

THE DOGMA IMPLEMENTATIONS OF DMK THROUGH CELLULOIDE

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Cinema as a popular medium of entertainment is now more than a century old. Comparatively only recently has society realized cinema's great potential as an instrument of entertainment, instruction, motivation, and construction. Developing countries in their effort to accelerate the processes of economic and social change have taken this popular medium as their best means of supplementing or replacing the traditional communication forms. Even with the arrival of radio and television, satellite and Internet communication, the crucial role of cinema and its myriad possibilities in social change and development have still to be explored. The whole world identifies with the cinema and thus it becomes a universal medium. The truth is that the global community is aware of and accepts the influence and impact of cinema on the society.²³ What makes this art form so captivating is that it caters not only to the needs of people but also provides a visual space for them to live their dreams as it tells the story more effectively and creatively. In India cinema as an art and industry has spearheaded development and social change from below. India has changed significantly in all its spheres in the past decades and that it has to do with its national ideologies. In India the cinema becomes a powerful tool to defend, to store up, to control, and to perpetuate its culture and national ideologies from foreign cultures at different times in its history. As a cultural reference Indian cinema reflects the social diversity of the country and the density of everyday life; it connects expatriates to what happens back home and makes an emotional link among Indians and the variety of languages and cultures present in the subcontinent. The cinema deals with the problems to be addressed and the social issues that are of national concern, cultural goals to be proud of, and ideological possibilities to be defended and explored. The questions of film policy, financial assistance of government and its subsidies, state censorship board, taxation, and licensing regulations as well as the locally and the nationally instituted awards and film festivals become crucial in determining the wider role of the cinema in Indian society.²⁴

Tamil cinema, centered in Chennai, is considered a regional cinema and often under-represented and overlooked. It has become increasingly pervasive in almost all aspects of Tamil society and perhaps the most prominently in political life.²⁵ With in this larger phenomenon, cinema takes part of its form from the theatre. Though the Tamil language with the aforementioned triple linguistic character of Iyal (prose), Isai (music), and Natakam (drama) flourished in ancient times, it had its setbacks in the past two millennia. When Buddhism and Jainism flourished in the country, music and drama were considered worldly pleasures to be refrained from. However, to please the common folks during festival seasons, a rustic form of art known as Kootthu was performed, and the people who took it as a profession later assumed a caste identity known as Koothar.²⁶

Tamil cinema is a powerful medium of cultural expression and it functions as a social, cultural, political, and economic institution. It has a tremendous impact on the lives of people by shaking and shaping the foundations of the society. Through cinema one can enter and study the cultural traits of the society: for example the caste system, its origin, its structure, and its function and influence can be understood just going through the Tamil cinema. A critical study of the Tamil cinema industry will support

the connection and its impact on socio-cultural, religious, and political values.²⁷ The Tamil cinema has much to do with the life of the Tamil people in all its aspects.²⁸

The significant role of the Tamil cinema in the social and political context is provided by Sivathamby as follows: The Cinema Hall was the first performance centre in which all 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 performance or be with all and sundry.²⁹ Politics and cinema have been inseparable in Tamil Nadu ever since star-politicians Annadurai, Karunanidhi, and M. G. Ramachandran realized the power of this cinema language in the 1970s and decided to exploit it to the full for their political careers. The local and historical condition of Tamil politics within India and a century-long quest for a separate Dravidian nation find easy expression in the Tamil cinema industry. These expressions of vernacular identity are quite explicit in Tamil cinema and in modern Tamil channels which assert Tamil ethnic identity even today. Tamil political life and culture are significantly marked by the ideology and practice of the DMK. The DMK's unchallenged grip over the audience is due to its rhetoric on Tamilness, which was constructed in part by notions of *maanam* (honour) and *valour*. The concept of female chastity symbolised by the virtuous and valorous *Kannagi*, the heroine of *Cilappathikaaram*, one of the famous Tamil epics, was articulated within the confines of these political ambitions and reinforced by popular cinema culture.

Annadurai's appearance in the film industry changed the history of Tamil filmdom as it had earlier altered the course of Tamil theatre and radical reform. It was the time when Dravidian movement was very strong in Tamil Nadu and every play was set with a reformist agenda of the Dravidian movement.³⁰ His first film-play *Velaikkari* made a mark in society as a film with a strong social theme and message. Tamil culture was fundamental for its politics and rationality was its philosophy. The party fought against the Brahmins and their religious superstitions. In order to free the Tamils from the clutches of the religious and caste hegemony of the Brahmins, the DMK was founded. It brought back the great Tamil poet *Tiruvalluvar* and his Tamil values to the people through popular cinema. It was a war against the Aryan ideals. Thus, this political structure was founded firmly on Tamil cultural values.³¹

The next mile stone in the history of the Tamil cinema is *Karunanidhi*. His famous 1952 film *Parasakthi* was written by him keeping in mind the early DMK's demand for a sovereign Dravidanadu or Tamil homeland. However once the party tasted power and entered into electoral politics, it began to compromise on all these issues. The brave Tamil nationalistic slogans were replaced with 'one race and one god.'³² It celebrated the greatness of Tamils and Tamil nation. This was an eye opener to bring the audience to the immediate realities of despair. This film touched the very core of the social problems and narrated the religious superstitions. It had its strong impact on the middle class people for its Tamil sentiments and ideals. Following these success stories the Tamil cinema industry produced a series of films on social themes, stories on Tamil ideologies like *valour*, *love*, *chastity of women*, and *love for the Tamil language*. It created a major revolution among the people and was considered as a threat to the high caste people.³³

K. Sivathamby opens a new line of inquiry when he says: "The Cinema Hall was the first performance centre in which all 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.'³⁴ The cinema had tremendous democratic potential in a context where distinctions of caste have played a crucial role in determining access to public places, including temples, village water sources and even streets. There were, in fact, protracted struggles across the country asserting the right of lower castes to be physically present in these spaces. The arrival of talkies in Tamil during the 1930s was received with much enthusiasm by the lower class film audience. However, such subaltern enthusiasm for this new form of leisure was simultaneously accompanied by enormous anxiety among the upper caste/class elites.³⁵ It is possible to argue that the history of the cinema in many parts of the world is characterized by the

enthusiasm of the lower classes which in turn produced the anxiety of the state as well as the elites resulting in a range of legislation on the one hand and sustained campaigns aimed at 'cleaning up' both films and exhibition venues. The ethos of popular cinema has had a close relationship with Tamil political culture. The DMK used cinema as a tool for the propagation of its ideology. Many leaders of the DMK movement were also involved in Tamil cinema in their own capacity.

The purpose of cinema, according to our ethnographer, is to provide cheap, harmless and cultured pleasure which ensures that the ignorant underclass viewers yearning for escapist fantasies, in spite of themselves, come to understand good many things. Evidently, the progressive, educational effect of cinema is inevitable. In much of the debate on the cinema in print media, the necessary conditions for the defense of cinema in general or a given set of films was their potential availability to a large cross-section of society and progressive educational or political effect on the viewers.³⁶

End Notes

1. Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature* (Delhi: Sage, 1997); also see T.K. Oommen, (ed.), *Social Movements*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010). P. 34.
2. A. Marimalayan, *Perarignarin Peru Vazhvu* (Madras: Vaanathi, 1974), PP.56-57.
3. See R.L. Hardgrave, *The Dravidian Movement* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965).
4. M.R. Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976) P.99
5. R.L. Hardgrave, "The Riots in Tamilnad: Problems and Prospects of India's Language Crisis," *Asian Survey* 5 (8) (1965), 399–407.
6. See Anita Diehl, *E.V. Ramaswami Periyar: A Study of the Influence of a Personality in Contemporary South India* (Madras: Pai and Co., 1979).
7. See S. Venu, *Manivizha Kanda Dravida Iyakkam* (Chinna Kanchipuram: Justice Publications, 1990) and D. Spratt, *DMK in Power* (Connecticut: Lawrence Very, 1970).
8. R.L. Hardgrave, "The Riots in Tamilnad: Problems and Prospects of India's Language Crisis", *Asian Survey*, 5 (8) (1965), 399–407.
9. M.R. Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1976), P. 132.
9. See S. Subramanian, *Cinema Sila Paarvaigal* (Madras: Tamil Puthakalayam, 1990); A.K. Chettiyar, *Cinema Cindanaikal* (Chennai: Snadhya Pathippagam, Chennai, 2001); S. Velayutham (ed.), *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics Of India's Other Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 2008); A. Narayanan, *Tamil Cinemavin Kathai* (Chennai: New Century Book House Private Limited, 1981) and T.S. Baskaran, *The Message Bearers: The National Politics and The Entertainment Media in South India*, (Madras: Cre-A, 1981).

10. S.S. Chakravarthy, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996) P.56.
11. R.L. Hardgrave, Jr, "Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and The DMK", *Asian Survey*, 13 (3): (1973), 288–305.
12. K. Sivathamby, *Tamil Camugamum Athan Cinemavum* (Madras: Chennai Book House, 1983), P. 19.
13. S. Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), P. 14.
14. K. Sivathamby, *Tamil Camugamum Athan Cinemavum* (Madras: Chennai Book House, 1983), P. 40.