

The Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication

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PREFACE

Thanks to the Academic Committee of the V th International Conference-Seminar of Tamil Studies, some amount of 'greatness' has been thrust upon this paper, giving it wider academic and public attention than it would have received, had it been read at one of those ill-charted group sessions of the conference at Madurai.

Academic propriety prevents me from retelling here all what has been told by those in charge of the academic matters there relating to this paper, which was not scheduled for presentation, even though I had earlier been informed of its receipt and the acceptance of the synopsis. However, I am now duty bound to state here what Mr. M. Arunachalam told me. He made it quite clear that this paper could not be scheduled for presentation because of the reference it has to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. I do not know whether Mr. Arunachalam had the authority to say it, but he did inform me that the Chief Minister did not like any reference to him, even if it was complimentary.

When I responded to him by informing him that since this is an academic matter I might be forced to take it up at other levels, his reply was "Then I will not substantiate it". I do not know what he meant by such a combination of words, but I thought that was his way of expressing the idea that he would deny his statements if I made our discussion public. The consequent controversy in the Press on the handling of the academic side of the Conference leaves me with no choice but to divulge what Mr. Arunachalam told me. I mean no disrespect at all to a Chief Minister who has made

history in his own right, but I have got to tell the truth about what happened at Madurai. However I have refrained from divulging here all what has been told to me by Mr. M. Arunachalam and by one other official of the Conference.

As one interested in the Social History of the Tamils, I feel it is important to go into the social and political role of the medium that has been responsible, among other factors, for throwing up three Chief Ministers of a State in succession. I have therefore tapped the discipline of Media-Sociology to understand that process. I have dealt with this problem in some of my other papers too.

This is not an exhaustive study. It had been planned and written as a Conference paper that would enable academic discussion on the question. But the exigencies of the situation demand its publication in the form it was submitted to the organizers of the Conference.

The Tamil "talkie" is fifty years old this year (1981). It is high time serious academic attention is focussed on its history and role.

There were many offers for publishing this paper in Tamil. The **New Century Book House Private Limited** offered to publish the paper in English. I thank them for it.

I wish to thank V. Chidambaram, my friend, for reading the proofs.

My thanks are due to A. J. Canagaratna of the University of Jaffna for his comments on reading the first draft of the paper and to Aranthai Narayanan for the information he gave on the political significance of some of the lyrics in the M. G. R. films, especially to those references to the DMK government headed by M. Karunanidhi. I have not been able to work on it fully in this paper.

I am grateful to Miss Margaret Alagaratnam for typing the manuscript.

Finally I wish to thank Mr. M. Arunachalam sincerely for giving this paper much publicity, unwittingly though.

Nadarajakoddam,
Valvettiturai,
Sri Lanka.
16-1-1981

Karthigesu Sivathamby

TO
THE MEMORY
OF
MY SISTER
YOGESWARI

The Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication

I

“Nothing less than the control of men’s minds and emotions is at stake. Since aesthetics, in this case, has become linked with economic and political action responsive to the uses of verbal communication, cinema is the major cultural factor in the second half of the twentieth century’

—Robert Gessner¹

Nowhere has this been better demonstrated than in the case of the Tamil film, for of all the media in Tamilnadu, the film had played a decisive, persuasive role in contributing to the electoral acceptance of three political leaders, two of them also film script writers and the third principally an actor, as Chief Ministers of the State. It is, therefore of immense interest from the point of the view of Media Studies, especially Media-Sociology, to inquire into the methods and manner by which this was achieved.

Inspite of its sixty-four year history in Tamilnadu (the first silent film exclusively for the Tamil spectator - Keecaka Vatam - was produced in 1916 and the first Tamil talkie - a feature film - Kalidas was produced in 1931; 1981 is the year of the golden jubilee of the Tamil film), the cinema has not yet, except for a penetrating study by S. T. Bhaskaran and an audience analysis by Centre for Social Research, Madras, received the full academic attention it demands as a medium of communication that shaped Tamilian public opinion.² There are, of course, some occasional studies made on the association DMK had with the Tamil film.³ Of late, however, one hears of studies being undertaken in this field.

An attempt is made in this paper to provide the sociological background⁴ to the emergence of the Tamil film as an effective political medium, to trace in brief outline how this was achieved, especially during the period 1948-1977 and to the manner the Tamil film "communicated" political ideology to its viewers.

II

It is essential, at the very outset, to have some idea relating to what is meant by the term "political communication" in so far as the persuasive content of the Tamil film is concerned.

According to Ithiel de Sola Pool "political communication, in a limited sense, would refer to the activity of certain specialized institutions that have been set up to disseminate

information, ideas and attitudes about governmental affairs."⁵

Such a restricted definition is needed to establish the academic scope and extent of the field of political communication within the context of communication studies. But, in a Third World situation, where such specialized differentiation in the scope of the area and in the function of the media forms is not possible, political communication should be taken to mean all communication that persuades the "receiver" to take up a particular political stance. As Pool himself agrees "Communication has many effects besides that of persuading people of the thing said. It also affects attention, information, interest and action. It often does so without causing a person to decide that what he previously thought to be false is true or vice-versa. None the less a large part of the sociological and psychological literature on political communication has dealt with the conditions of persuasion."

Further if one is to take that limited view of political communication, it would, in the case of the use of the film medium at best refer to the newsreels (of which undoubtedly good use is made) and to the propagandist documentaries. As we would see later the type of communication the film made was through the feature films and that too especially at a time when those communicators did not enjoy political power.⁷ Thus it is very essential to take a more flexible view of the term "political communication"; in this case it would mean

the manner the viewers were persuaded to take a political decision in voting for those communicators and to involve themselves in the political activities of the communicators. Furthermore communication in this case was only suggestive leaving it to the audience to be voluntarily and willingly inspired or activated by them.⁹

III

It is perhaps important at this juncture to clearly understand the "type" of films that performed successfully this task of political communication. As has been mentioned it is the feature film that was used; i.e. "Cinema drama of some length in several reels," in terms of the classification of films made by Paul Rotha, it would be the "cine-fiction film."¹⁰ These films had a (very often formulaic) story content and what was shown or spoken would have two levels of meaning, one within the context of the story and the other in relation to the political reality of the day. In fact if these did not possess the first level of meaning they would never have got the Censor's approval.

Saeed Akhtar Mirza states very clearly the type of film we are concerned with here.

"These are three basic and broad forms of Cinema that have evolved since its inception: 1) the dramatic, subdivided into the analytic and the narrative; 2) the lyric; 3) the epic, again subdivided into the classical and the neoclassical.

Most of the films that are made in India follow the dramatic-narrative pattern. This is the "commercial film" of the country. It could be a suspense thriller, of the gangster genre, a "social", a comedy or a permutation of all these genres..... The subject matter is generally peasants versus landlords or workers versus capitalists; characters are correctly fleshed out and sociologically defined. The movement of the plot is logical right upto the denonement....."¹⁰

So, it is the dramatic narrative film that is used in this political communication. They are not "political films" in the sense that they openly portray political oppression in colonialist and fascist situations (as are some of the films from Latin American countries).¹¹ but they are dramatic narratives, the story content of which, and especially the characterisation, would have a political relevance in the Tamilnadu situation.

IV

It is generally agreed by media-psychologists that of all the media, the film has one of the highest communication potential because the movement of the pictures in a darkened auditorium with the consciousness of the viewer lowered can dissolve the viewer into all things and beings. Seeing a film is a muted form of "dreaming". "Man is attracted by cinema because it gives him the illusion of vicariously partaking of life in its fullness."

The following assessment of the communicative capabilities of the film is representative

of what is usually given in the text books on Mass-Communication.

“.....film is probably the most powerful propaganda medium man has yet devised. As a consequence, its potential for aiding or injuring civilization is enormous. In addition to supplying a vital message through dialogue, narration or subtitles, the film provides an instantaneous, accompanying visual image-supplying the viewer with a picture to bulwark what he has learned through language. Thus, his imagination need not conjure a mental image to accompany what words have told him; *he leaves the theatre complete with a concept and its substantiation.*”¹²

The effectiveness of the film medium is because of its aesthetic appeal. “It is a wonderful new art merging in a unified whole presenting a synthesis of painting and drama, music and sculpture, architecture and dancing, landscape and man, visual image and uttered. Recognition of this synthesis as an organic unity non-existent before is certainly the most important achievement in the history of aesthetics.”¹³

With all its aesthetic potential, the film however has been basically, from its very beginning, a mass medium and that explains the popular character of its appeal.

“Where the traditional arts of music, drama and literature reached their first eminence as the exclusive possession of a educated aristocracy, the motion pictures were from the beginning an entertainment produced for the masses, despite the indifference or disapproval of the cultivated minority. With the development of democracy, universal literacy, a higher standard of living and greater leisure for the masses,

the traditional arts filtered down to the middle and working classes. The cinema, on the other hand, has had to spread its charms in the opposite direction, from the bottom of the social scale upward”¹⁴

Thus the very character of the film is adequate reason for its impact on the thinking of a community. But in the Tamilian context the film has a very significant place in that it is the first aesthetic expression of the Tamils that had the entire Tamils as its patrons.

A bird's eye view of the history of the performing arts among the Tamils would show that all those arts (dancing, music and drama) in their practice and performance did not bring all the Tamils, irrespective of their social distinctions to the same auditorium. It has already been shown that in the period of *Cilappatikaram* itself the classification made of *Kuttu* performances was based on the social status of the audience. The *Vettiyaal* and the *Potuviyaal* classification, mentioned in *Cilappatikaram* reveals a classification based on the audience.¹⁵ This applies to music and dance too; in the case of music there is enough reason to infer that the *Vettiyaal-Potuviyaal* bifurcation has started in the pre-*Cilappatikaram* period itself.

The word *Vettiyaal* means “Kingly nature” and in terms of performances refers to” Those kinds of dramas and dances performed in the presence of Kings.” The Tamil Lexicon explains the term *Potuviyaal* as “a dance (or drama) opposed to *Vettiyaal*.” As it is mentioned in *Cil*, that the

same performer was proficient in both these forms it is clear that *Potuviyal* acts were those performed outside the royal palaces. But these *Potuviyal* performances should not be taken to include *Āycciyar Kuravai*, *Kunrakkuravai* and *Vēttuva Vari* as those were tribal and communal performances which had not lost their ritualistic fervour. The *Vēttiyal* - *Potuviyal* classification is spoken of only in relation to the caste of professional dancers.

With the beginning of the 7th C. AD and the inauguration of the tradition of building temples of stone, these arts go into the temple. And with the system of temple entry obtaining among the Saivaites and Vaisnavaites, not allowing the ritually polluting castes into the temples this dichotomy became a permanent feature of the Tamilian arts.¹⁶

In later times, in 18th and 19th centuries when the Terukkuttu was patronised by the higher caste groups the social hierarchy of the spectators was well reflected in the seating arrangement.

The Cinema Hall was the first performance centre in which all the Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of the seating is, not on the hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power. If he cannot afford paying the higher rate, he has either to keep away from the performance or be with "all and sundry."

Thus in the history of Tamilian arts, the film has been the first social equaliser. And this had a tremendous impact both on the audience and on the medium itself as it operates in Tamilnadu.

Because of the socially exclusive character of the arts (including literature) in pre-modern times, it was not possible to portray any character or situation that would be representative of all the Tamils irrespective of their caste and status. It was after bringing them together as spectators under one roof or as readers reading copies of the same book (this was facilitated by the secular system of education introduced by the British) that creative artistes could think in terms of depicting and portraying characters that were 'typical' of the entire Tamils or characters that were typical of the various sections of the Tamilian population. This socio-psychological factor contributed, in main, to a situation wherein one who portrayed the average man in Tamilnadu doing average jobs but was, due to his personal honesty and bravery, able to overcome the social limitations of his life, was also taken as the political leader who could enable them to overcome the social limitations placed on the lower groups.

There is yet another factor in the history of the Tamil film, which had contributed in large measure to the identification of this medium with the masses, more for the masses to consider it as the medium most relevant to them. That, as has been very effectively highlighted by S.T.Bhas-karan, is the gap that has existed between the

Tamil Cinema and the Tamil intelligentsia.¹⁷ There was positive antipathy at the beginning. One member of the Board of Film Censors, in his submission before the Indian Cinematograph Committee (1927) "observed, "I find the uncultured flock to the cinema. It could be said that 75% of cinema patrons are of the lower order."¹⁸ And that has continued to exist throughout; in 1953 Rajaji as Chief Minister compared "cinema to alcohol and said that liquor also brought in tax money but still he campaigned for prohibition and had successfully implemented it. He went on to say that if the industry could stop producing films they would be doing a signal service to the community."¹⁹

It is not too difficult to understand this animosity. The Tamil film, especially the talkie, at the start, had its female artists (actresses) drawn mainly from the *devadasi* tradition and neither the initial entrepreneurs nor the performers came from the socially acceptable groups. It is interesting to note that at the beginning most of the technicians too were not Tamils and for some time even the filming was done in Bombay and Calcutta.

It is of immense socio-political interest to note that in the early fifties, when Rajaji's tirade was turned against the Tamil film, the DMK under Annadurai and Karunanidhi was making full use of the medium to propagate its views.

This intellectual apathy leads to the artistically low standards of the Tamil cinema; and

with the hostility shown by the traditionalists from the upper echelons it was possible for those who were making conscious political use of the medium to streamline the medium fully to suit the intellectual capacity of the masses. One special characteristic of the earlier political films of the DMK, their dependence on the alliterative rhetoric as declaimed by the chief protagonist, may be mentioned here. In Tamilnadu where the level of literacy is only 39.9% (1971) it would not be possible for all to appreciate the essentially kinesthetic quality of the films. The visual image to be properly understood should in such circumstance be supplemented by the word. To make matters easy for the understanding of the illiterate and the semiliterate the characters were made also to address in first person the society that is responsible for their oppression.

However there have been a few happy exceptions. Among the Congress politicians Sathiyamurthy and of the writers the Manikkodi group (esp. B.S. Ramaiah and of the popular writers 'Kalki' R. Krishnamurthy) campaigned for a fuller participation by the intellectuals. Kalki both as critic and the script writer of *Tyagabhumi*, which was banned for sometime, was very conscious of the potentialities of the medium. Perhaps the most important figure is K. Subramanyam, a lawyer, who under the banner of Madras United Artistes Corporation, produced many socially purposive films.

As the Tamil film began to develop commercially and establish itself as the main form of entertain-

tainment the Tamil intelligentsia was placed in a dilemma. While on the one hand it was decrying the standards of the Tamil film making fun of its theatricality, it had also to go for it as it was the only low-cost entertainment that the social group could afford.

Thus whether appreciated or not the Tamil film was seen by most of the Tamils. The very fact that here was a mass art willingly or grudgingly seen and appreciated, it began to play a communicative role in persuading, and among those it could not persuade, it could at least attract attention, provide information locate interest and induce action on those matters it chose to portray.

V

The discernible impact of the Tamil film on the political behaviour and the conscious use of the medium for political ends start with the emergence of the DMK (1949). But that does not imply that the films had been a political before that. In fact it could be seen that the conscious political use made of the film after independence has been the culmination of a covert socio-political orientation which the films has in the pre-independence era itself.

S.T.Bhaskaran's study of the silent era of the South Indian Cinema reveals that in the late twenties and early thirties, "the silent cinema, though it did not have any pretensions to ideological or political content, certainly had clear

overtones of political consciousness."²⁰ If one were to take into count the trend of politicisation of the Indian masses during this period, one could see that, under the leadership of Gandhi, eradication of the social evils at grass roots level constituted a definite part of the political struggle for independence. It is therefore essential that one takes into count those films directed towards the abolition of the various forms of social oppression also as politically oriented films. Bhaskaran cites, with justification, films, like *Dharma Patini* (1929), which had dealt with the problem of alcohol, thus setting the tone for propaganda for the temperance movement in films. The *Orphan Daughter* (1930) which dealt with the social injustices women had to suffer in South Indian Society and, more importantly, Raja Sandow's *Nandanar*, titled in English "*The Elevation of the Down-trodden*" (1930) which dealt with the life of a Hindu Saint from the pariah caste, are two important films of the silent era.

The first Tamil talkie-'feature film'-Kalidas was released in 1931. But even then most of the films were shot in Calcutta or Bombay; it was only during the period 1935-1940 that studios were being built in Madras.

The first flush of Tamil films dealt largely with mythological themes because of the guaranteed appeal they had for the viewers. Nonetheless there were some very important Tamil films which had socio-political themes. The

first Tamil "talkie" with a contemporary theme was *Menaka* (1935) and it is now revealed that it had used one of the poems of the revolutionary poet Subramania Bharathi.²¹ Besides *Menaka*, the other important socio-political films of the period 1931-1947 were *Balayogini* (1936), *Chandra Mohan* (1936), *Desamunnetram* (1938) *Sevasadan* (1938), *Tyagabhumis* (1939), *Jayakkodi* (1939) *Kulandaikkalyanam* (1940), and *Nam Iruvar* (1947).

The paucity of openly political films was due to the vigilance of the government. "Any mention of social reforms in a film, was looked upon with suspicion by the British as a veiled support to Matatma Gandhi's programme of social uplift. *Ekanath* (1938 Tamil) a film based on the life of the 16th century Marathi saint, who preached against untouchability, was banned as it favoured Gandhi's programme for Harijan uplift."²² The apathy of the intellectuals and the caution exercised by the government jointly created a situation in which the film producers had to go for "mythologicals and escapist fare."

Yet even within this rather restrictive context there was a documentary on Gandhi in 1940 and some of the films like *Tyagabhumis* could bring out in bold relief the Gandhian ideology.

The British government itself realized the communicative value of the Indian film when it encouraged production of films which depict popular support for the war-efforts of the government, by providing incentives to producers.

K.Subrahmaniyam's *Manasamrakshanam* (1944) was produced under this incentive scheme. The social stance of the Tamil film was becoming pronounced after 1940. Commenting on the period 1940-47, the report on the "Impact of Films on Society (A study of Tamilnadu)" says "the tone of the social films emphasizing upon the ills of caste system and untouchability, the soaring level of indignity done to women in the Hindu society became aggressive during this period."²³

However this impact was very much limited because during this period 1931-1947 rural population was not fully exposed to the impact of film as cinema halls were largely confined to townships. It is true that there were the "touring talkies" but it cannot be held that these were able to have any serious impact on the socio-political thinking of the people.

This is in marked contrast to the ensuing period when, as a result of the rural electrification programme, the number of cinema halls in the villages increased. It is now held that "Tamil nadu has the highest exposure rate for films."²⁴

This coincides with the period when DMK starts making conscious use of this medium.

VI

India achieves political independence in 1947 and that constitutes also the dateline for the emergence of the nationality problem in India.

The rise of DMK (1949) in South India symbolises this change. and it was with the rise of the DMK that, as has been mentioned already, the trend towards conscious use of the film medium for propagation of political ideas begin. C.N. Annadurai's (1909-1969) *Vēlaikkari* was released in 1948, and it marks a new era in Tamil nadu both in terms of political consciousness of the Tamils and in the articulation of socio-political demands of the region. *Vēlaikkari* constitutes a radical departure from the previous films in that the problems it highlighted and the manner it spelt them out challenged the hitherto unquestioned basis of South Indian Society. In its portrayal of the problems that Anandan, the son of a poor peasant working under a Zamindar, had to face in his efforts to break through the oppressive social system, this film brought to light, the helplessness of the average Tamil peasant in that social set-up and showed how the traditional religious institutions were used to keep the peasants in ignorance and poverty. The rhetoric of Anandan at the temple and at the court of law exposed the manner the landowners manipulated the entire system to keep themselves in power and authority. It showed that neither the rule of law nor the gracious benefits of the gods was for the poor. The arguments put forward were so radical and heretic that they posed a threat to the very foundations of the traditional rural Tamil society. In a way the film argued for social upliftment but in another sense it was also very atheistic and anarchist.

These ideas were woven well into a dramatic narrative very traditional in its structures - the hero, by his personal bravado ultimately triumphs and all those who conspired to keep him down express their regrets and accept him as their equal. All's well that ends well. The film was marked by the declamations of the hero in front of the icon at the temple of Mariamman and in the court of law. It was a case of transposing the political platform of the DK with its anti-Brahmin, anti-establishment rhetoric into the personal lives of the characters. The dialogues became an instant success setting the pattern of this new genre of politically oriented Tamil films. They were radical in their approach to problems and heretical in the manner they phrased them.

Although taken as one whole, this seems a radical departure from the contemporary run of the mill Tamil films, a closer look at the 'composition' of the Tamil films would reveal that there had been a trace of this radicalism slowly emerging in the films in those "comic scenes" of the inimitable Tamil comedian N. S. Krishnan (1908-1957).

To understand the significance of the role of N.S. Krishnan in politicising the film medium in Tamilnadu, one should know the structure of the conventional Tamil films. Any average Tamil film would have its "serious" side in which the trials and tribulations of the hero and the heroine are portrayed, and this would provide all

the rasas except *Hasya* and that was provided by the comedian (the film version of the traditional Vidusaka/buffoon) whose antics, either as a fool or a man with foolish habits, provide the laughter to the audience. N.S.Krishnan used this pattern to provide a parallel theme within the main film dealing with the incongruent social features. This parallel theme would be an autonomous one - it forms a sub plot within the major plot of the film - and the relevance it would have to the main theme would only be minimal and nominal. Very often the comedian is a friend of the hero and would perhaps help the hero at some crucial moments.

In *Ramalinga Swamikal* he has a dig at the caste system and argues that there are only two kinds of human beings, the good and the bad. In *Anandashramam* his scenes reveal the truth that any rich man who impoverishes the poor will ultimately be doomed. In *Salivahanan* he argues for inter caste marriages. In *Haridas* his part of the film depicts the foolishness of those who hope for good luck to see them through in life.²⁵

It is said that he composed these comic scenes himself and he went with his own troupe of actors and actresses and completed the shooting. Even the songs for those comic scenes were written by a member of his troupe. He had as his female counter part T.A. Madhuran, whom he later married. "N.S. Krishnan could rightly be regarded as a pioneer to exploit film for political advantages.

But in his roles he always tried to project realistically the social evils obtaining in Hindu society but gave the impression that they are not in-built in the society but are a consequence of the age-long Brahmin domination."²⁶

The social criticism NSK made in the Tamil films was, at the start, in the form of digs at society but over the years, as he matured, one could see him taking a particular stand in relation to social reform and the upliftment of the poor. In his own inimitable way he was able to identify the social evils that torment the people and to indicate ways of overcoming them. In this respect his two pieces the *Kindanar Kalakshepam* (incorporated into his film *Nallathambi* 1949) and *Aimpatum Arupatum* (incorporated into the film *Manamagal* 1951) are very important. Parodying the story of Nandanar, the great Saivaitic devotee from the pariah caste, who with his great devotion to Siva was able to break through the gates of untouchability, NSK in his musical discourse narrated the story of a young boy from a village, who through his determined will and integrity of purpose joined a school and rose up to be a graduate and thereafter got a high post. In *Aimpatum Arupatum* he brought out his own vision of independent India.

Though basically a Gandhian and believer in the ahimsa method of struggle, NSK began to openly support Annadurai from the time the DMK was formed in 1949. In his film *Panam*, by an effective pun, he brought in the very name of the

new party *Ti-mu-ka*, and sang its glory, carefully bypassing the Board of Censors by explaining that his *Ti-mu-ka* is an abbreviation of *Tirukkural Munnanik Kalagam*. It is significant to note that the DMK virtually pitched its entire ideology to the ancient Tamil didactic text, *Tirukural*.

From NSK's films to Annadurai's film the transition was logical.

VII

The involvement of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in films was only an extension of the use it made of the theatre for political ends.²⁷ Infact their first important films were all cine -versions of the plays they had staged. *Velaikkari* (1949) was a stage play and the film *Velaikkari* of the play was also scripted by Anna durai. His other famous film *Or Iravu* (1951) was cine adaptation of the play by the same name. M. Karunanithi's epoch-making film *Parasakthy* (1952), which brought out very forcefully the DMK's view on social oppression also was originally written as a play.

It is true that even at the very outset, i.e. at the end of the forties and the beginning of the fifties, both Annadurai and Karunanidhi wrote new filmscripts and adopted some ealier plays into films. Annadurai scripted *Nallathamby* for N. S. Krishnan. The films scripted by Karunanidhi, *Manthirikumari* (1950) and *Manohara*, were noted for their heretical and radical arguments. "The classical and legendary story (originally

written for the stage by P.Sambanda Mudaliyar) was fully renarrated by Karunanidhi with a successful manoeuvring towards highlighting the political ideas of the DMK. The powerful dialogue of the film personified Tamilnadu as the mother of Tamil society who has been politically and socially subjugated by an alien political tradition from North India."²⁸

The DMK films, especially those scripted by Annadurai and Karunanidhi, employed an alliterative rhethoric, which soon became one of the distinguishing characteristics of the DMK oriented films. The star associated with this rhetoric was Sivaji Ganesan, who started his film career as a DMK performer but soon left their ranks.

Madanapalli Gopal Ramachandran, who as time went on, became the most important DMK star, and who later, because of the image he created for himself and for the views he propounded on the screen, was able to cause a split in the DMK and was able to form a new party of his own (Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam ADMK) infused a new idiom into the political propaganda of the DMK films. He used his fist more than his tongue and created the image of an "action-hero" who revolutionised the existing societal pattern by depicting the dynamism of the downtrodden.

Thus the DMK revolutionised the very structure and content of the Tamil film.

In trying to analyse and examine the nature and extent of the political use made of the Tamil film by Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, one should understand how this party, an offshoot of the Dravida Kazhagam (and formally launched on 15-9-1949), wanted to project itself in the eyes of the masses of Tamilnadu and how it made use of the shortcomings of the governments of the day, to its advantage. It is important, therefore to know, in brief, the nature of the movement and how it made use of the film.

Even though, at the outset as Justice Party and later as Dravida Kazhagam, the movement started as the voice of the emerging non-Brahmin bourgeoisie, it was at its base "one of the most striking reform movements the oppressed classes of Tamilnadu had known in recent times."²⁰

At the time the DMK was launched as a separate political party Annadurai insisted "that the new party was solely interested in social reconstruction and intellectual resurrection and not in politics."²¹

Mythily Sivaraman has delineated the socio-economic base of the party, as it stood at the time it was launched.

"The base of the movement must be found in the burdens thrown increasingly on the people under the Congress rule and the very deep economic insecurity. Educational facilities in Tamilnadu had expanded considerably but unemployment was also in the increase. Food prices were also going up and dissatisfaction with the existing state power was widespread. It was this which was primarily

responsible for the eagerness with which the people rallied round the slogan of a sovereign Dravida Nadu. It was an indifferent alien rule from Delhi that was responsible for the stagnation and misery of Tamilnadu. The explanation was simple and easy to swallow. The economic liberation of the poor became synonymous with the political liberation from the "Aryan".²¹

In its attempt to clothe these demands in a cultural idiom, the DMK politicised the very concept of Tamil culture. It began to highlight the independent, pre-Aryan character of Tamil culture. It blamed the evils of the society on those external intrusions from the North.. Thus emerged a concept of Tamil nationhood, paleo-centric in many ways, depending much on the pristine maintenance of Tamilian ideals, as expressed in its ancient literature. Annadurai's early polemical writings (*Arya Mayai, Kamparasam* etc.) indicated this trend.

The DMK also used the concept of socialism. Its demand for a secular society, socialistic in outlook and devoid of exploitation, found a ready response among the non-Brahmin masses of Tamilnadu. Even though it openly eschewed electoral involvements at the beginning, "coming alive at a time when the Congress popularity was being eroded and the Communists were in prison or underground, the DMK became rapidly politicised."²²

The DMK films were very much reflective of this socio-political situation in which they

arose. Thus these films, while criticizing the social oppression and exploitation, also underscored the necessity to bring back those ancient virtues enshrined in Tamil culture.

A closer look at the DMK involvement with the film as a medium to establish its credentials as a party that was interested in the Tamil man and to propagate among the Tamils its ideals and vision during the period 1948-1977, reveals that there are two distinguishable phases, the first phase dominated by the filmscripts of Annadurai and Karunanidhi and a second one dominated by M. G. Ramachandran.

It could be said that the first phase begins with 1948 and extends up to the late fifties especially 1957, in which year the DMK enters the arena of electoral politics. From about 1957 both Karunanidhi and Annadurai got engrossed into parliamentary politics and did not have much time to devote to writing for films. However it cannot be said that they gave it up completely. They had their involvement in the filmdom, especially Karunanidhi. But these later years cannot be taken as revealing any decisive influence, like the one they had at the last two years of the forties and during the first half of the fifties.

After about 1957 we find the steady rise of MGR as the hero, who through the celluloid world showed the masses the moral character and fighting spirit that is needed for any man (especially the party enthusiast) to overcome his

social fate and establish his integrity and authority as a human being.

As has been already mentioned, the first phase is marked by those films which were scripted by Annadurai and Karunanidhi. We have also seen that not only in their original film narratives but also in their adaptations they were able to pack in enough to communicate their political views. The films referred to are Annadurai's *Velaikkari*, *Or iravu*, *Sorga Vāsal* and *Nallathamby* and Karunanidhi's *Parāsakthy*, *Mānthiri Kumāri* etc.

A closer look at these films would reveal that these concentrated on a social criticism of the existing order. Anandan in *Vēlaikkari* and Gunasekaran in *Parāsakthy* are characters that typify this trend. As much as they are depicted as the victims of the society and its caste and class bases, they also clearly identify the ills of the society. An easy way to bring out the social criticism, especially to highlight how the scales of the existing social pattern are tilted towards the haves, court-room drama is enacted and the characters in appealing alliterative rhetoric, spell out the grievances of the afflicted and the oppressed. It is in films of this type that the main protagonist very often addresses the Tamil society itself and points out the injustices. In these films of the first phase it was the rhetoric that was reigning supreme. And quite understandably, the actor who could declaim those long asides and soliloquies dominated the filmdom.

The reference here is to Sivaji Ganesan, who as *Gunasekaran* in *Parasakthi* and *Manoharan* in *Manohara*, excelled in rendering those speeches. However, the actor, through whom this trend was introduced and established was K.R.Ramasamy.

This type of social criticism fits in with the declared policy of the party in the first seven to eight years of its existence. The DMK decided to enter electoral politics in 1957.

But the main reason for this characteristic of the films of the first phase is because Annadurai and Karunanidhi were primarily writers. The films referred to here depict and discuss the problems as only writers would see them.

This feature of the first phase films should be seen in the context of the publication of the polemical writings of both Annadurai and Karunanidhi. Annadurai was undoubtedly the ideologue of the party. His academic training in the fields of History and Economics (Annadurai held an M. A. degree from the University of Madras) enabled him to make perceptive comments on the social system and on freedom. Karunanidhi was propagandist par-excellence. In the latter's film narratives one very much misses the complexity of characters one sees in Annadurai, but each of his protagonists are the advocates of the DMK ideology. It is true that Karunanidhi's characters lack depth but it was their outspokenness that brought forth the philosophy of the party in a direct and

effective manner. "The entry of Annadurai and Karunanidhi into the Tamil film industry as script writers was essentially responsible for opening up and exploiting the various facets of Tamil films sustained political propaganda with a social overtone. It must be emphasized that their dialogues, noted for powerful rhetoric and profuse sentiments, were largely responsible for awakening among the masses in Tamilnadu a close affinity for the ideals of self-respect movement and especially for the pro-Dravidian and anti-caste feelings of the DK and the DMK."*

The oppressive character of both the society and the government was always highlighted in these productions.

The impact of these films is seen in the fact that the filmscripts were soon used for theatre productions of these same dramatic narratives in every nook and corner of Tamilnadu. Here was a case of the cinema deciding the pattern of the theatre.

As Ram, Chintan and Ramachandran observe "The DMK influenced films dealt, in an elemental but highly effective level, with the plight of the poor, with people living in the streets, with starvation, with political corruption. They linked these to the clear political message of the ineptitude and corruption of the Congress regime. At a time when cinema houses were being extended to rural Tamilnadu, the DMK's propaganda had a new and far reaching appeal. DMK ideas reached every area of life in Tamil-

nadu through films, books, pamphlets, speeches, dramas, songs and newspapers. *As the ideology of the movement was widely spread and began to take hold, large number of people restructured their conceptions of political and social reality.*³⁴

This is communication bonanza!

The question can rightly be raised whether the above impact could be restricted only to the first phase of the DMK oriented films and whether it would not apply to the second phase when MGR becomes the dominant factor. It is true that as far as basic theme was concerned it could apply to MGR's films too, but a closer examination would reveal that his films dealt more with the social dynamism needed for the underprivileged man, to what extent he could go up the social ladder, than with a criticism of the entire society. Whereas Annadurai and Karunanidhi provided the arguments for the whys of social oppression MGR provided the how for a breakthrough. Thus the latter had more traces of wish-fulfilment, which explains high percentage of fans identifying him as one who acts than as one who reflects, as one of deeds and not necessarily of mere words.

MGR has been a film actor since 1936 but it was around 1950, with films like *Maruthanāṭṭu Ilavaraci* and *Marma Yogi* that his association with the DMK was fully forged. The success of *Malaikkallan* (1954) strengthened his position and gave him a position of equal power, even at

the time the rhetoric was holding sway and with *Nāḍodimannan* (1958), in which he cleverly brought in the rising sun, the symbol of the party, his place in DMK was assured.

Sivaji Ganesan's actions also helped MGR. Sivaji Ganesan who was the star-symbol of the new type of social criticism brought in by Anna durai and Karunanidhi, through his performance in *Parāsakthi*, began to drift away from the DMK since 1955 and when in 1961 E.V.K. Sampath formed the Tamil Nationalist Party joined it. Sivaji ultimately ended up with the Congress and became an ardent follower of K.Kamaraj. Sivaji to live down his DMK past and in his desire to forge himself as the idol of the religious and the more cultivated section of the population took up in a big way to acting in religious mythologicals.

MGR, on the other hand, chose his films and declared that he will act only in those films that are consonant with his social and political views. The DMK as a party began to depend on him, for gathering crowds and collecting votes. It is said that Annadurai himself declared that "just his face would draw 30,000 (persons) the person himself would bring in 50,000."

Before we go into an analysis of the communicative aspects of MGR's films, we should see the impact the film had on the DMK itself. When the DMK was formed, Periyar referred to it as the party of the *Kūttadikal*. That was a reference to the fact that Annadurai, Karunanidhi and some

others were dramatists themselves. But with the success of *Vēlaikkari* and *Par sakthy* there was an influx of DMK oriented writers, actors, actresses and lyric writers into the filmworld. Some of the leading men like Karunanidhi, Asaithamby, Murasoli Maran started producing films. E.V.K. Sampath objected to the undue influence of film artistes and dramatists within the party. He argued that 'non-political' personages (cinema actors and dramatists) played too important a role in party affairs; that they were often given precedence on party platforms; and that audiences were often more interested in seeing and hearing film stars than political speakers.

Sampath argued that emphasis on film actors and those connected with the cinema field would 'cheapen' the party....."⁸⁵

Of course this was a part of the inner conflict that arose within DMK due to the ascendancy of Karunanidhi within the party structure. But the fact that politics of the film world began to take a toll of the unity of the party cannot be doubted. The Kannadasan-Karunanidhi conflict arose because of their rivalry in the film world. E.V.K.Sampath ultimately left the party (1961) and formed the Tamil National Party. The problem assumed such proportion that in a book the General Secretary of the party, R. Neduncheliyan, wrote in 1961, he had to write an entire chapter on "The Party and the Aritstes."⁸⁶

The power wielded by those in the film world was felt once again in 1969 when Annaduri died.

Karunanidhi, who with the entire organization of the party in his hands, yet needed MGR's support to become the Chief Minister. Later on 1972, when there was a clash between Karunanidhi and MGR, it led to a split in the party and to the formation of ADMK.

How was MGR able to build up a party through his films? It merits serious study. In a paper like this one could go into only the fundamental features and that too briefly.

It is better that the distinction we attempted to make earlier be stated again. Whereas in the first phase which depended on social criticism from the writer's point of view the emphasis was more on the arguments adduced by than on the character of one personality, though, even in those films, the character was identified with the cause propounded. In the second phase of the DMK oriented films when MGR was the chief personality, the entire argument was woven round the protagonist himself. The whole concept was personalised in that it was shown as emanating from the personality of the actor. Here the emphasis was equally placed on the actor as it was on the story. Here too it is the dramatic narrative that is important but, the world of conflict exists only as a world centred round the hero and his personal emancipation symbolises the emancipation from the social evil depicted. If we accept this position, and see it in the background that the particular actor chooses to act only in particular roles then it becomes easy for the identification of the actor with the character.

Such was the case with MGR. A comparison that can be usefully applied here is that of the image of N.T.Rama Rao of the Telugu films who by choosing to act only in particular roles (in the roles of gods in mythological themes) has been considered a 'divine' personality by the vast majority of Telugu film fans.

In the case of MGR there is an additional force of the social circumstance. He played the characters of heroes who are socially relevant to the vast majority of the Tamil filmgoers. In such a situation he emerged as the symbol of the fulfilment of their own wishes. Socio-psychological studies of film fans have shown that particular actors act in roles that fulfil the wishes of the particular group of filmgoers. The fan fare that surrounded the personality of James Dean, the symbol of teen age heroism, explains this phenomenon.

An analysis of the many films of MGR, especially after he became the star symbol of the DMK fans, would reveal that he has played the roles of characters which were engaged in professions of the various lower social groups in Tamilnadu. He has acted the role of an agricultural peasant (*Vivacayi*), the fisherman (*Pada-kotti*) the carter (*Mattukkara Velan*), the rickshaw puller (*Rickshawkaran*), the taxi-driver, and the butler (*Neethikkuttalai Vananku*) and soon. Thus his roles spanned the entire vocational groups of the underprivileged of Tamilnadu. In all these films there is the unchanging moral character

of the hero. He is honest, hardworking, and had always to face social opposition. Such type of portrayals endears the actor to the entire population. Thus a mental image is created of the man by which every individual of each social group would consider him as somebody like him. And when he finds him overcoming the same social fate that bedevils him in real life, the attachment to that hero becomes very personal.

There are some other aspects of MGR's films that endeared him to the unvoiced vanities of those groups. For instance in almost all the films it is the girl who falls for him and he does not go for her. In fact for a socially committed man like the character he portrays, the love the girl has for him becomes more of a liability, for he has to face additional risks because of the love. It is also interesting to note that most of the heroines are daughters of wealthy parents falling in love with this very average man. They (the girls) see in him great moral qualities which have nothing to do with his economic status. The film hero thus becomes the symbol of the fulfilment of the fan's own wishes. Given the literacy level of the people and the uneven economic strata from which they come, such actions induce the growth of a cult.

Thus MGR more than any other star of Tamilnadu was considered the modern version of the archetypal hero.

The off screen behaviour of MGR contributed further towards this idolisation. His free gifts

to the poor and the needy and his insistence on temperance confirmed to them that he was not just a screen idol.

All these when combined with his personal dedication to the party activities induce the 'fan' also to be very sympathetic towards his party. In fact by becoming a member of the same party, the fan gets a participatory feeling.

The social composition of the MGR fan's clubs amply proves the point.

It has been found that mainly people from non-professional classes choose him as their hero. And even among them it has been discovered that Harijans and Vanniyas constitute the largest number. Of the members of the MGR fan clubs 73.4% earn less than Rs.400/- per month. 56.7% of the entire membership had a monthly earning of less than Rs.300/-. It has also been found that a large number of them are daily wage-earners. As for their literacy it has been found that 76.6% had studied only up to 3-7 grades.*7

This has been seen also in the voting pattern. It was found that MGR polled more votes from the villages.

It is now a known fact of recent South Indian history that it was the MGR fan clubs that constituted themselves as the party units for the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) when it was formed.

It is also generally conceded that it was the overwhelming dominance of the MGR fan clubs within the DMK, which constituted almost a parallel organization, that induced Karunanidhi to take a stern view of MGR's statements about the party. It was this conflict that led to the latter's dismissal from the DMK.

The fact that he never championed any chauvinistic cause which could hurt the feelings of any particular social group or a community also enabled him to gain wider appeal. In this particular sphere he looked very different from Annadurai and Karunanidhi who wrote some very vitriolic pieces against the Brahmins. It should, however, be admitted that at the time MGR came into the DMK, the virulent anti-Brahmin phase of it was over.

But this does not mean that MGR hesitated to use the medium against his opponents, especially against the Karunanidhi regime of the post-1971 elections. The entire film *Nam Nadu* was an indictment against the corrupt practice of the DMK administrators.

It is also a known fact that MGR used the lyric writers to communicate his stand on many matters. From *Nadodi Mannan* to *Maduraiyai Meeta Sundara Pandyan* all MGR films had songs which were virtually his policy statements. This could be seen right from the time of *Nadodi Mannan* to *Maduraiyai Meeta Sundara Pandyan*. At the start he got the services of Pattukottai Kalyanasundaram (*Nadodi Mannan*, for example)

and later it was Vaali and Pulamaippittan who wrote the lyrics for him.

The most important characteristic of these second phase films was that all of them dealt with socio-political ideals, which could be achieved only through a leader like MGR. With the self-grooming MGR did on and off the screen, people began to think the leader whom they wanted was not somebody like MGR but MGR himself.

The emergence of this socio-psychological attitude is well reflected in the findings of the survey done by the Centre for Social Research, Madras in 1972. It is revealed from that survey that 47% of the urban film goers and 51% of the rural filmgoers consider that films "create social awareness." Seen in this background of the active use of films as a political medium, the following statistics are of immense interest.

(I) Why does one see a film?

	Urban	Rural
To be entertained	84%	80%
To be educated	21%	35%
To escape from the tediousness of life	28%	36%
To have a philosophy of life as presented - in the films	04%	04%

(II) What influences do film have on people

	Urban	Rural
Creates social awareness	47%	51%
Discontent	15%	13%
Educative	22%	34%
Causing Criminal tendencies	02%	04%
Courage and Confidence	15%	31%

(III) Purpose of Cinema

	Urban	Rural
To entertain	60%	78%
To educate national consciousness	18%	24%
To provide moral instruction	27%	35%
To create progressive social awareness	34%	27%
To give religious instructions	02%	02%

It is quite clear from the above statistics that the Tamil film plays an educative role, especially in creating a social and moral awareness. One should also look into the impact of the films on the social thought of the rural viewers. It is unfortunate that we do not have a clear definition of what entertainment meant to those interviewed; none the less the political character of the communication is very clear.

VIII

The foregoing analysis of the mode of political communication done by the DMK and the ADMK should not imply that only those two socio-political forces made use of the Tamil film.

In fact there was a response to this type of films by what may be termed the socio-cultural establishment of Tamilnadu. But that response at the outset was not overtly political. As the first phase of the DMK oriented films indulged in social criticism popularising atheistic views among the viewers, the response of the establishment took the form of producing "religious" films. It should be added here that this trend of popularising atheism was seen also in the theatrical activities of the DK and the DMK.** The first of such religious films came, significantly enough, from Gemini Studios, the proprietor of which was S.S.Vasan, a leading Brahmin film producer, who started the trend of producing "colossals" in South India. His "*Chandralekha*" (1953) revolutionised the South Indian film industry.

Vasan's film "*Auvaiyar*" was a significant film in that it used the legendary life of the Tamil poetess Auvaiyar to highlight religious consciousness. While using a theme which had been popularised by the DMK (the literary heritage of the Tamils) this film sought to emphasize the religious heritage of the Hindu Tamils. The press-medium gave him unstinted support (Vasan himself was a publisher of one of the popular weeklies-

Ananda Vikatan) and the film became a great box office hit.

This was soon followed by a host of film on the religious mythology of the Hindu Tamils. Sivaji Ganesan, after his exit from the DMK began to act in these films. *Sampoorana Ramayanam* (1958), *Thiruvilayadal* (1965) are landmarks in this respect.

At the start, these religious films had invariably stories from the Great Tradition. But when M.M.Sinnappa Thevar, a great devotee of Mūruka, started producing religious films he began to include the Little Tradition too. This was seen in his film *Thunaivan*. But the more important film that brought in the Little Tradition cults was *Ati Parasakthy*.

Sivaji Ganesan after his disenchantment and break with the DMK acted in films which had a nationalist significance. The films he did for Padmini Pictures, *Veera Pandiya Kattabomman* (1960) and *Kappalotia Thamilan* (1962) are very important in this respect. *Veera Pandiya Kattabomman* was a box-office hit and the latter, as a film biography of V.O.Chidambarampillai, who defied the British by running the first Indian owned Steam Navigation Company, was well received. But it cannot be said that these films with a "nationalistic" flavour were able to set a trend for other films to follow.

It was left for the Brahmin lawyer Cho.Rama swamy to use both the theatre and the film against

the DMK, especially when it was in power. His dramas exposed the corruption that existed under the DMK administration. They were mostly directed against Karunanidhi. In the films he played humorous roles, very often in supporting roles.

The anti-DMK cry in films reached such a point that in one film (*Mannavan Vantanadi*) Sivaji Ganesan ridiculed the very style of rhetoric that popularised him as a hero.

As for the anti-Karunanidhi propaganda of Cho, it should be remembered that in many films he provided the humorous support to MGR.

It should however be admitted that inspite of these politically oriented films which either sought to provide social criticism in favour of DMK or to project the personality one star, as the most credible politician, Tamil films did not mobilise public opinion against social injustices (as for instance the famous Hollywood film *Snake Pit* which exposed the deplorable conditions in mental hospitals) nor have they cared to analyse any social evil in any realistic manner. The dramatic narrative plots which they used never allowed them to do so. Nor could the Tamil film boast of a sensitive director who could delve into such human problems.

IX

It now remains to indicate briefly how the economics of the film industry, as it was organised

during this period, enabled this type of partisan political use of the medium.

As we have already noticed the aloofness of the intellectuals contributed a lot towards Anna durai and Karunanidhi making political use of the film. The traditional Brahmin sources of finance-capital in South India did not take very kindly to this industry and right from the start. Except for K. Subrahmanyam and for S. S. Vasam, who himself was an outsider to the world of South Indian finance-capital, it was the non-Brahmin sector that was engaged in the film industry. An analysis of the major film companies (AVM, Jupiter etc..) would make this point clear

When the DMK stance in films proved a financial success, those political leaders who had an interest in the films started floating their own companies. (e.g. Mekala films, Murasoli films, Kannadasan films, Emgeeyar films etc.)

With the emergence of the star-cult, the two leading stars Sivaji Ganesan and MGR started a system of financial control of the industry. It is said that whenever they signed a contract for acting, it included the distribution rights of the film for the City of Madras. Sivaji Ganesan has his own cinema hall and MGR his own studio. With a whip hand over the entire industry they could make or mar a producer by giving or postponing to give call sheet dates. With the power they had the entire Tamil film industry was at their mercy. In such a situation where they could

easily decide the financial fate of so many producers, it was possible for them to carefully nurse their political image or decide the pattern of the political message they wanted to get across.

In fact it was possible for the new talent, that has now emerged fully, to establish itself only when the political competition between the major stars went to a cut-throat level or when one of them (MGR) was disabled from taking active part in film making because of the office held.

X

The political use made of the film in the Tamilnadu context and the specific role Tamil film has in Tamil society raise problems of interest to Media Sociologists. Mc Luhan would have us believe that film is essentially an extension of the print medium, an off shoot of the book culture. It would be very much apparent from the foregoing discussion that at least in the Tamil case it was not so. None the less the efficacy of the medium has been proved. It is however true that in terms of quality and presentation, the Tamil film has not reached any aesthetic heights. But it may be also due to the exigencies of the process of nativisation of the form.

The most significant factor about the film in Tamil Society, is that it has been the first art-form which catered to all the Tamils irrespective of their social position. And it is quite clear that it was this "democratic" character of the film that had also enabled it to be a powerful medium at mass level.

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The Madurai Conference of International Tamil Studies has come under severe criticism by local and foreign Tamilologists for the manner it handled the academic side of it.

Professor Sivathamby's paper on "Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication" was one of the papers shut out of the Conference. Where as in the case of the other papers there was no reason given for their exclusion, there was reason given for this paper and it clearly reveals political motivation on the part of those in charge of the academic organization of the Conference.

New Century Book House Private Ltd considers its duty to publish this monograph and to make it available to Tamilologists and to the general readers interested in this field of knowledge.

Professor Sivathamby, a leading figure in the fields of Tamil Literary Criticism and Social History has been interested in Mass-Media Studies and his contributions in that field have appeared in both Tamil and English.