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Ever since the DMK came to power in 1967, the question hotly debated and discussed by politicians and social scientists has been whether success of the DMK is due to the impact of films on society and politics of Tamil Nadu. This thesis has been pursued to assess the role of films in the politics of Tamil Nadu from 1947 to 1980. In other words, this study has made an attempt to assess the extent to which films have influenced the social and political behaviour of the people of Tamil Nadu.

The impact of films on society and politics is universally felt. However, Tamil Nadu provides a unique example of how films can play a substantive role in the social changes and in the political processes.

Tamil Nadu is the largest film making and widest exhibiting centre in India. Tamil films created a unique "folklore culture" among the masses, the kind of which one does not find in many places. Dress, habits and mannerisms of a vast number of people, both men and women, not to speak of school-going children, do show the definite influence of films and film artistes. Film stars like M.G.R. and Sivaji Ganesan are adored, blindly followed and venerated by their fans. Attractive pictures of actors are displayed prominently in calendars, motorcars, cycles and auto-rickshaws,
walls of hotels, shops and residential houses. Rings, 
purses and T-shirts carrying the pictures of film stars are 
sold in large numbers. Enthusiastic admirers (including 
women) tattoo the figure of M.G.R. or Sivaji Ganesan or 
Annadurai on their arms. The Tamils are so crazy about films 
that the theatres witness unmanageable crowds and riots every 
time a new M.G.R. or Sivaji Ganesan film is released. 
Fanatic film fans skip a meal, pledge jewels, donate their 
blood to the blood bank or borrow money at very high interest just to purchase tickets at outrageously exorbitant black market rates to get the chance of attending the first show of a new M.G.R. or Sivaji Ganesan film. Once the Indian Express reported that donations at the blood bank shot up every time a new M.G.R. movie was released. Film songs blare through microphones during weddings, festivals, parties and similar social gatherings in Tamil Nadu. The songs of popular film movies blast through loud speakers even during religious and temple festivals. The religious songs in films have a greater mass appeal than the classical Karnatic (traditional) songs of Papanasam Sivan and Thiagaraja. Similarly the cine playback singers like T.M. Soundararajan, P. Suseela, L.R. Eswari, K.J. Yesudass appeal to the masses while classical singers like Sennangudi Srinivasa Iyer and Madurai Somu appeal only to the elite. Sometimes classical singers have earned great popularity by singing songs in films. K.B. Sundarambal was a classical musician.
However, she acted in a few films like "Avvaiyaar". Her song "Gnana Pazham Neeyappa" in "Thiruvilaiyadal" is very popular. Similarly, M.S. Subbulakshmi, the noted Karnatic musician who acted in a few Tamil films in her early days reached a wider audience through films. "Kaatrinile varum Geetham" which she sang in "Meera" is still popular among the older generations. D.K. Pattammal is another classical musician. Yet her song "Aaduvome Pallu Paaduvome, Ananda Suthanthiram Adainduvittom Yenru" in "Naam Iruvar" made her more popular than before. Madurai Somu, a sophisticated and trained classical musician, acquired immense and sudden fame with just one film song "Maruthamalai Naamaniye Murugaiyaa" in a film "Thunaivan". It may be even said that the Muruga cult became deep rooted in Tamil Nadu more because of M.A. Chinnappa Devar's films. Film songs are the favourite of the listeners of All India Radio and Radio Ceylon and both these broadcasting stations allot a significant chunk of their broadcasting time to film songs. Similarly in Television the cinema programme "Oliyum Oliyum" (Sung and Light sequence) is liked more by people than the other programmes.

Popular journals and newspapers also give considerable coverage for film news to boost their sales. Popular film names are given to consumer goods like textile items (sarees), ornaments (bangles) and cosmetics. In the rural areas it is a common practice to name children after popular cine-artistes. Film studios and the residences
of popular film stars are some of the main tourist attractions in Madras. The Tamil film industry makes use of gorgeous, expensive and attractive advertisements, giant size posters, huge banners, gigantic cut outs, colourful hoardings etc. Walking down Anna Salai which is the State Capital's main throughfare is like disappearing into an eternal dream sequence. In no more than a matter of minutes the super stars take over. On either side stand mythological heroines, legs sprayed 30 feet tall, giant goddesses glittering in gold, monumental hoardings exuding sweaty sex; dimpled dream heroes who stand 80 feet height, gladiators and gangsters, and glycerine tears spilling out in lurid detail to offer the greatest escape on earth.

In Tamil Nadu popular artistes are somehow or other connected with political parties. Even women artistes are not an exception. Miss Jayalalitha who acted in a number of films with M.G.R. has now emerged as a full time politician in the AIADMK. She is given the title "Sinthanai Selvi" (thinker) and also she is made the Propaganda Secretary of the AIADMK and a member of the High Power Committee of the Nutritious Mid-day Meal Programme of the Tamil Nadu Government. It is also believed that she has become the most trusted lieutenant of M.G.R. in the party. Popular magazines and newspapers even predict that she may succeed M.G.R. in the future.
Tamil Nadu politics has shown convincingly that actors entering politics can capture power through a shrewd and effective exploitation of film media. The film artiste is the fund raiser, crowd gatherer, vote getter and decision maker or king maker of the party to which he belongs. His words are more respected and regarded both inside the party and by the people outside. In other words, film artistes have become 'super gods'. Hence, Tamil Nadu is unique as far as films and their impact is concerned. However, one cannot miss observing the recent developments that took place in the neighbouring states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. Even in North India film stars have made attempts 'though unsuccessful to enter politics. For example, when the Janata Government fell, people like Sanjay Khan kept a low profile. Instead it was left to Dev Anand to suggest that film stars enter politics not just as campaign attractions but as candidates. So the actors of the North formed a new party called, National Party. The party spoke in terms of putting up 300 candidates and Shatrughan Sinha's 'Chamchas' suggested that he could well be the next Chief Minister of Bihar. Dev Anand's argument was simple, "A film-maker knows what the masses want. He makes films for them, so he can gear his policies towards them and win elections".

However, this hypothesis was never tested. First of all, Manoj Kumar opted out. Then the producers
began to get cold feet. And predictably, the film people began fighting among themselves. Some of them questioned Anand's leadership and others thought that the party's policies had not been properly thought out. Anand went on nevertheless. He invited non-film luminaries like Ramakrishna Bajaj, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Nani Palkiwala and M.C. Chagla to a mammoth rally at Shivaji Park and printed posters announcing the participation of several major stars. The rally was a great success. It argued well for the party at that stage. However, the party collapsed because of the infighting that followed. It put up no candidates at all and dissolved itself a few weeks before the elections.

Looking back, Dev Anand had this to say, "We entered politics in the heat of the moment. We soon realised that politics requires full dedication, money and organization. We had very little experience and time, just four to six weeks to raise funds and no grass-roots organization".

The tragedy of the National Party was that it discredited film star-politicians before they were even put to test.

Unlike, the North, the South was more successful in using the film medium for political success. N.T. Rama Rao who started his party, Telugu Desam in March 1982 came to power in January 1983. Perhaps this may be even a world record. His instant success may be attributed
to his film image, dedicated and deeper involvement in politics and the dismal record and declining popularity of the Congress Party then in power in Andhra Pradesh. However, Tamil Nadu stands out as a unique example as to what extent films can play a role in the political development of a state. Since independence the Tamil films have been effective tool in the hands of the Dravidian Movement, conveying its anti-Brahmin and egalitarian stance. The effective impact of this alliance between politics and films could be seen in the deep rooted mass base of the DMK and the AITADMK, the regional parties which are the offshoots of the Dravidian Movement.

It is held that films can be one of the potential means of political power. During the Independence struggle, the Indian National Congress both in the "Silent Era" and in the "Talkie Era", whether the films had mythological or social themes, popularised the ideas of Indian Nationalism and social reform. Till India became independent in 1947 the Indian National Congress was the initial and exclusive user of the film medium for propagating nationalist ideas. The film artistes of those days were also involved in the independence movement. S. Sathiyanurthy, who was then at the helm of the affairs of the Congress in Tamil Nadu was a genuine patron of drama and cinema. He was one of the founders of the South Indian Chamber of Commerce and also he became its first President in 1939. Sathiyanurthy was
also the President of the Motion Picture Congress held at Bombay the same year to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of the film industry in India. He was the spokesman of the film world, so to say. Perhaps, in the Congress nobody before or after Sathiyamurthy took as much interest in the welfare of the artistes and the involvement of artiste in the day to day politics as Sathiyamurthy did. During his time nationalistic propaganda became fully explicit in films. But after his death in 1943, there was nobody in the Congress Party who took that much interest as Sathiyamurthy in using the films and film world personalities for political purpose. However, films from 1930 to 1943 had enough roused the feeling and sentiments of the people against the British rule. The role played by the films and the artistes during the independence struggle and the impact it exerted on the masses is very significant. However, after independence, the Congress neglected the film media. On the other hand the DMK started exploiting the potentials of the film media for its growth and success.

Through films the DMK mobilized mass support in a decisive way. E.V. Ramasamy, the founder of the Dravida Kazhagem and Self-Respect Movement, though himself a staunch critic of dramas and films had in his fold eminent dramatists, story and script writers and talented artistes. The ideas of his "Self-Respect" Movement reached the masses almost instantaneously, thanks to the artistes who were committed
members of the Dravidian Movement. In the bargain, artistes also brought in large measure, the much needed fund for the party. As the party grew in strength and popularity the artistes who identified themselves with the party also became the most sought after artistes.

The DK led by the late E.V. Ramasamy suffered a split in 1949 when C.N. Annadurai, launched the DMK as a political party. When the DMK was founded the bunch of artistes, except M.R. Radha, came along with C.N. Annadurai. M.G.R. who joined the DMK in 1953 proceeded to become the most pre-eminent star in the party galaxy, lending utmost credibility to the dissemination of Dravidian ideology through the silver screen. In a phenomenal rise he took Tamil Nadu by storm in the 50's and 60's, offering stiff competition to his arch-rival, Sivaji Ganesan.

The early plays and films of the Dravidian Movement were revolutionary in content in so far as they advocated genuine social reform and fought against the domination of the Brahmin Caste. However, when the DMK entered into active electioneering politics in 1957 the themes became diluted. When the DMK gave up its demand for separate Dravida Nadu in 1963, the theme started disappearing slowly from the silver screen. However, the films continued to carry the social and other political
ideas of the DMK to the masses. The DMK which won in the 1959 and 1964 Madras Corporation Elections owed its success to the film artistes.

The DMK grew in strength and popularity thanks to the hard and untiring work of C.N. Annadurai and his followers. These followers closely imitate in dress, style, speech and habits their leader Annadurai. Large number of people used to gather at the public meetings and the party conferences of the DMK. Annadurai's charismatic personality and versatile talents attracted large crowds towards him. However knowing fully the potential means of cinema for political propaganda he encouraged the active participation of film artistes in the DMK politics. He fully realized that his party could grow well with the help of artistes and vice-versa. He himself was a good playwright and stage actor. Hence his involvement of artistes in active party politics added colour to the already existing attraction of the party. He called the artistes respectfully as "Kalaignars" (artistes) while the then Congress leaders condemned them as "Kooththaadigal" (street performers). C.N. Annadurai also took interest in the welfare of the artistes. For example, his story and script for "Nallathambi" was exclusively written free of cost to help N.S. Krishnan during his difficult days. It was C.N. Annadurai who first inducted the artistes in electoral politics. The impact of
cinema on the DMK was twofold. The party grew with the help of the artistes and the artistes grew with the help of the party. It was easier for the DMK to use the film popularity of its artistes to electoral victory in the 1967 General Election. However, film was not the one and only factor responsible for the victory of the DMK. One should also take into account the declining popularity of the Congress government in power.

While M.G.R. was dominating the Tamil film world as a successful hero he had perhaps ideas of cashing on his film popularity for his political ends. M.G.R. lost no time in associating himself with the party with very strong ties. Soon M.G.R. came to be acknowledged as one of the forefront leaders of the DMK, taking part in almost all party activities. However, M.G.R. had to part company with M. Karunanidhi (who succeeded C.N. Annadurai after his death in 1969) in 1972 on personal and political grounds. Karunanidhi who paved ways for the dismissal of M.G.R. from the DMK had tried to bring a parallel hero in the film world. He failed when he tried to project his son M.K. Muthu as a DMK star. He then tried with 'Makkal Kalaignar' (People's Artist) Jai Shankar, in "Vandikkaran Magan" (a story written by C.N.A.) for which Karunanidhi himself wrote the script. This attempt also ended in failure as Jai Shankar never liked DMK men. So these attempts of Karunanidhi
neither gave a new film hero to the DMK nor they affected the popularity and the film market of M.G.R.

M.G.R., who was dismissed from the DMK for levelling charges of corruption against the top leaders founded his own party the ADMK (later known as the AIADMK) in 1972 with the support of his numerous fan clubs. M.G.R. made the maximum use of his films to project his own image and to expose the misdeeds of the DMK. Besides, along with the films in which he acted after 1972, he used his old movies, also (where he used to attack the Congress) to attack the misdeeds of the DMK. Thus he employed both his old and new films for his success in 1977. However, his government was dismissed in 1980 on the ground that it lost popular support because it performed so poorly in the 1980 Elections to the Parliament. Fresh election to the State Assembly was conducted in June 1980. The election was actually not between the AIADMK and the DMK and its allies, but between M.G.R. and Karunanidhi. M.G.R. won the election and was returned to power. It may be said that the congenial political situation then prevailing was mainly responsible for the success of M.G.R. However, M.G.R's film image and the charisma that he had built over the years were certainly the abetting factors responsible for his victory in 1977 and in 1980.
Right from the late 1920's, the Tamil Cinema not only provided entertainment to the people but also carried social and political messages to its audience. Apart from the politically minded personalities in the film world, even the politically neutral personalities have used political themes more liberally to attract and amuse the people. The Communists who started using the films later on abandoned the film world; however, a few politically neutral story writers like K. Balachander, Komal Swaminathan and Rama Narayanan made use of Communist themes. Artistes like Cho Ramasamy, a non-political personality (only of late he started identifying himself with the Janata Party) is known for his political satire through his dramas and his films and his bit roles in several Tamil films.

After getting to power, the DMK and the AIADMK, unlike the Congress did not abandon the film world to the extent the Congress did. On the other hand, they enriched and assisted the film industry by pecuniary and other aids. However, their assistance to the film world is not very significant, though they continue to pamper the film stars and film industrialists.

No doubt, the pursuits in cinema especially acting, may give popularity. More than that, in Tamil Nadu, an actor's personal and political image carried through
films and his involvement in party politics against the background of declining popularity of the party in government also matter a great deal in determining the political image of an actor-politician. In the case of M.G.R., it is his image, his political message in films, his involvement in party politics and the unpopularity of the DMK which was in power that helped him to rise to charismatic heights, as a political figure and as a film hero. M.G.R. in a long career of 42 years, has acted in 136 films, but Sivaji Ganesan in his 30 years of film career has acted in 230 films. Yet his films could not exert as much influence as that of M.G.R. May be because M.G.R's films persistently conveyed the same political, social and moral themes. He projected himself in the films only as a good-guy. He also tries to live upto the ideals he projected through his films. The impact of M.G.R's films on society is so much that it is difficult to distinguish between M.G.R, the actor M.G.R. the politician and M.G.R. the man. Besides, M.G.R. was one of the most trusted man of C.N. Annadurai. He gave him much importance and prominence and associated him with crucial decision making in the party. Even after C.N. Annadurai's death M.G.R. rose to the position of a King maker. In contrast, Sivaji Ganesan was not given that much of importance in the party by the leaders of the Congress Party. Nor does he seem to have taken politics as seriously as M.G.R. So M.G.R. is more successful as a politician than Sivaji Ganesan.
In the arena of politics there is now no movement or political party to arouse the sentiments of the people to a new direction as the DMK had earlier done. But in the field of cinema one can notice a tremendous change. People's taste has drastically changed. They now don't go to the film just to see their favourite actor preaching morals. They now expect effective entertainment. Almost every third day a film is released. As the number of films have increased the number of heroes and heroines have also increased. In this situation the audience have a wide choice unlike the audience of the 50's and 60's. The film field has become so competitive that only a few could sustain a steady market and even those successful few cannot hold the place of a hero for a life career as M.G.R. or Sivaji Ganesan. The film goers want new themes in films, new heroes, new heroines and so on. The producers have to take note of the fast changing trends in tastes and should shoot films in a short time with less investment making use of the latest techniques of film production. Thus taking these trends in the arena of politics and the world of films it will be very difficult to say what role films can play in the politics of Tamil Nadu in the future.

Yet one cannot deny the fact that Tamil Nadu politics since 1956 has been dominated by the
celluloid and the matinee idols. The film medium will continue to stay as an important vehicle of communication and will perhaps continue to expose the maladies in the society and government. But this alone cannot be the one and only means to political power.

This trend is superbly manifest in Andhra Pradesh where N.T. Rama Rao landed in that State's politics as a Messiah in recent times. One cannot ignore similar manifestations in Kerala and Karnataka States. One who carefully scrutinises the political events in South India since India's Independence, cannot escape observing the tremendous impact of the film world on the politics of the Southern States.

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