CHAPTER 6

MALAYALAM CINEMA AND TAMIL CINEMA

Malayalam Cinema, up to the middle of the fifties, had close links with Tamil Cinema, which originated and developed in Madras, the capital of the undivided Madras Province before 1956, which included the present Karnataka State, Andhra State and Malabar. As many studios were established in Madras, and it had seen the production of many silent films in the thirties, it was natural for all the South Indian films, including Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam to take the lead from Madras and the Tamil cinema, which developed in Madras. For a long time, till the end of the fifties, when the language based provinces such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala were formed, Madras remained the main centre for film production, processing and distribution for the whole of South India, even as Bombay emerged as the centre for North Indian and Hindi films. Even now, the processing centres, such as Prasad, Viyaya-Vauhini, and AVM are sought by Malayalam as well as other regional film makers, because of superior processing facilities. So, it was inevitable that Malayalam cinema, in its initial stages, was closely connected with Tamil cinema. In theme and form it took Tamil cinema as an example. So,
in order to understand better the origins of Malayalam cinema, one has to know about Tamil cinema and how it developed in relation to the society and politics of Tamil Nadu.

After the fifties, and more precisely, after the formation of the Kerala State in 1956, Malayalam cinema sought to have an identity of its own as distinct from Tamil cinema. It did succeed in developing a cinema which reflects the Kerala traditions and ethos in many ways. Meanwhile, Tamil cinema also underwent many changes and became closely linked with the socio-political movements of Tamil Nadu. From then on, the paths taken by the two cinemas have been very different. Malayalam cinema paid more attention to the form and improved it considerably, while Tamil cinema involved itself with the content and more specifically, the message. Therefore, while Malayalam cinema emerged technically superior to Tamil cinema, its socio-political links remained ambivalent, whereas Tamil cinema became essentially linked with the socio-political movements of the state and therefore emerged as a better representation of the society and politics in which it grew. It is felt that a comparison of the two cinemas, which began in the same manner, but later took two different paths, would be useful inasmuch as it reflects two approaches to cinema. Therefore, this
chapter will be devoted to a comparison of Malayalam Cinema with Tamil cinema — in their historical growth, in the development of form, structure and theme and in the relationship with society and politics. The similarities and the dissimilarities and the causes for these will be discussed.

Tamil Cinema had a longer history than the Malayalam cinema. The earliest known film was Keechaka Vadham (1916) by Nataraja Mudaliar who set up the first studio in Madras. Unlike Malayalam film, Tamil film went through a prolific silent film stage. One hundred and eight silent films were made during 1916-1932.¹ The main architects of these films in Tamil were, Nataraja Mudaliar, R. Prakasa, Whittaker, T.H. Hufton, A. Narayanan, Raja Sandow, Y.V. Rao etc. Tamil cinema during the silent film phase, was based on mythological/religious/historical themes. Along with the feature films, documentary films were also being made. These were, to begin with, simple coverages of important happenings referred to as "review" films. Later, the documentaries as we know them at present, began to be made. The pioneer in this field was Joseph A. David of Madras who made films such as Carvings of Mahabalipuram, The Magic of Paddy etc.² So even at the

² Ibid., p.75.
silent film stage, Tamil cinema began to experiment with two types of films - the documentary, informative, reportage type of cinema and the story-telling, dramatic, narrative feature film.

In keeping with the consistent production of films, several film studios also were set up --- The India Film Company of Nataraja Mudaliar, the Star of the East Film Company of R. Venkaiah, The Peninsula Company of T.H. Hufton, General Pictures Corporation of A. Narayanan, Associated Films of R. Padmanabhan etc.

At the silent film stage, it is probably not apt to distinguish between Tamil Cinema and Malayalam Cinema, because only when the sound was introduced and dialogue became a part of cinema, the language distinctions became important and regional cinema grew. However, the distinction at the silent film stage came from the nativity and the language of the producers/directors of the films. In that respect, Tamil film can claim to have had a full fledged silent film stage, whereas Malayalam film can claim to have produced only two silent films. There were more studios and processing facilities in Tamil Nadu and by 1930 it was a full fledged industry, ready to take on the new technological development in cinema, the introduction of sound, whereas Malayalam cinema came to its own only two decades later in the fifties. Both Malayalam and
Tamil films had to endure the difficulties of poor production (especially lighting) facilities, poor quality of films, the reluctance of women to act in films, lack of studios to exhibit films etc.

The major influences on Tamil cinema were the indigenous folk culture which gave it its themes, songs, dances etc and the overpowering influence of Hollywood films which had begun to be exhibited in Madras as early as 1930. Malayalam cinema during the early stages borrowed more from Tamil cinema than from any other source. Even at the silent film stage, Tamil cinema differed from Malayalam cinema in one important aspect. Whatever the theme, the Tamil film makers believed in imbuing it with a message (Karutru) of social or political relevance.³ Dharmapathini ⁴ exhorted against the use of alcoholic drinks which coincided with Mahatma Gandhi’s social reform measure of prohibition. The religious theme of Nandan Charitam by Poet Gopalakrishna Bharati was made into a film Nandanar by Raja Sandow which emphasises on the need to remove untouchability. Social justice to women was another theme that was touched upon. Another film Anachai Penn (1931) was about a girl who wanted to marry the man she loved and was therefore foresaken by

3 Discussions with HARIHARAN.K., Tamil Film Director.
her angry father. This theme emphasised the principle of marriage by choice. Rajeswari was a film which told the story of a woman who was driven to suicide by the ill treatment meted out to her by her in-laws.

However, because of the lack of proper technology and the development of a visual communication vocabulary, the silent films of Tamil cinema were not successful in being "good cinema". The Cinematographic Committee, commenting on the quality of all Indian silent films recorded: "They are defective both artistically and technically. Plots and scenarios are indifferent and lack originality. The acting is apt to be wooden and inexpressive. Episodes are long drawn out, so that acting is slow. The multiplicity of captions accentuates the slowness of action."\(^5\) One of the main reasons for the lack of development in the early stages of Tamil cinema, says Baskaran, "is the choice of mythological themes. Through other folk drama performances, the audience was familiar with mythological episodes, the film maker did not have to devise ways of telling the story as he was merely transposing a well known drama into a different medium".\(^6\) Another reason for the lack of healthy growth in Tamil and Malayalam cinema was the apathy of the

5  Ibid., p.86.
6  Ibid., p.88.
elitist class. Being commercial in nature and sensational in content the cinema endeared itself to the masses, but alienated the elite. "The stigma that was attached to the popular stage and those working for it was extended to the world of cinema also". 7 Even the Cinematography Enquiry Committee was besieged with comments such as the cinema was frequented only by the low class and it was harmful to the community.

The next stage in the development of Tamil cinema was the talkie and the first talkie in Tamil was Korathi Songs and Dances (1931) 8 produced by Sagar Movietone of Bombay. The first full length Tamil talkie was Kalidas (1931) made in Bombay and by 1935 thirty six talkies were made in Madras. In Malayalam, the first talkie came much later with Balan (1938), but the forties did not see any spectacular growth in Malayalam cinema. But in Tamil, by 1937, there were nine studios in Madras, two in Salem and one in Coimbatore. 9 The total investment in cinema was Rs.170,000,000/- 10

Another important difference between the Malayalam cinema and the Tamil cinema of the thirties

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., p.99.
9 Ibid., p.100.
10 Ibid.
and the forties was that while Tamil cinema was stimulated by the political fervour of the Indian National Freedom Struggle, the Malayalam cinema showed no vestiges of it at all. These Tamil films were not political films, but films made, "politically, in an effort to change the political situation as it existed."\(^{11}\) Actors and film makers, as a community, supported the nationalist cause and participated in the hectic political activities of the period. Because of the popularity of films as an entertainment medium among the masses who saw it, the actions of the actors also aroused great interest among them. So when the actors began to participate in the nationalist cause it gained the support of the masses too. The Tamil cinema had a political flavour right from the thirties and the forties.

From the very beginning, one of the major influences on Tamil cinema, from which it has never fully outgrown, was that of the popular drama. The Malayalam cinema, following the footsteps of Tamil cinema, was also influenced by the popular theatre. During the silent film days the commercial stage and the screen existed side by side and did not make too many incursions into each other's spheres because, as the stage artistes were mainly singers, they did not

find a place in the silent film whereas stunt men and acrobats were the prima donnas of films. But when the sound was introduced the situation changed and there was a great demand for singing actors. Stage actors, song writers and set artistes all moved away from the theatre to cinema. "Cinematically the movement had a disastrous effect. The films turned out to be mere photographed dramas and the unique capabilities of the camera could not be developed". But it was this exodus from the stage that was to infuse the early Tamil cinema with its political flavour.

Tamil cinema began to have the patriotic inflection of the times, mainly due to the efforts of A. Narayanan, a significant person of the early South Indian cinema. He was an ardent Congress worker and he was aware of the power of cinema on the mass audience and its unique possibilities for aiding the momentum of the freedom movement. Again, Sathyamurthi, who was at the helm of Tamil Nadu politics in the thirties and the forties was an enthusiastic patron of cinema. He recognised the potential of cinema in carrying the message of nationalism to masses. He believed that, in a country like India, where literacy was low, an entertainment form such as cinema could, if it tackled

12 Ibid., p.102.
13 Ibid., p.106.
socio-political issues, reach out to the masses and have far reaching effects. "At a time, when the educated elite as a class was condemning the cinema as immoral and culturally demeaning, Sathyamurthi's positive support put the role of cinema in a different perspective".¹⁴ Through his speeches and articles in English and Tamil, he gave a great fillip to film movement. He set the pattern of reviewing films in journals and by persuading other political leaders such as Rajaji to take cinema seriously. He induced the famous carnatic music singer, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer to play the role of the Vechiyar (the Pundit) in Nandanar (1935). He was associated with all film functions and artists and acted as their spokesman in the legislative forums encouraging them to participate in direct political action. He himself, produced two short propaganda films on behalf of the Congress party.

Sathyamurthi's efforts to link cinema to politics and make it into a vehicle for conveying the important nationalist and political messages reminds one of the great Bolshevik leader, Lenin, who gave all support to filmmakers such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Doveshenko etc to make films conveying the message of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Following Sathyamurthi, other leaders such as K. Santhanam, V.S.Srinivasa

¹⁴ Ibid.
Sastry and Rajaji also began to take active interest in films and film criticism. During this period, many films with nationalist sentiments were produced.

Among the prominent film makers of the period, the name of K. Subramanyam is the foremost. His films such as *Balayogini* (1936) and *Thyagabhoomi* (1939) are the most important ones.

Tamil cinema of the time reflected the political aspirations of the people by introducing the symbols of nationalism, like the charka (the spinning wheel) or the Gandhi Cap, in the visuals and including songs written by song writers from popular stage, reflecting nationalistic sentiments. Later, allegoric satire, and thematic twists were also used to propagate nationalistic ideas. Along with these techniques, themes involving social values, closely identified with the nationalist sentiments, such as emancipation of women, removal of untouchability, prohibition etc were introduced whenever there was a chance. All in all, this phase in Tamil cinema is known as the "Patriotic Cinema" and is notable for the active role it played in bolstering nationalistic sentiments and the social and political aspirations of the people. Malayalam cinema of that time does not have an equivalent for such patriotic cinema. Malayalam cinema was still in a nascent stage and was devoid of any political
inflections. Cinema had totally disregarded the politics of the time and bypassed it. The reasons for bypassing events of social and political significance could be many. Because of the high level of literacy among the common people of Kerala, the media of propaganda used to arouse nationalistic sentiments were speeches, pamphlets, newspapers and to some extent theatre. More emphasis was put on the spoken/written medium than on the visual medium. The second reason was the intelligentsia's attitude towards this new medium, bordering on indifference/contempt. There were no political leaders like Satyamurthi who recognised the potential of film in propagating political/social values and give the encouragement it deserved. Film was treated more as an entertainment medium and that too, a cheap entertainment medium. Pre-Independence cinema in Malayalam and Tamil basically differed in this aspect. Even quantitatively, Tamil cinema progressed by leaps and bounds whereas Malayalam cinema lingered behind, making very slow progress.

In the forties and the fifties, Tamil cinema gave up the nationalist sentiments and began a new trend. The best example of this type of cinema is S.S.Vasan's Chandrakal (1940). "It was a dazzling spectacle, an extravagant contrast to war efforts and
the most expensive film yet produced". It combined all the elements of a box office hit, including comedy, fights, songs and dances and succeeded financially. It was dubbed in Hindi and became a success in North India also. It marked the entry of Tamil cinema into the Northern market.

Another feature of post war cinema in Tamil Nadu was the emphasis on the pro-Dravidian, pro-South sociocultural sentiments. This was a phase in the history of Tamil cinema when it was intensely connected with a movement which took deep roots in the socio-cultural arena of Tamil Nadu, namely Dravidar Kazhagam (DK). Movies once again became involved with socio-cultural ideas. C.N. Annadurai, the popular writer and orator of the party was also a dramaturge, and a screen play writer. He wrote the script for the film Velaikkari (Servant Woman) which was released in 1948. It was a radical departure from the previous films in that it questioned the very basis of the hitherto South Indian society. It highlighted the helplessness of the average Tamil peasant in the social set up and showed how the traditional religious institutions were used to keep the peasants in ignorance and poverty. The rhetoric of Anandan (the hero in Velaikkari) at the temple and in

15 BARNOUW, ERIK AND KRISHNASWAMY, S., Indian Film (Oxford University Press, 1980), p.73.
the court of law and the arguments he put forth were so radical and heretic that they posed a threat to the very foundations of the traditional rural Hindu society. "In a way the film argued for social upliftment, but in another sense it was also very atheistic."16 The DK members were radical in their approach to problems and heretical in the manner they phrased the dialogues.

Another person who used the film for political advantage was N.S. Krishnan, the comedian and his wife T.A. Mathuram, who acted in several Tamil movies of the time. Though they formed the comedian pair who provided the "humour" in the traditional Tamil film structure, through these roles, N.S. Krishnan tried to project realistically the social evils prevalent in the Hindu society, projecting an impression, that they were not in-built in the society, but were a consequence of ageold Brahmin domination. Though he was a Gandhian, and believed in the non-violent form of struggle, he became a supporter of Annadurai from the time the DMK was formed in 1949.

After Velaiikkari, there was a spate of Tamil films inured with DK ideology, such as Oar Iruvu (one night) (1951) by Annadurai, Manthrikumari, (Minister’s

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Daughter, 1950), Parasakthi (1952), and Manohara (1954) by M. Karunanidhi, the trusted lieutenant of Annadurai. They all followed the same trend of using the powerful dialogue to highlight the socio-political ideas of the Dravidian Movement. Karunanidhi's epoch-making Parasakthy (1952) brought out very forcefully the DK's views on social oppression. "The powerful dialogue in the film (Manohara) personified Tamil Nadu as the mother of Tamil society who had been politically and socially subjugated by an alien political tradition from North India". 17

These themes were all originally written as plays and staged and later transformed into films. The DMK films, especially those scripted by Annadurai and Karunanidhi used an alliterative rhetoric which soon became a distinguishing characteristic of the DMK oriented films. The star associated with this rhetoric was Sivaji Ganesan, who started his film career in Parasakthi, as a DMK performer but soon left their ranks.

By 1957 the DMK entered into the arena of electoral politics and both Annadurai and Karunanidhi became engrossed in parliamentary politics and did not have much time to devote to writing scripts for films.

17 Ibid, p.31.
In the period between 1948-1977 in the history of Tamil film, dominated by DMK ideology, there were two phases, the first phase dominated by the filmscripts of Annadurai and Karunanidhi and a second one dominated by M.G.Ramachandran as an actor-politician. The first phase ended in 1957. The second phase which began at this time witnessed the emergence of M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) as an actor. "He used his fist more than his tongue and created the image of an "action-hero" (as opposed to a thinking, writing, preaching, ideologue) who revolutionised the existing social pattern by depicting the dynamism of the downtrodden". MGR began to use the DMK colours of red and black in his movies and made frequent allusions to party politics in rhetoric, much of it anti-Congress. He took on only specific roles - the three images he tried to project were those of a) a saviour of the poor b) an upright, honest and good man (with good morals) c) a physically strong hero who conquered the opposing forces personified as villains, a macho hero, always sought by women, a man who respected all women, especially Mothers, and protected them from assailters. He created the image of a "film hero", whose prototype in real life was a "Leader of Men". He gained a large following

18 Ibid.
and soon controlled many aspects of his movies using them to promote an image for himself.

With MGR, the star system of Tamil Nadu took a new turn with the star ending up as a political leader and the Chief Minister of a State. MGR used his political stand to popularise himself in films and with his popularity, mass appeal and fan clubs in cinema he built up a political backing, created a separate party (Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, which was rechristened as ALL INDIA Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam during the state of Emergency in India in 1976), and through the mass approval in films won the same mass's support in politics, won the state elections and dominated Tamil politics for 10 years.

A distinction should be made between the two phases when DMK politics influenced the cinema of Tamil Nadu. In the earlier phase when Annadurai and Karunanidhi dominated the film scene, social criticism was done from the writer's point of view and the emphasis was more on the arguments used in the court room or temple scenes and not on the character of one personality even though the character was identified with the cause propounded. In the second phase of DMK oriented films, when MGR was the chief personality the entire argument was woven around the protagonist himself. The entire concept was personalised inasmuchas
it was shown as originating from the personality of the actor. This, along with the fact that MGR chose to act only in specific roles brought about the identification of the actor with the character.\textsuperscript{19}

Malayalam cinema of the fifties and the sixties tended to put all the emphasis on the dramatic narrative and the romanticisation of the narrative. It used melodrama, love themes, extremely lyrical songs, the folk tunes and folk idioms of Kerala to mix facts with fantasy and present an exaggerated form of realism. There were no political messages, in fact, hardly any connection between the cinema and the politics of the state. This can be attributed to the fact that no political party like DMK emerged in Kerala, which not only tried to dominate the politics of the state, but tried to change the social system also, and had the backing of a good section of the intelligentsia for the social reforms they initiated. The tendency to compartmentalise politics and cinema in separate pigeon holes, the extreme individualism which prevented not only a star system, but also any kind of collective harmony in politics, the emphasis on the written word as a means of communication as opposed to visual communication and the aversion of the political intellectual to the artistic form of cinema, prevented

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, p.41.
Malayalam cinema from having a close connection with politics. Even the Communists depended on the theatre for propounding their political ideology than on the cinema. The intellectuals on the whole, even when they supported the artistic content of the cinema, refused to accept that it could have a political content too.

The sixties in Tamil cinema saw the introduction of the Bond-type thrillers full of smugglers and spies and mythologicals became infrequent. The spectacle studded, multistarrer blockbusters were also infrequent because dwindling profits could not justify the mounting expenses. Romantic melodramas, often styled as "socials" grew in popularity. Politics largely disappeared from the cinema of the sixties. One reason that can be attributed to this development is that by then, the DMK was firmly entrenched in the politics of Tamil Nadu and the need for cinematic propagation of political ideals was not important. Socials and family films were the favourites, but the seventies and the eighties witnessed an increased usage of sex and violence in the movies. The tendency of the mainstream cinema in Malayalam and Tamil was more or less the same, but because of the technical excellence exhibited in Malayalam movies, the variety and novelty in themes, and the experimentation in music, sound and even narrative, the mainstream cinema in Malayalam was
cinematically superior to the Tamil counterparts. Moreover, during this period, Malayalam cinema witnessed the emergence of a strong auteur type of parallel cinema. Along with this parallel cinema movement, there grew a middle of the road cinema which, while containing some of the formulaic elements, was cinematically and artistically superior to the run of the mill, commercial, mainstream cinema.

This kind of a division of cinema into three types - parallel, middle of the road and mainstream, intended for specific targeted audience, did not develop in Tamil Nadu. Therefore, Malayalam cinema was more cinematically recognised internationally and nationally than Tamil cinema. In Tamil, the ones who made occasional, exceptional movies were K. Balachander, Bharati Raja etc. While they did try to combine social messages with technical excellence and variety in themes, their films are cinematically comparable only to the middle of the road cinema of Kerala and not the parallel cinema. With the development of processing

20 Discussion with HARIHARAN, K., Tamil Film Director.
21 Significant films made by Balachandar are Arangetram (First Performance on Stage), Aval Oru Tudar Kathai (She is a continuing story), Thannir, Thannir (Water, Water) and Varumayin Niram Sigappu (The colour of poverty is red). The notable Bharati Raja films are Patinaru Vayathinile (In the Sixteenth Year), Nizhalkal (Shadows), Kizhakke Pokum Rail (The East-Bound Rail Track) etc.
facilities in Kerala and the funding from Non-Resident Indians, Kerala cinema grew quantitatively and became a force to be reckoned with, in the South Indian film scene.

In conclusion, when one looks at the overall development of Tamil cinema and Malayalam cinema the similarities and dissimilarities which surface can be summed up as follows:

To begin with, both were influenced by popular drama, especially the musical drama. Both witnessed the exodus of the stage artists, musicians and the set artists to the field of cinema as a result of which, elements of theatre such as, stylisation in gestures, expressions, movements and stances, melodrama, profusion of songs and dances, humourous bits etc crept into cinema. For a long time the theatricality persisted. Even now, the mainstream cinema in both categories is not completely rid of theatricality. However, both have gone through different phases and have finally arrived at the present stage where the dramatic narrative is the most common form adopted.

Both have, in general, followed the pattern of Hollywood movies except that, instead of having specific genres such as Western, Musical, Noir, Horror. Family Opera, they combine elements from all these
genres and remain a composite, conglomerate mixture of various elements. They also present occasionally, themes offering active resistance to dominant ideology. "Class related themes are the most obvious sources for both contestation and compensation. They show the working class to be honest, trustworthy, courageous and righteous in direct contrast with the wealthy. The poor are the better people. In addition, the act of film going itself defies public attitudes that stigmatises it as an activity of the working class". 22 Malayalam cinema was not fully developed in the thirties and the forties and therefore there are hardly any films reflecting the fervour of the freedom struggle or the social reforms connected with it. In fact, even when it dealt with political topics, the tendency was to treat it as family drama, romanticise it and dilute it of its political fervour. Theatre was used more for propagation of political ideals than cinema. But in Tamil Nadu, even in the fifties, cinema was used to propagate DK/DMK ideals. One of the reasons for not using cinema in politics probably was, the higher literacy and education levels that prevailed in Kerala, which prompted the politicians to appeal to the people through the spoken and written medium rather than the

visual medium. Another reason was, while in Tamil Nadu the DMK Politicians were all in some way or other connected with the cinema through script writing, acting or music composition, in Kerala, very few of the active politicians or political ideologues were involved with cinema.

Malayalam cinema did not have a star system, whereas Tamil Cinema, from the very beginning, with M.K.Thiagaraja Bhagavathar and later with Sivaji Ganesan and MGR, had a distinct star system. The viewers are more prone in Tamil Nadu to seek a hero image in cinema. Even the present star system of Kerala, surrounding Mammootty and Mohan Lal has no political base. It is just based on glamour and a role model based on glamour like that of Rajnikanth & Kamalakahan of the eighties in Tamil Nadu.

In any case, Tamil Nadu has a history of using cinema and propagating social and political ideals, which brought about the phenomenon of a film star becoming a politician. However, one cannot overlook the fact that it was not just the glamour of cinema but the combination of it with political ideology which was appealing to people at large that brought about a politician turned star into a star turned politician. The major difference between the Tamil cinema and the Malayalam cinema is its star system and its deeper connection with society and politics.