towards major economic and social changes. As a reaction to these tumultuous changes, Tamil cinema became more politicised and its representations increasingly fragmented, divisive and parochial. A number of themes emerged in this period.

First, the emergence of neo-nativity films, a term coined by Kaali (2000), that were centred on rural settings and portrayed the stories of the 'village'. Though village settings can be found in previous decades, the 1970s gave birth to a particular genre of films that emphasised a 'return to the rural roots of Tamil culture, an aggrandizement of tradition and an evocation of the sensory ambience of the Tamil countryside'

(Jacob 2009: 99). This was an interesting intervention because it was an attempt to take the cinema audience to an idyllic and unadulterated essence of 'Tamilness'. As Jacob (2009: 99) pointed out:

By reaffirming the autonomy of the village, its lifestyle, values, and land-scapes, these films capitalized on the nostalgia of city dwellers among who were recent migrants from villages still clinging to their rural identities. For this vast audience the rural thematic produced images of an ideal native homeland that was simple and liveable, scenic and cultured, and cleaner and more natural than the periurban residence that has become their home.

Moreover, neo-nativity films presented a powerful counter-narrative to increasing urbanisation, population growth and overcrowding in the city of Chennai, as well as to the dilution of Tamil identity in this rapidly evolving urban milieu. Directors like Bharathiraja, Bhagyaraj, Balu Mahendra and T. Rajender became the trademark of neo-nativity Tamil cinema and principally devoted themselves to elevating the rural experience as quintessentially rooted in Tamil identity and culture. Some notable neo-nativity films include *16 Vayathinile* (At Age 16 1977), *Puthiya Vaarpugal* (New Mouldings 1979), *Mann Vasana* (Fragrance of the Soil 1983), *Muthal Mariyathai* (First Respect 1985), *Kizhaku Cheemaiyile* (Wild Wild East 1993) and *Karuthamma* (Dark Girl 1994).

Second, from the 1990s, film makers also turned their attention towards revitalising caste identities. In Tamil Nadu, the self-respect and Dravidar movements led to the political mobilisation of non-Brahmin castes, and in turn entrenching the DMK and AIADMK parties' rule since 1967. However, as Krishnan (2008: 149) argued, 'though these parties sought to consolidate all non-Brahmin castes, there were significant caste identities that have not been fully assimilated by the parties'. Apart from the major Dalit groups of Pallars and Parayars, other backward classes such as the Thevars of the south and Vanniyars of the north have also remained non- assimilated into the Dravidian parties' non-Brahmin/backward caste identity. Violent caste clashes between the Thevar and Dalit communities in Southern Tamil Nadu districts erupted on a regular basis, mobilising the Dalits against caste discrimination and untouchability. Further, as Damodaran and Gorringe (2017) asserted, since the late 80s, films carried thematic structures and visuals depicting and glorifying the intermediate castes, especially the Mukkulathor people who are collectively known as Thevars. These included caste names in film titles, costumes, dialects, songs and caste

markers (sickle and moustache) permeating the screenplay. Thevar Magan (Thevar's Son 1992) starring Kamal Hassan was the first of its kind with strong idioms and glorification of the Thevars, a martial community which has self-characterised itself as rulers of the land. Other films, like Chinna Gounder (Junior Gounder 1992), Thevar Veetu Ponnu (Thevar Household Girl 1992), Kizhakku Cheemayile (Wild Wild East 1993), Pasumpon (Pure Gold 1995), Virumandi (2004), Kaadhal (Love 2004) and Ghilli (Risk Taker 2004), to name a few in a long list, unmistakably 'celebrate caste dominance and become vehicles for, and expressions of, the assertion and pride of intermediate castes' (Damodaran and Gorringer 2017: 9). These films have appeared over a period where there has been an increase in violent clashes between intermediate and Dalit caste communities. The celebration of the martial valour and tenacity of intermediate castes is as much a political statement of their dominance as it is about suppressing Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu.

A plethora of popular media commentaries on the representations of and links between caste and cinema have had far-reaching effects on raising awareness of casteism in Tamil Nadu. Through the cinematic persona of actor-turned-politicians (M. G. Ramachandran, Jayalalitha, Vijayakanth and more recently, Rajinikanth and Kamal Hassan), caste identities and the moral sentiments that they are connected with found a vital avenue for public expression. In the meantime, this co-existence/coalescence of the political and cinematic public face of these actors has also shaped voting behaviour. In their cinematic roles as a common person (ordinary/marginalised) who struggles against oppression and speaks up for the most oppressed and powerless, these actors have produced an image of themselves which is symbolically powerful in galvanising the support of non-Brahmin caste groups. This is evident, in particular, in the ways in which figures such as M. G. Ramachandran, Vijayakanth and Rajinikanth have widely appealed to the OBCs and Dalit voters.

Take, for example, the case of the Dalits, who have historically been absent in Tamil cinema. In recent years, up and coming directors such as Pa. Ranjith (Attakathi [Cardboard Knife] 2012; Kabali 2016; Kaala 2018; Madras 2014), Vetrimaaran (Vada Chennai [North Chennai] 2018; Visaranai [Interrogation] 2015), Gopi Nainar (Aramm [Good Deed] 2017) and Mari Selvaraj (Pariyerum Perumal [Horse Laden Deity] 2018) are breaking new grounds through their Dalit-centric films. These boundary-pushing directors have been making powerful political statements about marginality, atrocities and injuries endured by Dalits

and Dalit liberation through film. As Ravishankar (2018) pointed out, the Dalit as a figure of pity is being overturned:

In *Kabali*, Ranjith takes on this stereotyping with roaring derision. Warming up for a fight scene, Rajinikanth mouths these lines: 'In Tamil films you have a character with a huge mole on his cheek, who twirls his moustache, wears a lungi... and as soon as Nambiar (the actor famous for his villain roles) shouts, "Eh, *Kabali*", the character would bow low and say, "Yes, Master"... Did you think I am that kind of *Kabali*?' Then, gesturing toward himself in his spiffy suit—a nod to Dalit rights icon BR Ambedkar's attire of choice, and today the Ambedkarite movement's mark of pride and resistance—Rajini growls menacingly, '*Kabali*, da (I'm this *Kabali*)!'

The actor Rajinikanth, who has previously played various roles associated with lower caste occupations (auto driver, milk man, factory worker, unemployed, servant, etc.), has gripped Dalit communities through his recent films *Kabali* and *Kaala* in which he plays a Dalit character—only months before announcing his entry into politics. As Rajamani (2018) pointed out, 'by positioning himself as a potential voice of the Dalits and by quoting Ambedkar on screen, Rajinikanth has undeniably attempted to cash in on what is popularly considered to be a shortcoming of the Dravidian parties'.

Third is the theme of depicting dichotomous imaginary geographies of Tamil Nadu. Like neo-nativity films that romanticised and celebrated rural life and the archetypal village to underscore an idealised notion of Tamilness, in the 2000s, films began to return to the city of Chennai to articulate a complex Tamil social life. Here, there have been three parallel developments. The first, as Krishnan (2008), Leonard (2015) and Damodaran and Gorringer (2017) have shown, a number of films present Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, as a city of modern, free individuals where one is anonymous, and caste is unspoken or absent. The city offers a degree of anonymity that is expressed in comparisons between Chennai and Madurai, the State's third largest city, as well as with other southern cities/localities as a spatial 'Other'. This is evident in films like *Kaadhal* (Love 2004), *Ghilli* (2004), *Veyil* (Summer, 2006), *Paruthiveeran* (Hero of Paruthiyur, 2007) and *Subramaniapuram* (2008), where Madurai is exteriorised and exoticised because it is beset by caste conflict, violence, lawlessness and hooliganism. Krishnan (2008) argued that such dystopic rendering of the South and the city of Madurai was a product of colonial modernity, caste clashes since the 1990s and the valorisation of intermediate castes on film. It is not surprising that this re-imagining of the South works to shift the cinematic gaze towards Chennai as an 'enunciatory location of modernity'.

(Krishnan 2008)—a capitalist and world class city, cosmopolitan and technology-driven. In *Kaadhal* and *Ghilli*, for example, the sequences of events central to the film narrative take place in Madurai, a city besieged by family feuds triggered by antagonisms of caste and class. In both films, the protagonists are connected to Chennai, where they find refuge and a sense of order and continuity.

The second development complicates the neat and implicit valorisation of Chennai. Since the 2000s, films depicting the raw, gritty and everyday Chennai have become commonplace. Films such as *Chennai 600028* (2007), *Angadi Theru* (Market Street 2010), *Marina* (2012) and *Kaaka Muttai* (Crows Eggs 2015) by young directors underscore that life in the city is cruel, difficult, by focussing on downtrodden characters facing various kinds of adversities (economic, social, cultural and gender) and the promise of success that Chennai offers to its residents—young and old. In *Angadi Theru*, for example, we bear witness to the exploitation endured by migrants from Tirunelveli, who come to Chennai to work in a textile showroom; in *Kaaka Muttai*, we trace the lives of two slum children in the city who desire to taste a pizza; and, in *Marina*, we are exposed to the life of an orphan in Chennai who escapes from his cruel uncle and ends up on Marina beach selling drinking-water packets. Across the three films, themes such as the precarity of work, the violence of the city, the exploitation of migrants and youngsters and gender violence underscore that the right to the city is not universal. The city space is not valorised: rather, it is articulated as a much more raw, gritty, unequal and uneven city.

At the same time, films like *Madras* (2014), *Irudhi Suttru* (Final Round 2016), *Maanagaram* (Metropolis 2017) and *Vada Chennai* (North Chennai 2018) explore the underbelly of North Chennai as a space that is marked by goondaism, rowdiness, dons and mafia-dons in what could be called the criminalisation of the modern city (Leonard 2015). This is the third development that emerged post-2000 in Tamil cinema. It can be argued that these depictions are voyeuristic and sensational with the effect of desensitising the cinema audience to violence and shoring up South Chennai as a safe haven. At the same time, the dystopic rendering of North Chennai ridden with caste-related crimes and the embattled working classes, observed Sai (2018), reflects 'the politics surrounding the area too which is racy, full of twists and is mostly about one-upmanship'. What these collections of films do is speak to the unevenness of the city, where the state government's focus is on developing the western and southern parts of the city at the expense of North Chennai. The municipal body which manages the city of Chennai, the Corporation of Chennai

(CoC), has embarked on an expansionist programme that included the development of 'manufacturing and residential clusters ... in the municipality's western and southern margins' (Hancock 2008, 181). It should be noted that these films on North Chennai seek to move beyond stereotyping the space as one dominated by violence and marginalisation by showcasing the vibrancy of the place, the close-knit community bonds and the exceptional characters who occupy these spaces.

Tamil cinema's role in reinventing rural and village life as rooted in tradition, cultural and caste identity, subsequently oscillating towards the valorisation of metropolitanism while at the same time rejecting the 'imagined south' and finally depicting urban slums and ghettos has produced a differentiated and sometimes contested imaginary geography of Tamil Nadu. These, in turn, have given impetus to multiple modes of identification, perpetuation of the 'Other' and familiar places that reinforce positions of domination and subordination, vis a vis urban/rural and Northern/Southern Tamil Nadu.

## **For and Against the Indian Nation-State**

India's entry into the global economy in the 1990s and the phenomenal growth in the media and advertising sectors concomitantly drove Indian cinema in search of a global audience, especially the overseas Indian diaspora. Tamil cinema also responded by way of director Mani Ratnam. His trilogy, *Roja* (Rose 1993), *Bombay* (1995) and *Dil Se* (From the Heart 1998) explore communal violence, separatism, Indian patriotism and the resilience of the Indian state. And there too, strong sentiments and attachment to an antagonistic Tamil-Indian identity exist. *Roja*, the namesake character in the film, leaves her small village in southern Tamil Nadu with her husband to migrate to Kashmir. There, the husband is kidnapped by extremists. *Roja* hardly speaks a word of Hindi, let alone any English, but pleads in Tamil with the Delhi army officers and ministers for his return. The India represented in the film *Roja* slips between what Homi Bhabha (1994) referred to 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' (cited in Devadas and Velayutham 2008: 155). As the theme song to *Roja* echoes: 'Tamizha, Tamizha tomorrow is ours, this country is ours [...] my home is mother Tamil Nadu [...] and enunciate that you are an Indian [...]', the person being invoked here is first and foremost a Tamilian [Tamizh], and then an Indian.

Not surprisingly, in *Nayakan* (1987), *Mahanadi* (The Great River 1993), *Roja* (1993), *Bombay* (1995), *Baasha* (1995) and *Tuppakki* (Gun 2012), where the films are set in Mumbai, New Delhi or Kolkata, the protagonists encounter these city spaces as outsiders because they do not speak the same language. They are largely accompanied by other Tamil interstate migrants in those cities. Mumbai's Dharavi slum is the backdrop for Mani Ratnam's Tamil rendition of *The Godfather*. The main character, Sakthivel 'Velu' Naicker (played by Kamal Hassan) with a quintessentially Tamil name, rises to become the underworld gang leader supported by fellow Tamils in the slum. In *Roja*, Mani Ratnam's intention was to transcend regional and linguistic differences and celebrate triumph of nationalism in the face of terrorism—and this was precisely why the Telugu and Hindi versions of the film were major box-office hits. However, for the Tamil audience, the Kashmir border dispute and language incomprehensibility were jarring. In *Nayakan*, Velu Naicker does not speak a word of Hindi and remains 'truly' Tamil to underscore that Tamil regional identity overrides the Indian national identity. As Devadas and Velayutham (2008: 167) argued,

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 margin 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 remains thoroughly ambivalent.

Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power at the national level in 2014, the relationship between the Union Government and Tamil Nadu has been tense, especially around the long-running Cauvery River water dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In January 2018, the Indian Supreme Court instructed the Central Government to frame a scheme for the implementation of the judgement on the distribution of the Cauvery water. However, this was reneged by the BJP Government, as it was focussed on the outcome of the Karnataka State election. The government's lack of resolve in addressing the dispute reached a boiling point. The Nadigar Sangam—officially known as 'South Indian Artists' Association', a film, television and stage actors' union in Tamil Nadu staged a protest against the central government and called for delaying the release of new Tamil films in Karnataka.

Tamil cinema has also responded vehemently when the Indian Supreme Court issued a ban on Jallikattu (bull-taming event) in 2014.



This culminated in a major pro-Jallikattu protest in Chennai's Marina beach, across India and overseas, demanding the lifting of the ban. Many film artists and directors actively participated in the protest and spoke of the deep roots of Jallikattu in Tamil culture and identity. The film music composer A.R. Rahman observed a day-long fast in solidarity. Santosh Gopal's documentary *Jallikattu* 5–23 January 2017 and a feature film *Karuppan* (2018) reinforced the sentiments shared by the Tamil people. In another recent development, the film *Mersal* (Zapped 2017), starring Vijay, was marred by several controversies, including depicting the lead actor as a Jallikattu exponent. Moreover, the film criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST), and the government's fixation on the digital mode of payment. Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi, tweeted in support, 'Mr. Modi, Cinema is a deep expression of Tamil culture and language. Don't try to demonetise Tamil pride by interfering in *Mersal*' [sic] (*Hindustan Times* 28 October 2017).

In examining the issues of nationalism and patriotism in Indian cinemas (the many language cinemas of India), Devadas (2014: 226) posited that they are 'a significant machine for articulating such expressions', but they also 'change and shift across different historical moments and ideologies and are inscribed in complex ways within and across different bodies'. In this sense, post-independence Tamil cinema has contributed in many ways to the collective imagining of the Indian nation-state and identity, and more precisely from a Tamil territorial, historical, cultural and ethno-linguistic vantage point. Tamil cinema's positioning vis-à-vis the Indian nation is therefore marked by divergent tendencies that simultaneously evoke Indian nationalism, ethno-linguistic dissonance and profound self-proclamation of Tamilness. Tamil cinema's status as a 'regional cinema', as opposed to the pan-Indian and globally successful Bollywood, has meant that its 'national investment', that is, its potential to speak to a wider non-Tamil speaking audience, is nullified. Tamil cinema is mostly made by Tamils and exclusively for Tamils, with accompanying remake of multilingual versions for the Hindi and Telugu audience.

## **Social Injustices and Moral Crusaders**

The principle of social justice has always animated Tamil cinema. From the attack on caste dominance, gender oppression and violence to class inequalities, cinema has raised this awareness among its audience to

varying degrees of success. In the same vein, cinema frequently constitutes itself as the voice of the 'third estate', that is, the common folk—for venting frustration and social disaffection against bureaucratic red tape, corruption, maladministration, cronyism, injustices and bribery in the bureaucracy, public institutions (schools, hospitals), state institutions (police, legal system, courts, prisons, etc.) and public office (political candidates, District Collectors, Members of Parliament, Ministers, etc.). Alongside these repressive apparatuses are films depicting rowdyism, gang rule, criminality, vigilantism and 'innocent' and 'unwitting' everyday individuals caught in the middle. These cinematic tropes are deployed to elevate the hero as a moral crusader, use strong and styled violence and engage the audience in a politics of sentiment. *Kaakha Kaakha* (To Protect 2003), *Saamy* (2003), *Singam* (Lion 2010) and *Vikram Vedha* (2017) are a series of films centred around the Tamil Nadu Police, law-enforcement, corruption, use of excessive force and violence and quashing of gangs and underworld figures. It is well-established that corruption has been widespread in Tamil Nadu since the 1970s, tattering the reputation of the police. It is not surprising that police films were an attempt to reprise and restore the honour of the policing profession. Here, the khaki police uniform symbolises the rule of law. Integrity and honesty (sometimes tainted by corrupt practices) are redeemed by the hero by the end of the film, thus reinforcing the point that while there may be problems with policing and individual cops may abuse their powers and engage in dishonest dealings, nothing can tarnish the uniform and the symbolic power of the police as a social institution. *Indian* (1996), *Anniyan* (Outsider 2005) and *Nimirndhu Nil* (Stand Upright 2014) are part of a long list of vigilante films that are bent on rooting out corruption and correcting the system. Though these films are unlikely to result in 'revolutionary' changes to the woeful bureaucracy and corrupt practices, they are nonetheless pointed attacks on a failing and deplorable public service. For the audience, vigilantism can serve as a relief valve, as it were.

The box-office hit *Kaaka Muttai* (Crow's Eggs 2014) tells the story of two young boys living in the Chennai slums attempting to fulfil their dream of eating a slice of pizza. This is a simple but pointed reflection on slum dwellers, poverty and hardship, as well as a sharp criticism of affluent, westernised and middle-class Chennai. Recent films like *Bhoomi* (Earth 2021), *Merku Thodarchi Malai* (Western Ghats 2018), *Mersal* (Zapped 2017) engage with the themes of rural poverty, depletion of water resources, climate change, corrupt politicians and dysfunctional bureaucracy. These films are neither radical nor revolutionary in the anguish and the message they

convey. Similarly, they are less likely to influence political and policy outcomes in a meaningful way. Nonetheless, the power of these films lies in making visible the sufferings of minorities and the socio-economically marginalised, and acknowledging a shared sense of injustice.

## Conclusion

On the 5 of December 2016, Jayalalitha, the actor (1965–80), General Secretary of the AIADMK (1991–2016) and Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for over 14 years, died of illness. She became the first woman Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, largely due to her cinematic fame and close mentorship by M. G. Ramachandran. Shortly after, on the 7 of August 2018, M. Karunanidhi, the screenwriter, politician and leader of the DMK, died due to age-related illness. He was the last stalwart of the Dravida movement. The passing of Jayalalitha and M. Karunanidhi has raised the possibility that the symbiotic relationship between cinema and politics, a quintessential feature of Tamil Nadu, would come to an end.

However, as we have shown in this article, political communication in Tamil cinema has outlived the propaganda of the self-respect and Dravida Movements. On this pathway, C. N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, M. G. Ramachandran and Jayalalitha used cinema as a platform to launch their political careers. Others, like actors Vijayakanth and Sarathkumar (the former much more successfully than the latter), have made headway in politics. Veteran actors Rajinikanth and Kamal Hassan, both extremely popular, announced their foray into the political arena in 2018. A key point here is that post-independent Tamil cinema has consistently produced film stars who were catapulted into the political arena. The power of cinema to convey particular ideological, political and socio-cultural positions and to win the hearts and minds of movie-going public cannot be underestimated.

In this article, we have shown that the cinematic image of the subaltern crusader and the political messages that film narratives promulgate have served the DMK and AIADMK well. These two parties remain the dominant players in the political landscape of Tamil Nadu. At the same time, with the shift from the Dravida Kazhagam to the Dravida parties, Dravidian ideology has been diminished by diffused political agendas. New concerns around redefining Tamil identity through village life, caste affiliation, political orientation, changing Indian economy, class and urban sensibilities are the catalysts for the fragmentation of political communication. These pluralist and sometimes non-partisan voices arguably do not translate into a democratisation of the cinematic

or public sphere. Rather, they are representative of a fragmented and divisive political reality. Despite the 'bottom-up political mobilisation' that cinema fosters—the championing of the poor, the marginalised and ordinary Tamils—more compelling social issues like sexual, gender, class and caste discrimination, privatisation of education, precarious work and employment, crime and violence, diminishing arable land for farming and human produced environmental calamities receive little attention.

## Postscript

As we finalised the revision of this article, Kamal Hassan led his political party Makkal Needhi Maiam to the 2021 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly election. However, the party failed to win a single seat. Kamal brandishing torchlight—his party symbol—campaigned not as a larger than life celluloid hero but as an 'ordinary citizen' (*one of ours*). While his predecessors M. G. Ramachandran/Vijaykanth curated their roles carefully to launch them into political life, Kamal's on-screen political ambitions were less clear. His defeat can be viewed as an indication of a further rupture in an already fragmented/fractured symbiotic relationship between cinema and politics. It remains to be seen whether Tamil cinema's intimate entanglement with politics will persist as we look ahead.

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