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CINEMATIC CHARISMA

AS A POLITICAL GATEWAY IN SOUTH INDIA:

THE CASE OF TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

This PhD thesis is about cinematic celebrities who use their stardom as a launching pad for their political careers in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It examines the relationship between film stars (revered as gods) and politics in Tamil Nadu, where all the Chief Ministers since 1967 have been former actors. This symbiosis is likely to continue as current film stars also venture into politics by launching political parties. This study presents an insight into the phenomenon by investigating the charisma of five actor-politicians— MG Ramachandran (MGR), Jayalalitha, Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth, and Sarathkumar— and their films through textual and discourse analysis. This study is the first comprehensive scholarly work that deals with the relationship between Tamil cinema and politics from the emergence of the late legendary actor-politician MGR (1917–1987) in the mid-1970s until the incumbent Chief Minister Jayalalitha (an actress and former mistress of MGR), and actor-politician Vijayakanth, currently the Leader of the Opposition. This thesis adopts a film studies approach within a broader cultural studies context in order to understand those aspects of race, class, gender, and caste that operate in Tamil society and are represented through films and their star actors. The Tamil film industry produces these cultural elements in its narratives by presenting its film stars as 'heavenly bodies'. By applying Max Weber's notion of 'charismatic leadership,' and Richard Dyer's star studies approach this thesis attempts to understand the adulation of Tamil film stars and their political ascendancy. Looking through the prism of film spectacles and by navigating through the charisma of stars, this study presents a detailed picture of contemporary Tamil culture.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Dhamu Pongiyannan

06 December 2012

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Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3: 13-14

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It goes without saying that the strengths of this study are due to all I have named and acknowledged. I, alone, bear the faults and shortcomings of this thesis.

Dedication

<u>சமர்ப்பணம்</u>

என்னை எனக்கும் இந்த உலகுக்கும் அடையாளம் காட்டி

அன்போடு பண்பையும் ஊட்டி வளர்த்த அன்னைக்கும்,

பாசத்தோடு பகுத்தறிவூட்டிய தந்தைக்கும்,

அடைக்கலம் கொடுத்த தங்கைக்கும்,

மாசு மறுவற்ற மைத்துனருக்கும்,

எனது தேவதைகள்-- ஹர்ஷினி மற்றும் சுகு-வுக்கும்!!!

<u>Translation</u>

By showing me to myself and to the world,

Mother, who fed me with love as well as culture;

Father, who reared me with affection as well as rationality;

Sister, who offered me a sanctuary in this great southern land;

Brother-in-law, whose heart is kind and spotless,

And

Harshini and Sugu — my guardian angels!!!

Situating Tamil Nadu in the Subcontinent

Preface

This thesis has been written primarily from an insider's point of view but reflected that observation through the scholarly perspective. Thus, a number of things need to be addressed before proceeding further. What I mean by insider's point of view is that I am writing this thesis from the perspective of a Tamil— by birth and who lived in Tamil Nadu for over 30 years. I witnessed the adulation of film stars among my family members, friends, and colleagues. Being a Tamil, I share the same identity and cultural background of most of the people mentioned in this study. As a student of media studies, a journalist, and an aspiring academic, I had the opportunity to observe the activities of fans and the people who constitute the working class and common folks that represent the majority of Tamil society.

This study does not examine the diasporic aspects of Tamil cinema; therefore, it is limited to the Tamils in Tamil Nadu only. Furthermore, the study aims neither to investigate the impacts of the digital culture in the adulation of celebrities nor does it adopt an ethnographic approach. This study is fundamentally qualitative in design and follows the textual analysis method within a broader cultural studies approach; therefore, there is no primary data such as survey reports or interviews in this thesis. However, the thesis has used a number of textual and extra-textual materials to examine the cultural, social, and political significance of film stars in Tamil Nadu.

Richard Dyer's concepts of *speech of character*, *speech of others,* and *objective correlatives* have been italicised throughout the thesis. The term, 'politics of sentiment'— which I have proposed in this thesis— has been placed within single quotes.

Tamils use their fathers' names as surnames. The Tamil tradition of not using surnames has been followed when citing Tamil authors' names. The study has used a number of Tamil texts. The translations of the lyrics of the Tamil songs and other Tamils texts are the researcher's unless stated otherwise.As some Tamil films referred to in this thesis carry the names of the characters in the films, their translations are not given, for instance, *Annamalai* (dir. Suresh Krishna 1992). For the Bibliography section, this thesis has followed the Harvard Referencing Style of the University of Adelaide.

Introduction

Politics is a bedfellow of almost every film artist in Tamil Nadu.
Robert Hardgrave 1973, p.296

This thesis is about cinematic celebrities who use their charisma as a launching pad for their political careers in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The participation of celebrities in politics is prevalent across the world. Examples of such actor-politicians include George Murphy, Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood, and Arnold Schwarzenegger in America, Glenda Jackson in the United Kingdom, Joseph Estrada and Vilma Santos-Recto in The Philippines, and Amitabh Bachchan and NT Rama Rao in India. However, the unique feature of Tamil Nadu is that all the Chief Ministers (equivalent to US State Governors or Australian Premiers) since 1967 have been former actors. This phenomenon of film stars becoming politician is likely to continue as many current film stars have also ventured into politics either by starting political parties or by associating themselves with existing ones.

Through intensive examination of films and other texts, this thesis will analyse the cultural, historical, ideological, aesthetic, and political significance and representations of Tamil screen icons. Paying particular attention to five Tamil actor-politicians— Marudur Gopalakrishnan Ramachandran (most commonly known as MGR, 1917–1987), Jayalalitha (also known as Jaya, 1948-), Rajinikanth (also known as Rajini, 1950-), Vijayakanth (1952-), and Sarathkumar (1954-) — the study explores the filmic characterisations and cinematic charisma which open the gateway for their political ascendancy. In

doing so, the study applies Max Weber's theory of charismatic leadership and Richard Dyer's 'signs of characterisation of stars'. These Tamil actors have been selected based upon their chronological importance, popularity, and political activism. All five actors have acted in more than 100 films and have each remained in the industry for more than two decades. The late legendary actor-politician MGR was the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1976 to 1987. His co-star and long time lover, Jayalalitha, is the current (at the time of writing) Chief Minister. Vijayakanth and Sarathkumar are the founding fathers of their respective political parties. While Vijayakanth is the opposition party leader in the current Tamil Nadu assembly, Sarathkumar is a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Before proceeding further, it will be important to situate this study by historicising, contextualising, and problematising the interconnectedness of stars, cinema, charisma and politics in Tamil Nadu.

Chennai (formerly Madras) is the capital city of Tamil Nadu; literally, the Nation of Tamils. It is also the hub of South Indian cinema that regularly attracts other Indian language productions (Velayutham 2008, p. 1). The city was built and established by the British as its South Indian capital. Historically speaking, Tamils have a rich cultural heritage and are traditionally known for their folklore, literature, music, dance, and theatre that spans thousands of years of civilisation. In 2004, the Indian government declared Tamil the first classic language of India. The majority of Tamils are Hindus, while Christians and Muslims constitute a small proportion of the population. Tamil Nadu is the only place in the Indian subcontinent which was never completely under any foreign rule except the British. Soon after India's independence, Tamil leaders intensified the anti-North Indian and anti-Brahmin Dravidian Movement in which cinema played a pivotal

role in the political mobilisation. Robert Hardgrave and Anthony Neidhart state that:

> Film in South India has been a major vehicle of the Dravidian movement, and its effect and penetration may be measured in the spectacular rise of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and in its landslide victory in Tamil Nadu in the 1967 election (1975, p. 27).

Furthermore, Hardgrave (1973, pp. 291-292) adds that films such as *Good Brother* (*Nalla Thambi,* dirs. Krishnan & Panju 1949), *The Housemaid (Velaikaari,* dir. Sami 1949), and *The Goddess (Parasakthi,* dirs. Krishnan & Panju 1952) 'stunned' the audience with their political messages. The Dravidian movement, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, is a Tamil National movement with an anti-caste, anti-Hindu, anti-Hindi, and anti-North Indian ideology and is one of the most powerful social movements in Indian history. Most importantly, it is cinema that provided the momentum and mass mobilisation for this movement.

Ordinary Tamils, extraordinary celebrity devotion

> *Without cinema, he [a fan] said, 'everyone will be in jail. That is the effect of film. Without cinema, there would be no country (naadu), no people (makkal).'*
> *Sara Dickey 1993a, p. 140*

In Tamil Nadu film stars are not just actors but are adulated and idolised as gods. Fans worship their stars to the extent that they build temples and perform religious rituals to their images on film posters. Film stars are revered on- and off-screen. Almost all Tamil films, and more particularly films featuring the leading actors, have at least one song glorifying the valour and beauty of heroes. Outside

cinema halls, posters of the stars are revered through religious ceremonies and special prayers are performed in the hope that their films will be commercially successful. Richard Dyer has noted that:

> In the early period, stars were gods and goddesses, heroes, models— embodiments of ideal ways of behaving (1998, pp. 21-22).

The relevance of Dyer's assertion in the context of Tamil Nadu goes beyond the early days of Tamil cinema as cinema and celebrity worship continue to constitute an integral and inseparable part of everyday life in Tamil Nadu. Therefore, once actors become active in politics, the songs identified with them through their films are in turn played during their political campaigns. The role of cinema as cultural and political artefact in Tamil society is not just omnipresent but also omnipotent to the extent that film is the only medium that dominates cross-media platforms such as radio and television. Henceforth, cinematic celebrities are constantly interacting with ordinary Tamils. The sacredness of film stars solidifies even further with their political ascendancy as they capture 'real' power rather than mere 'celluloid' power. In this regard, Sara Dickey mentioned in an interview (D Karthikeyan 2011) about the continued adulation of the legendary actor and former Chief Minister MGR two decades after his death, while MSS Pandian refers to the saga of MGR as 'a modern day political myth' (1992, p. 11). One can understand this phenomenon more clearly by applying Max Weber's concept of charisma to the ways that Tamils bestow their film actors' with 'superhuman qualities, magical powers, and extraordinary traits' (1947, p. 358).

In Tamil Nadu, particular social structures exist for the poor. Film heroes are not just entertainers but also saviours; to film stars, cinematic fame is a

stepping stone for their political career; for politicians films are the prominent and proven propaganda purveyors. It is also important to acknowledge that it is not just male actors who capitalise on the fame of their stardom to gain political leverage but also female actors, who deploy similar tactics and techniques to woo the audience and become successful in politics. For instance, the former actress and the third wife of MGR, the late Janaki Ramachandran (1923–1996), was the Chief Minister for less than a month in January 1988 after the death of MGR. The current Chief Minister Jayalalitha is a former actress, and more recently actress Kushboo Sundar (1970-) made a public entry into politics in 2010.

Celebrity worship in Tamil theatre and cinema

> *He [MGR] is seen as "one among the people," "the incarnation of goodness," "the poor man's avatar."*
> *Hardgrave 1973, p. 298*

The depth of Tamil cinema's influence in the daily lives of Tamils did not come as a sudden development but is deeply entrenched in thousands of years of Tamil culture. Folklore, ballads, theatre, dance, and music are all part of Tamil culture where protagonists are glorified and celebrated as gods and goddesses. This culture of venerating actors continued to exist even with the arrival of new technologies because it was theatre artists who embraced the new technology of cinema, which screened in the streets of Tamil Nadu during the British era soon after its advent in Europe. In addition, the onset of sound technology to the hitherto silent cinema paved the way for the influx of theatre artists to cinema. The birth of cinema in Tamil Nadu was the beginning of an end to theatre; however, the genre tradition of theatre successfully made its way into cinema,

more prominently through celebrity worship. Robert Stam suggests, 'two hundred years of theatre has impacted on Indian cinema' (2000, p. 17).

Celebrity worship is also ingrained in literary and theatrical traditions where religious themes were the most popular genre. As a bankable theatrical genre, religious films became intrinsically popular in the early days of Tamil cinema because people were able to identify with the characters in religious stories. These films are, locally known as 'devotional films.' In regard to the genre of early Tamil films, Hardgrave notes:

> Early Tamil films were largely "mythological" but with the first "social" films in 1936 came an infusion of politics (1973, p. 289).

Having seen their gods and goddesses in theatres, Tamils are no strangers in seeing them on-screen. They believe that actors' souls are replaced by the holy spirits during such performances as one can commonly witness the pious nature of the audiences in the cinema halls of Tamil Nadu. This is perhaps due to the fact that Hinduism allows idolatry and the predominantly Hindu Tamils have no issues in seeing their divinity negotiated through their favourite actors as they play the roles of gods in their theatrical and filmic performances. The fundamental argument here is that celebrity worship of Tamils is basically rooted in their strong traditional cultural beliefs. Dickey (1993, p. 158) puts forth a similar argument by tracing fans' fervour in Tamil culture, where the fans commitment to the stars grows out of their religious adoration and their actions are intended to demonstrate such feelings.

Tamil cinema and Weber's charisma

This thesis endeavours to explicate the stardom of Tamil stars by using German sociologist Max Weber's theory of 'charismatic leadership.' Weber, along with Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx, is considered as one of the founding fathers of sociology. He is often referred to as a sophisticated 'value-free' sociologist (Allen 2004). In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*, Weber defines charisma as:

> A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional power or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as leader (1947, p. 358).

If we apply Weber's theory of charisma to the adulation of Tamil film stars, we find what Weber says is the case that people believe their leaders (actors) are not ordinary people but 'extraordinary' (Adair-Toteff 2005, p. 194) endowed with supernatural and superhuman traits. The faithful devotion of the people is witnessed in their veneration of stars. Weber also argues that charismatic leaders emerge during social crises and when there is a threat or danger to any ethnic community or its existing cultural identity. As discussed, after the British rule in India, North India's cultural hegemony threatened Tamil Nadu. Tamils saw this as an attack on their self-respect and their long-standing independent identity.

While tracing the roots of the Dravidian movement in the beginning of the Justice Party, Lloyd Rudolph (1965) argues that in a modern economy radical populism grows out of threats from the forces of hegemony of the popular authority such as that occurring during the 1960s when the people of Tamil Nadu

felt that their language, culture and identity were facing imminent threat from North Indian politicians trying to impose Hindi as the singular National language of India. With this development it can be argued here that Tamil film stars emerged as charismatic leaders during a time when Tamil society was undergoing a crisis. As MSS Pandian (1992, p. 29) argues, films provide 'imaginary solutions to the real problems', and the public faith in film stars, therefore, remains as Tamil society faces continual crises and uncertainties such as poverty, unemployment, bureaucratic maladministration, and political corruption. In other words, Tamil film stars capitalise on the crisis of the poor by offering them hope. To be more precise, MGR's charismatic rise coincided with celebrity worship, which became more intense during his political tenure. More curiously, after MGR's death in 1987, other stars continued to emulate him. Dickey rightly argues:

> Since MGR's death there has been a rush among actors and directors to associate themselves with the former leader, even among those who previously supported other parties, in an attempt to gain popular support among audiences who remember MGR nostalgically (1993, p. 56).

As mentioned, the link between cinema and politics mainly centred on charismatic leadership. Although the Dravidian movement spoke for the masses, it needed charismatic leadership in order to mobilise the masses and to convert the consolidated support into votes. Throughout their history, the Dravidian parties have gravitated around charismatic, authoritative figures, for instance, EV Ramasamy, CN Annadurai, MGR, Karunanidhi, Jayalalitha and Vijayakanth, all charismatic personalities with cinematic backgrounds. The interplay between the Dravidian movement and cinema is so deep that one can even argue that there

would be no Dravidian movement without cinema and there would be no cinema without promises for the poor. As Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens (2007) argue, charismatic leadership, simplistic language, and political mobilization are typical and important features of politics. In the context of Tamil Nadu, Dravidian leaders such as Anna and Karunanidhi also worked as scriptwriters who wrote the film scripts in simple and colloquial language for charismatic actors such as MGR. These simple dialogues helped to pull the crowds that were in turn used by Dravidian leaders for political mobilisation. One also needs to understand that only action heroes like MGR and Vijayakanth have been politically successful while non-action stars such as Sivaji Ganesan, T Rajendar, and Bhagyaraj were unable to gain the same amount of success despite their popularity among the masses.

While cinema is considered to be the most popular form of entertainment with its versatile capacity to reach a universal audience, politics is the epicentre for the most powerful organ of liberal democracy. Politics is an edifice of power which is constructed upon the foundation of mass support. Cinema provides the base for politics in order to mobilise the masses, to cultivate cultural ideas, to inject political agendas and to divert people's attention from mainstream issues. Cinema, on the other hand, needs politics for taxation benefits, financial assistance, and to some extent, to affect policy-making and legal matters concerning issues such as censorship. Regardless of the perceptible intensity of its impact, cinema is the medium which is always hailed for formation of public opinion throughout Tamil Nadu and much of India. To be more precise, cinema creates, influences, and represents popular culture with its capacity to reach

mainstream audiences. Graeme Turner describes this convergence as part of the 'celebritisation of politics':

> Celebrities have become 'integrally involved' in political activities: electioneering, fund-raising, lobbying and so on. The pay-off for them is twofold: it contributes to their overall professional strategy of marketing their own celebrity-as-commodity and it also gives them political influence within the party. This may even lead to the pursuit of political office, of course. The US is used to seeing celebrities from the entertainment and sports industries running successfully for political office; the most high profile example in recent years has been the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California in 2003 (2004, p. 133).

Therefore, power is the manifest realisation of politics while politics becomes a potential trajectory for those who are imbued with popularity; in this context, popularity comes with fame through films. Cinema has the capacity to produce individual personalities who are able to woo people's minds, cutting across age, gender, caste, class, religion, and race. In electoral politics on a global scale, personalities with panoramic appeal are always much sought. For instance, Philip John Davies and Paul Wells (2002) claim that 'Ronald Reagan was the first Hollywood actor to occupy the presidency and his reputation as 'The great communicator' is attributed to his film background.' It was not only Reagan who had entered into politics from Hollywood. There are a number of actors who have also moved from 'stage and screen' to political podium. Actress Gahagan Douglas was elected for the US House of Representatives in 1944 and ran for the Senate in 1950 against Richard Nixon. Actors like Shirley Temple (late 1960s), Clint Eastwood (1970s and 1980s), and television comedy stars like Fred Grandy, Ben Jones, Pat Paulsen (1980s and early 1990s) all entered politics but met with little or no success (Dannheisser 2007). Of them all, action hero Arnold

Schwarzenegger lasted as governor of California for almost a decade. What this demonstrates is that celebrities engage in political activities in various parts of the world. In regard to Tamil Nadu, Hardgrave (1975) and Dickey (1993) observe that politicisation of Tamil cinema began with the arrival of sound films, more specifically from 1936 onwards with a shift from 'mythological stories' to 'social themes'. The connection between cinema and politics became evidently dominant in the midst of the emergence of the Dravidian movement, and its close engagement with the film industry resulted in film makers and actors promoting the Dravidian ideology. Film was the ideal medium for this, as Dickey (1993, p. 165) rightly points out that it is films that are 'widespread and accessible' to the majority of viewers in India.

Cinema: a cultural artefact

Culture is a fertile ground for any form of storytelling including cinema because it is culture that produces texts. Indeed, Turner proposes that 'The feature film is a twentieth century storyteller, and much more than the contemporary novel it is the model through which we articulate the world' (1986, p. 9). The origin of all texts is embedded in the culture and the artefacts are interconnected with each other, for instance, printing and photography, theatre and cinema. While theatre is cinema's closest relation, the latter has evolved itself as one of the most popular and profoundly influential forms of narrative in the last hundred years. As with all other artefacts, cinema is a product of culture and contains particular thematic structures and meanings, therefore, the construction of meaning through this medium is an equally fascinating exploration. Since the production and

consumption of meaning is rooted in culture, it is important to unpack films from the prism of culture. As Turner emphasises:

> It is based upon the conviction that narratives are ultimately produced by the culture; thus they generate meanings, take on significances, and assume forms that are articulations of the values, beliefs— the ideology— of the culture. As the culture produces its texts it prefers certain meanings, thematic structures and formal strategies (1986, pp. 1-2).

Picking up on the foundation of culture from the aforementioned argument, the aim of this thesis is to identify what Tamil films do to Tamils in the same way that Turner understood Australian cinema by unpacking Australian narratives through a Cultural Studies approach. Although Turner's work explores Australian narratives, his ideas and approach regarding culture and films can be applied to the Tamil context as well. His insistence on the interconnectedness of culture and narratives, the use of landscape, folklore, and ballads, and the meaning-making process of the narratives through these cultural elements can be observed in films such as *Vagabond King* (*Nadodi Mannan*, dir. MGR 1958) which stars MGR, detailed further in Chapter Two. With a history that dates back five thousand years and with culture that is traditionally expressed in ballads, myths, music, poetry, and theatre, Tamil society comprises an immeasurable wealth of stories to tell and it is through cinema that those narratives can best be explored.

Tamil cinema narratives are more than mere entertainment or corridors of escapism as they are seen as the conveyers of messages and canons of optimism. In Tamil Nadu, film narratives are scripted in such a way to promise a better future for the poor, provide a sense of hope for a just and equitable life, and pave the way to escape the bitter pains of reality. They also suggest freedom from

opportunistic politicians, and the authoritatively corrupt bureaucracy, by offering the poor the freedom to move up through a caste-ridden societal hierarchy. Dickey notes:

> Cinema suggests that life is fine now, in no need of change since the poor already possesses the best aspects of life (i.e. morality and strength of character), and simultaneously that present difficulties will soon resolve without effort and be replaced by abundance, i.e., material wealth (1993, p. 176).

Like Dickey, this thesis argues that Tamil stars, and particularly action heroes, projected their screen image not only as entertainers but also as saviours of the suppressed, protectors of the poor, messiahs of the malnourished, and deities of the downtrodden. Tamil cinematic texts inform the audience, educate the spectators, address various social problems, provide them solace, and secure them with hopes through warrior heroes. This convention of placing hopes on stars, which began right from folk tales, has been carried out through folk music and theatre. This continuum, evolving out of the strong foundation in culture, reinvented itself with a new avatar through films in the early twentieth century.

Tamil-ness in Tamil cinema

> *In cinema, the use of Tamil generates a symbolic, embodied and affective connective to Tamil-ness and Tamil identity.*
> *Velayutham 2008, p. 6*

The 'Tamil-ness' of Tamil cinema in this thesis is used in line with Turner's approach of 'Australian-ness' (1986) in Australian cinema. In *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative*, Turner expounds Australian-ness throughout in terms of the Australian nature (landscape) to

represent the dualism of freedom–exile, city–outback, and mateship and the rebel against the cultural hegemony of the British. Similarly, Tamil cinema narratives represent the Tamil nature through the dichotomy of benevolence– malevolence, rural–urban, camaraderie, and revolt against the cultural hegemony of North India. Tamil films revolve around each of these aspects, which are detailed in the individual chapters.

It is perhaps true to say that Tamil-ness in Tamil cinema has been constructed over the last 80 years in more than 6000 films. This historical construction must be seen in the context of linguistic division of Indian cinema(s), which will be discussed in detail shortly. Within this context, it is important to acknowledge the presumed linguistic and ethnic boundaries between the various cinemas of India. With the arrival of sound talkie films, Indian cinema(s) had to address the audiences who are divided in terms of their ethno-linguistic differences. The majority of south Indians did not patronise North Indian talkies, and vice-versa, because they did not understand the language. Therefore, the early Tamil film-makers needed to appeal Tamil audiences by differentiating Tamils films from the other kinds of Indian films. Thus the films came out with the terms such as 'Tamil talkies, 100% Tamil films, Film produced by a Tamilian' (Hughes 2010, p. 217). Even though these early films were made in Tamil, Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema and notions such as what makes a film Tamil continued to evolve. For example, In the 1930s more emphasis was given to the films that are Tamil in every respect from pre-production to post-production.

Hughes (2010, p. 217) argues that Tamil-ness in Tamil cinema 'was not merely distinguished as a matter of kind but also a matter of degree.' It is an outcome of various factors such as logistical difficulties, commercial interests,

and outsourcing issues. Most importantly, concerns over the 'exploitation' of Tamil audiences by the North Indian film-makers, promotion of Sanskrit and the negligence of Tamil in the religious and cultural events by the upper caste Brahmins— who controlled the educational, religious, and cultural institutions in Tamil Nadu— and ethnic pride advocated by social movements in the 1930s such as Pure Tamil Movement (*Tani Tamil Iyakkam*), Tamil Music Movement (*Tamil Isai Iyakkam*) and Self- Respect movement.

The Self Respect movement led by EV Ramasamy (1879–1973) is very significant since it set a critical mass for the Dravidian movement, which will be discussed shortly. Hughes (2010, p. 226) claims that the Self Respect movement, 'created a new network of discursive associations that linked a critique of Brahminical power, caste hierarchy, and Hinduism with Tamil/Dravidian linguistic identity'. He adds further that this was a beginning of a long, productive and political engagement between the Dravidian movement and Tamil cinema. Tamil poet Bharathidasan (1981–1964) is a key figure in advocating Tamil-ness in Tamil cinema. Hailed as an official poet laureate of the Dravidian movement, he realised the importance of using cinema for the mass mobilisation. He emphasised, 'even though Tamils had made hundreds of films they had still not succeeded in using the clothes, mannerisms, and culture of the Tamils. Instead Tamil films used an odd assortment of the costumes and tunes from north India, Telugu songs mixed with Tamil, *slokas* in Sanskrit, and speeches in English,' (Hughes 2010, p. 226). He scripts and lyrics for Tamil films such as *Balamani* (dir. PV Rao 1937) and *Kalamekam* (dir. Ellis R Dungan 1940) — both of these titles are the protagonists' names.

Tamil-ness, therefore, is the result of the combination of historical, cultural, and social factors. One can argue that the construction of Tamil-ness in Tamil cinema started since the arrival of the sound talkies, which gave a cinematic validation to the already existing ethno-linguistic exclusivity, cultural insularity, and regional hostilities among the Indians.

The most noticeable aspect of Tamil actors is the way their roles project their Tamil-ness. This is the fundamental character of Tamil films. Another aspect of Tamil-ness in Tamil films is Tamil Nationalism, which goes to the extent of demanding a separate nation for Tamils. Hardgrave strongly argues that Tamil cinema inherited its actors from the 'guerilla theatre of Tamil Nationalism'. He maintains:

> The demand for the separate state of Dravidasthan [Dravida Nation] — then the cry of the DMK Party— would be couched in 'folklore' films in which MGR would struggle against an evil despot. Dialogue would obliquely refer to contemporary politics and gradually phrases were introduced to trigger applause— a reference to Anna or to the rising sun, symbol of the Party (1973, pp. 290, 299).

In addition to the above argument, it is equally important to situate and distinguish Tamil cinema from its hegemonic cultural contemporary 'Bollywood cinema' to understand the Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema. It is extremely rare for actors to crossover between the two industries and if it ever does happen, it is often unsuccessful. In other words, Tamil cinema is not Bollywood and Bollywood is not the only Indian cinema.

Why Bollywood is not representative of Indian cinema!

Bollywood represents Hindi cinema but not Indian cinema as a whole. For Western viewers, Bollywood is a synecdoche for Indian cinema with musicals

(predominantly Punjabi bangra), provocative dance movements with gyrating hips, the exposed bellies of female stars, melodramatic story lines, and ultra-national themes. The insularity of Bollywood is noticeably clear as it excludes non-Hindi film industries. Adrian Athique argues:

> Bollywood does not incorporate the regional— language cinemas that constitute the bulk of film production and consumption in the subcontinent in purely numerical terms.... So, if Bollywood is not the Indian cinema per se, as Rajadhyakse points out, it might be described as the 'export lager' of the Indian cinema, since Bollywood productions are the ones that dominate India's film exports (2012, pp. 112-113).

From this quotation, it becomes evident that inside India, Bollywood maintains its polarity. Outside India, however, it is promoted as the biggest film industry in the world. The assertion is not just a fallacy but also is an extension of cultural hegemony as the non-Bollywood film industries produce the major chunk of Indian films. As Hardgrave and Neidhart reveal:

> The film industry in the South centred in Madras is the largest in India, in the number of studios, capital investment, gross income, and in the number of people engaged in the industry. Half of India's 6,000 cinema houses are located in the southern region— and half of those are in the state of Tamil Nadu. Virtually no village in Tamil Nadu is so isolated as to be beyond the reach of the film (1975, p. 27).

While it is a widely known fact that India produces the greatest number of films in the world, the diversity of Indian cinema, that includes Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu film industries, is rarely acknowledged. In addition, the South Indian film industry produces more than fifty percent of the films in India (Dickey 1993; Hardgrave Jr. & Neidhart 1975; Velayutham 2008). So, while Bollywood makes films for Hindi-speaking North Indians and its diasporas, and the Bengali film industry makes films for the Bengali-speaking people, the South Indian film

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industries like Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam make films for those who speak their respective languages. Interestingly, the Bombay film industry is known as *Bollywood* while Tamil and Telugu film industries are named *Kollywood* and *Tollywood* respectively. The etymologies of these names, of course, can be traced to the influence of Hollywood. The interesting point here is that unlike Hollywood, Bollywood is not a geographic district or a place.

The media hyperbole of Bollywood is more pronounced when examining the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-racial context of Indian society. The complexities of the myriad identities of Indian society are not just contrasting but conflicting in nature as well. Prior to the British rule there was no 'India' and national identity was constructed by leaders during the freedom struggles and through political compulsion after independence. However, the inherent weakness in this fabrication of Indian identity is still evident as the construction of 'Indian-ness' remains incomplete.

Be that as it may, during their two hundred years of colonisation, the British unified the geographically continuous, but, racially and culturally disparate India via transport, communication, and administration. In other words, Indian national identity did not evolve out of need, necessity, or nature but was imposed upon the people by the British to begin with. After Independence the Indian Territory was reorganised by the then Congress government headed by Jawaharlal Nehru on the basis of language. In terms of linguistic origin, the four main South Indian languages, namely, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam have their roots in Tamil while the North Indian languages such as Hindi and Bengali have their origin in Sanskrit. The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution recognises more than twenty languages, including Hindi and Tamil, as national languages,

while making English the common language (locally known as the link language). Dickey (1993, p. 347) observes that cinema was introduced in British India in 1896, six months after its original unveiling in Paris. Soon after, cities such as Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), and Madras (Chennai) became the hub of cinema for their respective regions North, East, and South as they simultaneously witnessed the mushrooming of film theatres.

As these disparate cinema industries grew, films from the three cities began to represent not only the regions but also the linguistic and cultural differences of India. Bombay films entertained the Hindi-speaking North Indians, films from Calcutta catered to the needs of the Bengalis while Madras became the hub of South Indian films, which include Tamil and Telugu. As these film industries addressed entirely diverse audiences who differed in terms of language and culture, the characteristics of their films became distinctive. Even though there are occasional interactions among the three different film industries, they maintain their individuality. For instance, Hindi films mostly portray the protagonists as diasporic, happy-go-lucky, luxurious young men (usually) surrounded by product placements, and bachelors who always wind up with their girls. On the other hand protagonists in Bengali films are more poignant and less dramatic portraying the emotional subtleties of daily lives. Tamil film heroes address and advocate Tamil culture and more pressing social issues such as poverty and corruption, offering their audiences hopes for the future.

There are more than one thousand films produced and released every year in India, making it the largest film producer in the world. Of these, Bollywood produces around 200 films in a year (Athique 2012, p. 112); therefore, more than 800 of the films produced in India are not Bollywood films. In addition, it is

South India, comprising Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Karnataka, and Kerala, which produces more than seventy percent of the films in India. South India also accounts for the greatest number of cinema theatres per capita in the world. As noted, the paradox is that Bollywood is projected as the national film industry, while the other film industries in India are labelled as 'regional' by the public and the English private media in India. The economic, numerical, and cultural significance of the multi-billion dollar film industry of South India is thereby subsumed within the hegemonic discourse of the 'national' North and 'regional' South (Velayutham 2008, pp. 1-2). Arguing against labelling of non-Hindi film industries as 'regional,' Vijay Devadas (2006) proposes instead an alternative discourse for Tamil cinema, as a form of 'transnational cinema'.

As previously mentioned, the interaction among the different film industries in India is sporadic, yet, unsuccessful. It has so far been proved that it is impossible for a male actor, even if he is a superstar in his home film industry, to crossover from one film industry to another; while female actors do it occasionally. For instance, while Bollywood mega-stars such as Shah Rukh Khan faced humiliating flops in their Tamil film adventures such as *Oh My Soul* (*Uyire*, dir. Mani Ratnam 1998), South Indian matinee idols such as Rajinikanth and Chiranjeevi were similarly unable to replicate their success in Bollywood. However, South Indian heroines such as Sri Devi are popular in Bollywood and female actors from Bollywood such as Aishwarya Rai are popular among South Indian audiences. It can be argued here that it is only female actors that are able to cut across the North- South divide in Indian cinema and not the male actors in the patriarchal Indian film industry. The gender specificity is rooted in the racial antagonism between the North and South Indians, which is discussed in detail in

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Chapter Three. It is worth mentioning here that in his seminal work *White*, Dyer acknowledges this racial difference:

> White genealogy has focused on the Aryans or Caucasians. The former are posited as the ancient inhabitants of what is now North West India and Pakistan. The term, which came to prominence in the early nineteenth century, is taken from a Sanskrit word meaning 'of noble birth', and the Indian ancestors of the Aryans (when acknowledged at all) were identified as the Brahmins, the highest caste in Indian society (1997, p. 20).

From the above argument it is clear that the popularisation of the term 'Bollywood' to denote Indian cinema is reductive and exploitative as it does not represent the multiplicity of Indian cinema and it gains credit at the cost of subsuming the other screen industries in India. As Academy Award-winning music composer AR Rahman (Mahr 2009) comments:

> I hate the term Bollywood as it does not represent Indian cinema but Hindi cinema and North Indian stuff only. Indian cinema is much broader than Hindi films. For instance Tamil films, Telugu films, Kannada films, and Malayalam films are to name a few, and there are so much in terms of culture, philosophy, and poetry to take from this part of the world.

The hero is the only one and only one can be the hero

Another aspect of Tamil-ness in Tamil cinema is the disengagement between the leading actors (occasionally from different political viewpoints) who refuse to act together in films: MGR–Sivaji Ganesan, Rajinikanth–Kamal Haasan, and Vijay–Ajith. This is also a reflection of the political culture of Tamil Nadu where politicians from opposing parties view each other as firm enemies. They do not look at each other or sit side by side. It is well documented that party workers from opposing parties often engage in violent clashes.

Popular heroes, even before they enter politics, do not act together in films. It is very hard to see double-protagonists in Tamil films as there are instances of violent off-screen clashes between the fans of the leading heroes. The trend emerged with the birth of stardom in Tamil cinema in the late 1950s, where MGR fans would often engage in confrontations with his contemporaneous actor Sivaji. The next generation of actors such as Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan maintained a similar polarisation between themselves and thereby their fans. The hostility is present among young upcoming actors as well, for instance, Vijay versus Ajith, Vikram versus Surya, Simbu versus Dhanush; all of whom have opposing political views.

Fan clubs are also divided and engage in bloody clashes among themselves especially during the release of the new films starring their favourite idols. With the current sophistication of modern technology, mutual hatred is exchanged through heated text messages, tweets, and e-mails. This situation reflects a quotation from Carlos de la Torre (2010, p. 149) who notes, 'The foes and friends of politics see each other as enemies and not as democratic rivals who seek negotiations and agreements.' By disengaging other protagonists in their films, Tamil actors lay the foundation for their possible political animosity in the future.

In the context of what is Tamil about Tamil cinema, Velayutham (2008, pp. 5-7) clearly enumerates that 'Indian' cinema is not a homogenous or singular entity and any attempt to approach this cinema from a 'national' perspective is problematic. Furthermore, he demonstrates the distinctiveness of Tamil cinema through its symbolic, embodied and affective connection to 'Tamil-ness,' and Tamil identity. The ethno-linguistic space of Tamil language in Tamil cinema is yet another striking difference from Hindi cinema.

Politics and Tamil cinema

Annadurai is once supposed to have said, "When we show his [MGR's] face, we get 40,000 votes; when he speaks a few words, we get 4 lakhs [400,000].

Hardgrave 1973, p. 302

It is not only cinema that embraces politics but also politics that seeks out cinema. The two major political parties in Tamil Nadu, the *Dravida Progressive Federation* (*Dravida Munnetra Kalagam*, DMK) and the *All India Anna Dravida Progressive Federation* (*Anaithu India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kalagam*, AIADMK), have always adopted populist approaches by offering free electricity to farmers, a mid-day meal program for school children, and free colour television sets for the poor. One factor to observe here is that there are numerous films depicting the same practices by portraying actors engaging in such charitable activities. For instance, MGR in various films such as *Fruit of the Heart* (*Idhayakkani,* dir. Jeganadhan 1975) donates clothes to the poor, and actors such as Rajinikanth in *The Lord* (*Yejaman*, dir. RV Udayakumar 1993); Vijayakanth in *The Little Gounder* (*Chinna Gounder*, dir. RV Udayakumar 1992) and Sarathkumar in *The Master* (*Ayya,* dir. Hari 2005) do the same in their films. Off-screen, these same actors engage in public charity events such as distributing free school text books to children, and manning blood donation camps. During his tenure as Chief Minister MGR announced 'the Chief Minister's Nutritious Meal Programme' in 1982 for school children. Jayalalitha, the former actor and the current Chief Minister, launched a similar scheme offering free lunch (*annadhanam*) in Hindu temples in 2012. One can clearly see how actor-

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politicians seek to connect and maintain their 'saviour image' both on- and off-screen.

Tamil cinema and the Dravidian movement

> *The DMK had used the film and film stars as a vehicle for propaganda and political mobilisation since the party's inception. The cinema was a vital element in the landslide victory that brought DMK to power in 1967.*
>
> <div align="right">

Hardgrave 1973, p. 304

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As mentioned, the Dravidian movement used cinematic spectacles and stars as its political apparatus. To understand the relationship between the Dravidian movement and Tamil cinema one needs to look into the politico-cultural context of that period. The arrival of films in Tamil society in 1917 (Velayutham 2008, p. 2) and the first 'talkies' in the South in 1931 (Hardgrave Jr. & Neidhart 1975, p. 27) was then followed by the end of colonial rule in 1947. Political freedom in India, coupled with the birth of parliamentary democracy and more importantly the linguistic reorganisation of states, did not come without difficulty. Ironically, most of the problems continue to exist today through the crisis over national unification, racial and linguistic tensions, the cultural hegemony of Hindi-speaking North Indians, casteism, poverty, unemployment, the low-status of women, and interstate relations. As political independence from the British did not resolve the aforementioned issues, even decades later, people were increasingly agitated in various parts of the country. Tamils responded to this ongoing crisis through the Dravidian movement. The movement had its roots in the Self Respect movement founded by E.V. Ramasamy in 1925. As mentioned, by placing Tamil Nationalism at its ideological core the cultural mosaic of the

Dravidian movement was based on anti-Hindu, anti-Hindi, anti-Brahmin, and anti-North Indian sentiments. MSS Pandian argues:

> There have been films which have indulged in direct political propaganda. These films, in keeping with the early ideology of the DMK, propagated atheism, Tamil nationalism (which was often couched in anti-North and anti-Hindi rhetoric) and anti-Brahminism (1992, p. 34).

The ideals and aspirations of the Dravidian movement embraced the Western values of modernity and scientific rationality. The political wing of The Dravidian Federation was Dravidian Progressive Federation (*Dravida Munnetra Kalagam*, DMK*)*, founded by the writer and former theatre artist, CN Annadurai (also known as Anna) in 1949. Karthigesu Sivathamby (1971, pp. 214-217) notes, with the birth of the DMK party, both theatre and, more particularly, cinema were actively used as propaganda tools. Unlike the ruling Congress Party leaders of that time, Anna spoke in the language of the southern Indian masses and his approach was revolutionary, innovative, and egalitarian, promising the uplifting of the poor and low-caste masses. He scripted his plays ideologically by addressing current social problems. As his plays were popular, so was the people's support for his party.

The other reason for the Congress Party to neglect theatre and cinema was the preponderance of Brahmins in the party and their 'casteist' aversion to popular culture, like, theatre and cinema. It should be underlined that the ruling Congress Party undermined the power of cinema, while the DMK was quick to realize the potential of film stars and their fame so that the party was considered an uncanny catalyst for mass mobilisation in Tamil Nadu. The party strategically devised various ways to get involved with the film industry through scripts, songs, and

dialogues, by bringing actors to the political meetings, and by fielding actors as party candidates in elections. Since then, the synergy between cinema and politics has attained such a level that neither one can be separated from the other.

Anna's satirical style of script-writing became a legacy as he influenced many others, who adopted his style. He created successes like *Good Brother* (*Nalla Thambi*, dirs. R Krishnan & S Panju 1949) and *The Housemaid* (*Velaikaari*, dir. ASA Sami 1949). Sivathamby comments:

> This film (*Velaikaari*) — now considered as a landmark in Tamil cinema because it introduced new themes and a new kind of language (alliterative rhetoric) — deals with a typical DMK plot (1971, p. 218).

His successor Karunanidhi (aged 88 and still active in politics at the time of writing) is known for powerful scripts on socially sensitive issues with electrifying and prose-like dialogues such as *The Goddess* (*Parasakthi*, dir. R Krishnan 1952), which is still acclaimed for its fiery dialogue. He also wrote stories, scripts, and dialogue for numerous films starring MGR. Karunanidhi has been the president of the DMK party ever since the death of Anna, and has become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu five times (1969–1971, 1971–1976, 1981–1991, 1996–2001, 2006–2011). By all means, ideologically-loaded stories and scripts were structured in such a way that they created heroes, who ensured self-respect, engineered social change, and envisioned the creation of an egalitarian society. At that time, the political power of Tamil Nadu resided with the Congress Party in the 1960s, although, the popular media was under the dominance of the Dravidian leaders. The outcome was a disaster for the Congress Party, as the DMK swept to power in the elections of 1967. The success was attributed to the film industry and more particularly to the charisma of MGR, who

was elected as MLA from the Saint Thomas Mount assembly constituency in Chennai. With this, MGR began his political career using his cinematic charisma for his electoral politics. On the other hand, Congress Party is still unable to come to power in Tamil Nadu since then. Perhaps it also means that people were able to see their future through film heroes, who provide them hope by depicting their cinematic charisma as the potential tool to eradicate their miseries single-handedly.

In the present Tamil Nadu State Assembly, the Leader of the Opposition, Vijayakanth, and MLAs such as Sarathkumar are active film actors as well. The veteran politician Karunanidhi, besides being a writer, also acted in films in his early days. Beginning with Anna, who was a theatre artist as well as a writer, in 1967 until the current Chief Minister Jayalalitha, the voters in Tamil Nadu have continued to elect only actors as the Chief Ministers of the state.

Political power: a destination for Tamil stars

> *For MGR, 'Arts [Cinema] and politics are the two sides of the same coin.'*
> *Hardgrave & Neidhart 1975, p. 33*

This section discusses the political activism of Tamil stars in comparison with the actors from other languages with particular reference to Hindi and Telugu screen icons. As mentioned, cinema is part of the daily lives for the people of Tamil Nadu. A survey conducted by Sara Dickey in 1986 demonstrated that most residents in the city of Madurai saw at least one film a week. By 1990 Tamil Nadu was a home to 2431 cinema halls, making the state the site of one of the highest per capita number of film theatres in the world (Dickey 1993, p. 3). In addition,

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cinema has intensively intermingled with all other social institutions including family, marriage, economy, and politics. Above all, the link between cinema and politics is a most fascinating phenomenon to analyse. The preponderance of cinema in politics (and vice versa) is felt all across India. Bollywood (Hindi) actors like Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna, Jaya Bachchan, Shabna Ashmi, Vinoth Khanna, Hema Malini, Shatrugan Sinha, the late Sunil Dutt, Govinda, and Nagma were or are actively engage(ed) in electoral politics. In Andhra, another south Indian state, where Telugu is the state language, NT Rama Rao (also known as NTR), Chiranjeevi, Vijaya Shanthi, the late Soundharya and Roja are all in politics. Likewise, Tamil actors/scriptwriters Annadurai and Karunanidhi, matinee idols like MGR, Vijayakanth, Sarathkumar and Karthik, actresses such as the late Janaki MGR and Jayalalitha have involved in politics. Among them, the impact of MGR in Tamil Nadu and NTR in Andhra has been vital. While MGR was the Chief Minister of the state of Tamil Nadu for more than a decade (1977–1987) up until his death, NTR was elected as Chief Minister more than once in Andhra. In South India, film stars have entered into politics more frequently and gained success more often than their North Indian counterparts.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of this cinema-politics juncture is gender distribution. While both male and female actors aspire to become politicians, just like in Tamil cinema, female stars are generally unable to outshine their male counterparts in the political sphere. The noticeable exception to this is Jayalalitha, who is studied in detail in Chapter Three. Cinematic interconnection with politics is not uniform all across India, for instance, even though Bollywood stars participate in electoral politics, they are unable to be successful in politics in relation to their counterparts in the South, despite the fact that Hindi is spoken in

more than one state within the Indian territory. There are a number of reasons for the relative eclipse of Bollywood actors in politics. Firstly, Most of the South Indian films can be read as political statements since the actors, who aspire to become politicians, make sure that their chosen screen roles shape their political career in the future. South Indian heroes prefer to play 'do-good-hero' roles alone and South Indian cinema in general and Tamil cinema in particular, as we will discuss later, is ideologically driven. In other words, socio-economic issues and ethno-nationalist ideas are subtly, yet successfully, injected in to typical melodrama genres. Heroes in the South are portrayed as self-sacrificing 'messiahs of the poor', whereas in Hindi cinema heroes are 'happy-go-lucky' men with hedonistic lifestyles. Their cinematic characters are something about which ordinary people can only fantasise.

Secondly, unlike Bollywood actors, film stars in South India have more organisational support in the form of fan clubs. They readily and rapidly provide their heroes with encouragement and incessant mass support. It is said that the number of fan clubs for MGR varied from 800 to 20,000. Fan clubs become a forum for working class citizens to address their livelihood issues. Fan clubs engage in social services like blood donation programs. Fan club offices are often also converted into party offices once the hero launches their own political outfit (Dickey 2001). Fan clubs are created, developed, and maintained by the fans and in terms of their gender and demographic distribution Dickey argues:

> Almost all fan club members are men, most in their late teens to late twenties. Women rarely join, and when they do join women's only clubs. Most fan club members come from lower middle Hindu castes and the lower or lower middle class, and are not highly educated. The clubs also include Muslims and Christians in what appeared to be rough proportion to their numbers in the general population (1993, p. 149).

Lastly, Bollywood actors do not seem to have taken politics seriously as their South Indian counterparts. This is perhaps due to the ethno-linguistic and different political landscape among Hindi-speaking states. As noted, unlike Tamil or Telugu, Hindi is not specific to one state but the majority of North India. Although some Bollywood actors such as Amitabh Bachchan have entered into politics, no Bollywood star has yet launched a political party. Instead they prefer to associate themselves with either one of the National parties, either the Congress Party or the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (People of the *Bharat* Party, BJP). Even then, they rarely attain leadership positions and most Bollywood star-politicians are content themselves with getting a *Rajiyasabha* seat (the Indian version of the House of Lords) rather than contesting in the electoral politics. There are some instances where a few Bollywood actors have opted for electoral politics, but it is not common to see them winning elections in comparison to the South.

As discussed, the politicization of cinema is one of the visible features that set apart Tamil cinema and its stars from other Indian films and actors. A look at the stories and characterization of Tamil films will give more details on the politicization of Tamil cinema. The narratives of Tamil cinema revolve around heroes rather than heroes revolving around the stories. For instance, the stars featured in this analysis are always action heroes and assume immortal qualities both on-and off- screen. In this regard, Dickey points out in an interview with D Karthikeyan:

> During the process of my ethnographic study on the fan clubs I found a lot of fascinating things. It was quite interesting to note that MGR's fans would always say he would never die. Even in 1989, a good two years after the former Chief Minister passed away, his fans still believed he was alive! He still lives in their hearts (Dickey cited in D Karthikeyan 2009).

In order to build the immortal qualities of their characters in the films, actors manipulate stories to suit their charisma, locally known as 'star image'. Sivathamby notes:

> In South Indian cinema a film star has much power: he can dictate to the producer, director, cameraman, song-writers, scriptwriter, and costume designer, and shape a film according to his wishes (1971, p. 220).

The construction of charisma is not spontaneous but manipulated bearing in mind that politics is the destination of the film actors. It is a well-acknowledged fact that almost all actors in Tamil Nadu have a political connection some way. Although most of the actors identified and associated themselves with the DMK, it was the success of MGR that marked the beginning of a new era that the charisma of a cinematic hero would convert into votes. As the trend started with MGR, it flowed through to the next generation actors like Vijayakanth, and engulfing even the upcoming heroes like Vijay (1974-), who has recently announced a flag symbol for his fan clubs, a gesture that is indicative of his prospective political entry. Unlike the past heroes who aligned with the Dravidian political parties, contemporary actors' launch their own political outfits by converting their fan clubs into political organisations.

Tamil fans have both a fascination for their film stars and a frustration over the system they live in. As the people are frustrated with the repeated failures of successive governments, they are fascinated by the promises of the filmic heroes as well. Politics is rehearsed in many spaces of the film industry in Tamil Nadu not just through fan clubs. For instance, actors' associations are common. It is only actors, who have enough money, fan clubs, and political support, who can become heads of these associations. Actor-politicians such as MGR, Vijayakanth,

and currently Sarathkumar rehearsed their political future by heading various associations such as the South Indian Film Artists' Association (SIFAA, *Nadigar Sangam*). At some point in their careers, star actors launch their political parties while comedians and relatively less-known actors engage in political campaigns during the elections to add star-value to politics. In the State Assembly elections held in 2012, Tamil screen comedian Vadivelu campaigned for the DMK Party against Vijayakanth. The underpinning argument through this discussion is that politics is played out through cinema, and cinema is a gateway to politics in Tamil Nadu that has been inseparable for nearly a hundred years.

Research gap and organisation of the thesis

As Baskaran (2009) observes, despite the importance of Tamil cinema within its society in the cultural spectrum and more visibly in the political sphere, there is little acknowledgement among the global scholarly community of the phenomenon of Tamil cinema and politics. While western scholars such as Hardgrave have made some initial efforts to understand the symbiotic relationship between Tamil cinema and politics, there is little or no interest from domestic scholars in the study of South Indian cinema (apart from a few exceptions like Pandian). The reasons for this lack of interest among local scholars is varied, for instance, economic and social factors, as studying arts and humanities is not highly appreciated and non-remunerative because such fields do not guarantee employment opportunities. Henceforth, it is important to study South Indian cinema, and more specifically Tamil cinema, from an insider's perspective using the cinematic angle.

In regards to the status of cultural studies and the application of representational theories on Tamil cinema, there is a huge scholarly vacuum (Velayutham 2008, p. 2). In Tamil Nadu universities, films are studied within the Departments of English Literature, Political Science, Sociology, or Communication where they are only one of the many components of the respective disciplines. As a matter of fact, there is no university in Tamil Nadu that offers an exclusive department for Film Studies and research, itself an indicative of the lowly status and scope of the discipline. This thesis is the first comprehensive work in this regard by initiating a debate on cinema as cultural and political fields. This study looks into the common structure in many Tamil films of different times, and traces them back to the Tamil culture. By adopting the British and European Cultural Studies themes of representation and using semiotics, textual, and discourse analysis, this study is, therefore, text- and context-based.

This thesis, besides bridging this academic gap, has a number of objectives. It aims to provide a comprehensive documented analysis on the relationship between cinematic actors and politics by identifying the charismatic factors operating in them. Secondly, it investigates the symbiotic relationship between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu since the 1960s and its resilience in the changing socio-politico-economic milieu of the 1990s. Thirdly, it examines the role of film stars in the construction of their image and their off-screen persona. Finally, it briefly examines the contribution of fan clubs to the political ascendancy of film stars.

Chapter One looks at the theoretical underpinning (Figure 2) of this thesis and the review of relevant literature while Chapters Two to Six deal with five

chronologically significant actor-politicians. I have selected five actors, who have enjoyed immense success in Tamil cinema: MGR, Jayalalitha, Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth, and Sarathkumar. These five actors are selected over numerous actor-politicians on the basis of their political activism and electoral success. Interestingly, apart from Sarathkumar, all hail from different states and Tamil is not their mother-tongue. As mentioned, one needs to remember that the states in India are divided on the basis of language and these differ from state to state. This thesis will examine the reasons for the actors' success among the ethnic-conscious and linguistically assertive Tamils.

In Chapter Two, I begin with MGR, the most successful film-star politician in the sub-continent. He was born in Sri Lanka in 1917 and Malayalam is his mother-tongue. He is the founder-president of 'All India Anna Dravida Progressive Federation' (*All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kalagam,* also known as AIADMK). He was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1977 until his death in 1987. His 'charisma' continues to influence the political decisions of the people even decades after his death. As Dickey notes, 'at least three or four of his films run daily in every city of Tamil Nadu, another one or two appear each day on television' (Dickey 2007, p. 77). He is worshipped as a god by the poor and temples are built by his devotees.

Chapter Three deals with Jayalalitha, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu at the time of writing. She was born in Karnataka in 1948 into an affluent upper-caste Brahmin family. She is often described as one of the shrewdest politicians in India. This chapter is the female face of the thesis. She has been ruling the state of Tamil Nadu for three terms (1991–1996, 2001–2005, 2011– present). People consider her as 'MGR's anointed successor' (Dickey 2007, p. 93), as she acted

with MGR in more films than any other female actor and was his long-time mistress.

Rajinikanth in Chapter Four, however, has not entered into electoral politics. Nevertheless, he is considered to be politically influential. He was born in Karnataka in 1950; his mother-tongue is Marathi. He is the highest paid film actor in Asia, next only to Jackie Chan (Sreekanth 2008). He is well known overseas, not only among English-speaking countries, but has also attracted cult status in Japan and Germany.

Vijayakanth in Chapter Five is the Leader of the Opposition in the current Tamil Nadu State Assembly since 2011. He was born in Tamil Nadu in 1952; his mother-tongue is Telugu. He is founder-president of a political party, 'National Progressive Dravida Federation' (*Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kalagam*, also known as DMDK). He is an action hero most noted for violence, weaponry, and the distribution of instant justice.

Sarathkumar in Chapter Six has been the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) in the Tamil Nadu state assembly. He is the founder president of a newly-launched political party, the All India Egalitarian People Party' (*Akila Indhiya Samathuva Makkal Katchi* also known as AISMK). He was born in 1954 in Tamil Nadu. Tamil by birth and mother-tongue, he belongs to the politically influential caste, Nadar, which mainly populates southern Tamil Nadu. His filmic charisma is based on the preservation of rural social structures as well as traditional values.

Chapter Seven will provide a summary and comparison of the five star politicians. It is important to give a synthesis of these five star politicians since each of these actors specifies a particular socio-cultural-political setting. Although the thesis will briefly discuss the role of charisma in their propaganda, the thesis

will not interrogate this in detail because it shifts the current focus of the study towards political communication. Therefore, this aspect might be explored for future studies.

Furthermore, this thesis analyses the aforementioned five actors by looking at the films seen as their most representative in terms of the construction of a political identity. These films are MGR's *Vagabond King* (*Nadodi Mannan,* dir. MGR 1958), Jayalalitha's *Slave Lady* (*Adimaip Penn*, dir. K Shanker 1969), Rajinikanth's *The Creator* (*Padayappa*, dir. KS Ravikumar 1999), Vijayakanth's *Captain Prabhakaran* (dir. RK Selvamani 1991), and Sarathkumar's *The Village Headman* (*Naattamai*, dir. KS Ravikumar 1994). Apart from *Captain Prabhakaran*, in the other four films, the protagonists play dual roles; this was, however, not a criterion for the choice of these films. And while Tamil films do not usually come with dual protagonists, dual-roles for the heroes are popular and this trend continues today with Rajinikanth, for instance, playing dual roles in his recent blockbuster, *The Robot* (*Endhiran*, dir. S Shankar 2009).

To conclude this chapter, the thesis attempts to understand the culture, society, and the people of South India through cinematic gateways that usher its cinematic superstars into the political arena. With an intensive analysis of cinematic narratives and charismatic characterisation of the film stars, we can learn a great deal about Tamil culture, which is not only the core of South Indian society but also coexists in hundreds of countries elsewhere through its diasporas. Any attempt to comprehend the cultural complexities of India will be incomplete without studying the Tamil society which is the nucleus of economic, scientific, technological, and cinematic spheres in South India. Without understanding the cinematic landscape of Tamil Nadu, South Indian culture can never be

understood. Thus, with the prism of film spectacles and the charisma of stars, this study provides a kaleidoscopic picture of Tamil culture, one of the earliest civilisations in the history of mankind. As Turner notes, *a propos* of Australian cinema:

> In this work, all the benefits obtained from viewing Australian culture are suggestive rather than comprehensive. But at least we can learn a great deal about Australian culture by examining the function of filmic and literary narratives and the ideological work which they accomplish (1986, p. 144).

The subsequent chapters provide a comprehensive view on Tamil culture through Tamil film texts, Tamil cinematic celebrities, and ideological work that these accomplish. While each chapter pays particular attention to one actor, the analyses have related the actors throughout the thesis through comparisons, contrasts, and contextualisation. The next chapter details the theoretical framework and review of key literatures from Max Weber, Richard Dyer, Graeme Turner, Richard Hardgrave, Baskaran, MSS Pandian, and Sara Dickey.

Chapter One

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This thesis is written within a Cultural Studies framework, and is text-based as well as context-based. While textual analysis examines the specific characteristics of the film texts by tracing myths, codes, conventions, signs, and ideologies in culture, the contextual approach analyses the cultural, political, and institutional determinants of those texts. Combining these approaches, this research unearths the roots of Tamil cinematic narratives in Tamil culture by considering star actors as signs in the filmic texts. In addition the study explores the characterisation of stars and their charisma by historicising and contextualising their representations in cultural and ideological institutions. To study the characterisation of stars the thesis applies Richard Dyer's typology of 'the signs of character in films', detailed in his seminal work *Stars* (Dyer 1998, p. 107), which was first published in 1979. What this demonstrates is that characterisation of stars leads to the construction of their cinematic charisma, facilitating their political entry. To understand the specific cinematic charisma of Tamil stars, the study also applies Max Weber's theory of *charismatic leadership* discussed in his book, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* (1947). Simply speaking, as Figure 2 illustrates in page 87, the thesis argues that Tamil actors enter into politics via their cinematic charisma. Carefully constructed through their filmic characterisation, this charisma is then meticulously merged with their off-screen persona.

While delineating the culturalist approach to the relation between film and culture in *Film as Social Practice*, Graeme Turner insists that the combination of textual and contextual approaches has 'enormous explanatory power':

> The common thread, however, which links the textual and the contextual and makes an understanding of them as complementary rather than mutually exclusive, is that both industry and text, the process of production and of reception, must be in some way related to ideologies (1999, p. 154).

Asserting that the definition of ideology is not 'incontestable', Turner (1999, p. 155) defines 'ideology' as 'the term used to describe the system of beliefs and practices.' On the other hand, Dyer (1998, p. 2) argues that 'ideology' as 'the set of ideas and representations in which people collectively make sense of the world and the society in which they live.' Taking these two accounts together, what this thesis construes is that ideology is both a system of beliefs, practices, and of representations. Ideology does not have a physical form; however, its manifestation can be seen in myriad material forms including through social, political, cultural institutions, and filmic texts that are fertile fields for ideological analysis. Ideological signs and representations can be studied in the characterisation of stars and in the construction of their charisma.

To understand the characterisation of the five Tamil screen icons outlined in the previous chapter, I have selected five films: MGR's *Vagabond King* (*Nadodi Mannan*, dir. MGR 1958), Jayalalitha's *Slave Lady* (*Adimaip Penn*, dir. K Shanker 1969), Rajini's *The Creator* (*Padayappa*, dir. KS Ravikumar 1999), Vijayakanth's *Captain Prabhakaran* (dir. Selvamani 1991), and Sarathkumar's *The Village Headman* (*Naattamai*, dir. KS Ravikumar 1994). In addition to their commercial success, the aforementioned films are milestones in the political

careers of the respective stars in terms of the construction of their stardom. While emphasising the importance of the films, through which these stars construct and consolidate their charisma, the idea in this thesis is not to draw differences between the two but to combine the two approaches in order to get a better and broader understanding of the role of the stars on- and off- screen in Tamil society.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu is a perennially fertile ground to study the cinematic interaction with politics. Although the phenomenon of film stars becoming politicians has been taking place continually for nearly five decades, only a limited number of studies are available on this topic. One might argue that Robert Hardgrave (1973) and Theodore Baskaran (1981) pioneered the studies on Tamil cinema and politics, while Karthigesu Sivathamby (1971) shed scholarly light on the historical connection among theatre-politics-cinema. While giving a detailed account about the 'symbiotic relationship' between Tamil cinema and politics since the 1950s, Hardgrave (1973; 1975) primarily focuses on Dravidian politics and cinema up until the mid-1970s. Baskaran's highly regarded writings give a historical picture about cinematic interaction with politics since the arrival of cinema in South India. Post-colonial Tamil scholar, MSS Pandian (1992) and American ethnographer Sara Dickey (1993) provide a more contemporary framework. Pandian (1992) offers a critical appraisal of the rise and rise of MGR as 'a modern day political myth', while Dickey's (1993) ethnographical studies refer to the continual adulation of MGR in Tamil Nadu among the urban poor, the role of fan clubs and the caste-class demography of fan clubs in Tamil society. This thesis reviews both of these key texts later in the chapter.

More recently, British scholar Martin Rogers (2009) and Australian academics such as Selvaraj Velayutham (2008) and Adrian Athique (2012) have contributed to the discourse on Tamil cinema and politics. In his edited collection, *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry*, Velayutham (2008) examines the identity, cinematic and cultural representation of Tamil cinema. Rogers (2009) looks at the role of Vijayakanth's fan clubs and the construction of reality and fantasy in Tamil society in his article. Athique's book on *Indian Media: Global Approaches* (2012), offers an international perspective on the complexities of Indian media including cinema by acknowledging the cultural hegemony of Bollywood in Indian cinema. I have discussed the works of Hardgrave, Dickey, and Pandian separately since my arguments will revolve around their ideas as illustrated in Figure 2. For example, Athique's argument on the multiple cinemas in India has been cited in the Introduction. Similarly, I have borrowed Hardgrave's arguments on the ethno-linguistic diversity of Indian cinema, Dickey's adulation of Tamil stars, and Turner's ideas on the Australian landscape, film as a social practice, understanding celebrity throughout the thesis. Apart from these works, there are few scholarly studies on the cultural and political significance of Tamil cinema. Starting with Max Weber, let us review key literatures that buttress the theoretical framework.

Max Weber: charismatic leadership

As mentioned in the introduction, German sociologist Max Weber is one of the founding fathers of modern sociology. This section looks at Weber's theory of charisma through several translated works on the same, including *The Theory*

of Social and Economic Organisation (1947). By outlining Weber's theory of charisma, Christopher Adiar-Toteff (2005) claims that charismatic leaders have certain distinctive attributes: 'Mass following with faithful devotion,' from those who believe that their charismatic leader is capable of 'heroic acts' and has 'superhuman traits' such as 'magical powers' and the capacity of performing miracles. After establishing themselves in power, leaders stabilise their charisma through the 'routinisation' of charisma because charisma is intrinsically unstable. Charismatic leaders emerge during chaotic times in the society and their demise is often followed by succession crisis. Adair-Toteff argues that charismatic leaders 'do not live from politics but for politics', they do not 'compel' the masses to follow them but 'convince' them (2005, p. 197). As discussed in the following section, Tamil stars exercise their charisma in these sorts of ways.

One can identify cinematic charisma by examining the ways in which Tamil stars are characterised in their films. The cinematic characters of these star politicians are revolutionary, extraordinary, and superhuman. Also, the star characters often have mass following that show their faithful devotion to their star characters. One can witness this in the characterisation of the star politicians discussed in the thesis, for example, the vagabond revolutionary Veeraangan (MGR) in *Nadodi Mannan*, an extraordinary Pavalavalli (Jayalalitha) in *Adimaip Penn*, and superhuman Padayappan (Rajinikanth) in *Padayappa*. These films also project the chaotic situation during the temporary or permanent absence of these charismatic characters. All these charismatic attributes, as outlined by Max Weber (illustrated in Figure 2), can be seen in the characterisation of star-politicians. In other words, charisma can be identified but it is difficult to measure. Moreover, this thesis, which solely follows the qualitative approach, does not intend to quantify charisma.

Weber introduces his theory of 'charismatic leadership' to analyse authority and while detailing his analysis on the typology of political leadership. Marisol Lopez Menendez (2008, p. 225) traces the etymological roots of charisma to the Greek word, *charizesthai*, a Greek goddess Charis, known for grace, beauty, purity and altruism. As such, the Weberian concept of charisma is often seen in association with religious figures such as Jesus. Nonetheless, as Robert Tucker (1968, p. 734) argues, the phenomenon of charisma can be an effective tool to study 'modernisation and political development in ex-colonial new states'. With regards to the inseparability of cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu, this notion of charisma assumes enormous significance. Let us look at the attributes of charisma and their applicability to Tamil star actors.

Mass following and faithful devotion

One of the most important characteristics of charismatic leadership is to have faithful followers. As Tucker (1968) mentions, 'They [masses] do not follow him [charismatic leader] out of fear or monetary inducement, but out of love, passionate devotion, enthusiasm.' With regards to Tamil film celebrities, they have hundreds of fan clubs and millions of loyalists, who are willing to sacrifice their lives for their stars. MSS Pandian notes the reaction of the masses after the death of the legendary actor-politician MGR:

> In the early hours of 24 December 1987, Madras city witnessed one of the world's largest funerals. No less than two million people, including several who had travelled long distances from remote villages, formed MGR's rather long funeral procession. In other places, people who could not attend the actual funeral organised 'mock' funerals in which images of MGR were taken out in procession and buried with full ritual. Countless young men tonsured their heads, a Hindu ritual usually performed when someone of the family dies. Thirty-one of his desolate followers, unable to contain their grief committed suicide (1992, p. 17).

This quotation speaks volumes about the nature of devotion towards a film star-politician. This extreme form of devotion does not just stop with MGR. Currently, actors such as Rajinikanth, and actor-politicians such as Jayalalitha and Vijayakanth have similar sets of loyal followers. For instance, when the actor Rajinikanth was recently hospitalized, more than a thousand men shaved their head (Figure 1) for the speedy recovery of the actor (NDTV 2011d). It is needless to mention that by such things, the fans do not get any monetary benefit; rather, they are performing these gestures to express support, love, and loyalty to their favourite stars. The cinematic celebrities, as charismatic leaders, exercise a kind of domination over the followers. Followers are captivated and surrender themselves to their stars to the extent that their favourite actors are infallible, indestructible, and sacred even though the stars are inaccessible and intangible for the followers. As mentioned, the extraordinary qualities of film stars, which are the reasons for the followers' submission, are derived from their film roles.

Figure 1. Rajini fans with shaven heads, 2011

Extraordinariness and superhuman personal qualities

One of the MGR pilgrims earnestly reasoned, 'In some religions, gods have been born as human beings. Don't people worship them? Our god is MGR...'

MSS Pandian 1992, p. 130

What can be seen from the aforementioned statement from a 'devotee' of MGR is the way the latter treated on par with religious figures Jesus and Mohammed, who were born as human beings. Pandian (1992, p. 131) observes that MGR's fans 'attribute him with magical/thaumaturgical powers'. The devotion and attribution of superhuman qualities did not stop with MGR but continues to date. For instance, recently shrines were built for actress Kushboo Sundar. This scenario reflects some key aspects of Weber's concept of charisma, such as the endowment with 'supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional power or qualities,' which are 'not accessible to the ordinary person' (1947, p. 358).

Cinematic celebrities in Tamil Nadu are revered as Gods, worshipped as prophets, and venerated as messiahs. As mentioned in the introduction, the admiration and adulation do not end there. Temples are built for the film stars by the poor in South India to worship them as Gods. Actors' divine qualities are attributed to their super-human roles in the films. In an interview with BBC, the notable author Arundhati Roy (YouTube 2011) points out that for the poor in India, who constitute about seventy percent of the population, no democratic institution is accessible. In such circumstances, the most democratised form of entertainment cinema, which also happens to be the cheapest and the chief source of entertainment in India, offers them a sense of hope amidst despair. They see

film stars as the reincarnations of their deities, who can bring about a change via their super-human powers and extraordinary prowess. In other words, film stars are capable of bringing about the most needed socio-economic transformation. Their allegiance to cinematic stars is growing stronger as the popular democratic institutions continue to be corrupt and fail to deliver by redeeming them from the brutal clutches of poverty. While super human qualities of the film stars are exhibited by the action packed spectacles, with death-defying scenes and hair-raising stunts, which resemble the mythical fights of the good versus evil, the 'extraordinary' traits of the 'heavenly bodies' are adulated by the fans through garlanding the posters and performing rituals for the banners carrying film stars' images (Appachi 2010). Celebrating the release of a new (or sometimes old) film of a favourite star through carnival-like decorations and by distributing sweets and worshiping the stars' cut-outs is *rite de passage* of fans in their attempt to prove their loyalty to the celebrity.

Revolutionary attributes

> *'The revolutionary urges of the masses,' writes Mythily Shivaraman in Mainstream, 'find a vicarious fulfilment in the movies while in reality they are denied a real-life forum for articulation. The close identification between the films and the party... creates the happy illusion among the people that the Government is on "their side."'*
>
> *Hardgrave 1973, p. 305*

For the poor in India, poverty is real but the solution becomes imaginary as the root cause lies in political corruption, caste hierarchy, and cultural hegemony. In such situations, people require a saviour, a crusader against corruption, and a revolutionary at least. Cinematic imagery becomes a source for

'the movement' that promises hope, and the film personalities who carry out the roles in their films become symbols of salvation and people's revolutionaries. For them, film stars are more than just role models. This particular aspect emphasises the characteristic feature of the Indian poor, desperation and the longing for someone to save them, which are evident in the honorary titles with which they affectionately adorn their favourite film celebrities. For instance, MGR was known as revolutionary leader (*Puratchi Thalaivar*), and Vijayakanth is called as revolutionary artist (*Puratchi Kalaignar*). These revolutionary attributes of film stars are derived from their roles in their respective films. Cinema is a tool of revolution with a promise of socio-economic uplift. For example, in action films, heroes protect the lives of the poor, provide safe havens to the women and the vulnerable, fight against institutional ignorance, save the helpless by serving them food and offer love and care to the needy and neglected. In doing so, film heroes overthrow the traditional forms of subordination. Menendez (2008, p. 226) makes this clear by saying that the charismatic domination transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms. Weber explains:

> In traditionally stereotyped periods, charisma is the greatest revolutionary force. The equally revolutionary force of 'reason' works from without by altering the situations of action, and hence its problems finally in this way changing men's attitudes toward them; or it intellectualise the individual. Charisma, on the other hand, may involve a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm (1947, p. 363).

Temporariness and routinisation of charisma

The pious popularity of the charismatic leaders is not indispensable. Cinematic fame is not permanent. An actor's fame can witness a meteoric rise and fall; for instance, when Rajinikanth's film *Baba* (dir. Suresh Krishna 2002) failed

to make a profit, the actor's fame was said to be waning. However, he was able to revive his fame with his subsequent blockbusters like *Chandramuki* (dir. P Vasu, 2005)*, Sivaji* (dir. S Shankar, 2007), and *The Robot* (*Endhiran*, dir. S Shankar, 2009). What this particular factor emphasises is that the nature of charisma is unstable and the 'magical' power of the leader may vanish, if the leader fails to impress upon his followers. In other words, a charismatic leader needs to prove his special qualities, consistently and constantly, in order to be followed. As Weber explains:

> By its very nature, the existence of charismatic authority is specifically unstable. The holder may forego his charisma; he may feel 'forsaken by his God,' as Jesus did on the cross; he may prove to his followers that 'virtue is gone out of him.' It is then that his mission is extinguished, and hope waits and searches for a new holder of charisma (Tucker 1968, p. 737).

To sustain their popularity and to keep their charisma intact, the actors try to engage in various activities such as charity work. Politics is the final destination of the cinematic celebrities in Tamil Nadu, which reminds us of, what Weber called, the 'routinisation of charisma.' Charismatic authority is 'inherently unstable; it either becomes traditionalised or rationalised' (Dow 1969, p. 312). In other words, by venturing into politics, film stars seek to legitimise their charisma. In the pursuit of legitimacy, film stars institutionalise their fans and followers by organising fan clubs.

Absence/problems of succession

Charisma is neither genetic nor hereditary as it is purely derived on the basis of the personal qualities of a leader. Charismatic leaders hardly have charismatic successors. As a result, there arises a succession crisis after the

demise of a charismatic leader. As Menendez (2008, p. 226) asserts, the absence of permanence and the problems of succession for the leader are the features of charisma. In the case of MGR, after his death, the AIADMK party witnessed a leadership vacuum and there were succession crises for the next two years. The turbulent times were resolved when Jayalalitha, an erstwhile actor and another charismatic leader, became the leader of the AIADMK party.

It is important to acknowledge the ways in which these star politicians construct their charisma to appeal the religiously plural Tamil society. Generally speaking, these stars integrate the major religions— Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism— in their stardom and project themselves as the embodiment of eclecticism. For example, although MGR remained irreligious in his films since his association with DMK Party, he embraced people from different religions in his characters. In the film *Moonrise* (*Chandhrodhayam*, dir. K Shankar 1964) MGR gives lip-synchrony to a song lyric:

> You know why were Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Gandhi born?
> Comrade, it is for 'us poor'.

One can see the all-encompassing approach of MGR through this song lyric. It is also important to see the visual field of the song where MGR walks along the homeless people in the rain, presumably leading them to a shelter. He carries a goat in his hands depicting his concerns for animal welfare; helps an old man, who falls down, depicting his care for the aged; and gives his hand to a labourer who has difficulties in pulling down a rickshaw highlighting his concerns for the working class.

The application of Max Weber's idea of charisma to Cinema Studies is relatively new. Dyer (2007, p. 82) was the first to emphasise the relevance of

charisma theory to star studies; the theory, however, had been tried and tested in sociology and political science. Even after many decades, the core components of charisma still hold relevance especially in the context of a young, diverse, and vibrant democracy such as India. The application of the concept of charisma to cinema is justified with an ongoing phenomenon of stars becoming politicians in the state of Tamil Nadu, where film actors are seen as charismatic leaders and the exit/demise of one charismatic film star ensures the birth of another, for instance after the death of MGR it is Jayalalitha. Another aspect to note here is that although actors may be physically mortal, their cinematic charisma is 'immortal' in the minds of the people (K Jeshi 2012). In this sense, they leave their legacy behind.

Richard Dyer: *Stars*

Broadly categorising stars as a social phenomenon, images, and signs, Dyer (1998) analyses a star as a person, character, auteur, text, self, role, an essence, and as a subject in his path-breaking book *Stars*. He examines actors such as Marlon Brando, Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich, Jane Fonda, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Robert Redford and John Wayne by looking at their characterisation in films.

Dyer (1998, p. 31) analyses *Stars* by situating charisma in the specificities of the ideological configurations. For instance, he argues, one needs to situate the image of Marilyn Monroe in the context of morality and sexuality in America in the 1950s. The image of a star is constructed through the various representations that he/she manifests, for instance, stars such as Brando and Wayne are always

represented as depicting a particular version of 'Americanism' in their faces, voices, and mannerisms. Furthermore, audiences construct social meanings through stars and their images and representations. While claiming that the relationship between stars/audience is intense among adolescents and women, he also points out further that it is of absolute importance among gay ghetto culture as they have similar common role and identity conflicts.

Looking at stars as a social phenomenon, Dyer (1998, pp. 18-20) reasons out their significations, their social realities, their relationship to other aspects of social structure and cultural values. Stars as representations of characters, as well as people as they relate what people are or are supposed to be. However, while analysing stars/audience relationship through the dialectic of production and consumption, Dyer concludes that audience role in shaping the phenomenon is very limited and mediated by and in ideology. To begin with, stars are idolised and seen as the embodiments of ideal ways of behaving.

One can draw parallels with the history of Tamil cinema here. While the Tamil stars are seen adulated and idolised, audiences search for 'realism' did not change their superhuman image, rather it was strengthened. In the case of MGR this can be seen clearly. As Dickey notes in a newspaper interview, people still did not accept that he was dead even two years after his death (D Karthikeyan 2009). Unlike in Hollywood, the adulation of film stars started in line with the beginning of the incorporation of social themes in Tamil cinema in the late-1940s.

Dyer extends the scope of image of stars by incorporating not just simple visual elements but a whole range of complex signs encompassing visual, verbal and aural aspects. Through the theory of stardom, he argues that stardom is the way of life of stars. For instance, Marlon Brando's dishevelled public appearances

and turbulent personal life was in line with his rebellious image. Dyer understands star actors such as Brando, Fonda and Taylor by means of 'ordinariness.' Similarly, Rajinikanth's public appearance with his bald head is his sign of stardom, signifying him as simple and humble. Dyer (1998, pp. 43-47) states that a star's simple appearance, extravagant lifestyle, rags-to-riches biography, romance, heterosexual monogamy or marital problems can make them look ordinary to audiences. This discourse establishes the link between the notion of ordinariness and the extraordinary image in regard to stars.

Particularly emphasising the star image, Dyer maintains that films are built around stars and their images. In majority of cases, stories are written for the stars by keeping a close eye on their image:

> The image is a complex totality and it does have a chronological dimension. What we need to understand that totality in its temporality is the concept of structured polysemy. By 'polysemy' is meant multiple but finite meanings and effects that a star image signifies (1998, p. 63).

Dyer also mentions that polysemy is structured and the images of stars convey multiple meanings, however, they are not endless and have temporal dimension. In this regard, he studies Jane Fonda by looking at the trajectory of her image, the way her gender and traditional values are situated between her father and brother, and affected by gossip, and her portrayal of sexuality.

The most fascinating aspect of Dyer's *Stars*, however, can be seen in his analyses of stars as signs. Using a fusion of sociological and semiotic analyses, Dyer proposes the following 'signs of character' in 'the construction of character' (1998, pp. 106-117).

Name

Dyer (1998) argues that a character's name suggests the personality traits of the stars. Furthermore, he claims, 'people speak of a character in a film as having the star's name' (p. 109). Tamil film titles are carefully selected in a way that is ideologically loaded using signs with associated meanings. The target audience of the Tamil films are the working class people. Therefore, the titles of the films and the protagonists carry working class titles. For instance, *The Farmer* (*Vivasaayi,* dir. Thirumugam, 1967) and *The Labourer* (*Thozhilali*, dir. Thirumugam, 1964) with MGR, *Maiden Mother* (*Kanni Thaai*, dir. Thirumugam, 1965) and *Virgin Lady* (*Kumari Penn*, dir. Ramanna, 1966) with Jayalalitha, *Annamalai* (dir. Suresh Krishna, 1992) and *Hard Worker* (*Uzhaippali,* dir. P Vasu, 1993) with Rajinikanth, *Super Power* (*Vallarasu*, dir. Maharajan, 2000) and *The Government* (*Arsaangam*, dir. Madhesh, 2008) with Vijayakanth, and *Coolie*, dir. P Vasu, 1995) and *The Master* (*Ayya*, dir Hari, 2005) with Sarathkumar. In the above examples, one can easily identify the cultural meanings, ideological leanings, and political tones of the films from the titles.

Audience foreknowledge

According to Dyer (1998), audience foreknowledge refers to the preconceptions about a character derived from their familiarity with the story, their relationship to paratextual documents like advertising, posters, and publicity, star/genre expectations, and critical accounts of films and so on. In the context of Tamil audiences' foreknowledge, it is 'star expectations' that is the most important of all. Dickey (1993, p. 52) aptly observes that the majority of Tamil films put the emphasis on melodrama by including songs, dances and fights. She

further states, 'Throughout India heroes and heroines have become very significant factors in a film's success.'

Appearance

The appearance of a character in a film indicates the personality through the physiognomy, dress and image of the star. Dyer (1998, p. 112) argues, 'The image of the star playing the character is carried in the star's physiognomy.' Apart from Jayalalitha who portrays conservative women in her film characters, all the Tamil stars in our analysis are action heroes. Hence their dress and make-up signify their characters and strength. Paradoxically, while the film titles and the story lines revolve around the working class culture, the costumes of the heroes set them apart. For instance, Rajinikanth in *Hard Worker* (*Uzhaippali*, 1993) wears an expensive jacket, shoes and sun glasses. The same feature can be seen in other actors' films as well.

Objective correlatives

Aspects such as decor and setting, montage and symbolism may be considered as *objective correlative*s. Dyer (1998) argues, 'A character's environment— whether a home or a general landscape — may be felt to express him/her (e.g. Bree's room in *Klute*, John Wayne's West. A film like *The Courtship of Eddie's father* uses this with a fair degree of schematisation (p. 112).' The landscape is a noticeable aspect of Tamil films. It is the landscape that underscores the binary oppositions such as rural–urban, rich–poor, tradition–modernity, and so on. The thesis deals with landscape in more detail in the subsequent chapters.

Speech of character

For Dyer (1998), 'what a character says and how s/he says it indicate personality both directly (what a character says about him/herself) and indirectly (what a character betrays about him/herself). More importantly we are inclined to trust our perception of the latter than the character (p. 112).' In the case of Tamil stars this assumes significance. The actors deliver one-liners, locally known as 'punch dialogues,' in films. The one-liners reflect the personality of the stars, often serving as intertextual references to their current political and professional situations.

Speech of others

Dyer (1998) explains that, 'what other characters say of a character, and how they say it, may indicate a personality trait of that character and/or the characters speaking (p. 112).' In regard to Tamil films, the protagonists are always surrounded by a group of admirers, who keep praising him. Besides the group of admirers, the Tamil hero's strength and goodness are asserted through songs and dialogues from other characters.

Gesture

Dyer (1998) takes the vocabulary of gesture according to formal (that is, recognised to be governed by social rules) and informal (or involuntary) codes, as the indicators of personality and temperament. However, the emphasis is on the later as it allows one to understand the character's 'true' self. Tamil stars in this thesis have their own unique gestures, whether it is MGR's hand movement, Jayalalitha's sexuality, Rajinikanth's cigar flicking style, Vijayakanth's angry eyes, or Sarathkumar's muscular body.

Action

Action, referring to what a character does in the plot, is an important aspect of Tamil films as the cinematic charisma of an actor is constructed through his film actions (what he does in the plot). In this way stars construct their image as saviours and do-gooders. Pandian explains:

> A characteristic MGR role was that of a working man attempting to combat everyday oppression. Thus, he had acted as peasant, fisherman, rickshaw-puller, carter, gardener, taxi driver, quarry worker, circus artiste, shoe-shine boy, cowherd, etc. In fact, many successful MGR's films get their titles from these occupational groups (1992, p. 39).

The tradition of titling films with names to conjure up an image of the working class, and the actions of the heroes in catering to the needs of the poor, starting from MGR continues till today.

Mise-en-scène

Dyer (1998) refers to *mise-en-scène* as 'the cinematic rhetoric of lighting, colour, framing, composition and the placing of actors' (p. 117). *Mise-en-scène* in Tamil films is discussed in the following chapters with reference to the particular films.

Application to Tamil Films

As we can clearly see from the above discussion, the application of Dyer's 'the signs of character in films' fits well with the choice of five Tamil screen icons for the analysis. These 'signs of character' can be contextualised to Tamil actors in order to understand the construction of charisma through their cinematic characterisation.

Furthermore, one of the noticeable features in the engagement of film stars with politics is the way they negotiate their on-screen image with their off-screen persona. Throughout their careers, these stars maintain their filmic image as simple individuals with an extraordinary understanding of the plights of the poor and are always there to help the poor and needy.

In his more recent work, *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer (2004) focuses on the lives, careers and the construction of the screen image of three of Hollywood's most globally popular cinematic celebrities: Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson, and Judy Garland. The three different stars represent three different identities: Monroe as a victim of patriarchy, Robeson as a black icon, and Garland as a gay stalwart. Furthermore, Dyer (2004, p. 10) talks about the distinguishable representation of 'real self' and 'reel self, where he differentiates the representation of private and public selves, otherwise known as on- and off-screen persona, through the typology of binary opposition. This is true in the case of Tamil actors as well. Unlike actors in the west, Tamil actors maintain their cinematic integrity in real life; for instance, Rajinikanth is known for his simplicity with a monogamous and non-controversial real life image.

This thesis seeks particularly to extend Dyer's (2004, p. 24) analysis on Monroe to Jayalalitha. Like Monroe, Jayalalitha was a 'taboo-breaker'. The image of Jayalalitha as a victim of patriarchy and male-chauvinism, her innocence, vulnerability, sexuality, and her intimacy with MGR and later with another actor Shoban Babu, and her guiltless rebellion against heterosexual monogamy can be placed alongside Monroe's popular appeal. The film career and personal image of Jayalalitha, like Monroe, was cultivated and shaped within the discursive and ideological context of Tamil society.

Dyer's book *White* (1997) focuses on the representation of white people in white western culture. By revolving around the photographic and filmic representations of whiteness, he deals with the personal, political, theoretical and thematic issues and problems of white representation. While dealing with the white body, his primary concerns are films such as *Tarzan* and *Rambo*, but the discussion is not exclusive to these texts. Dyer analyses the British television serial, *The Jewel in the Crown* (dir. O'Brien & Morahan 1984) to examine the representation of white in the context of British India. Alongside genre analysis, he looks at the racial, gender, and religious aspects of this fourteen-episode television program. Dyer argues that *The Jewel in the Crown* depicts a glowingly positive image of India while simultaneously disclosing the conventional colonial perspective. India is the most prestigious possession of all in the British Empire; yet at the same time:

> India is a country of endemic, atavistic violence no more than kept at bay under the Raj; the failure of the Raj is the failure to change this, to civilise Indians out of their lethal tribal and fundamentalist loyalties (1997, pp. 195-196).

The so-called conventional colonial views exist not just at the level of white British towards Indians, but also of the fair-skinned North Indians towards the predominantly dark-skinned South Indians and of fair-skinned upper caste Brahmins towards dark-skinned low-caste people. As Dyer (1997, p. 20) notes sarcastically, the North Indians and Brahmins are of Aryan origin. Their fair-skin is considered to be beautiful and affords them privilege. The actors in this thesis, such as MGR and Jayalalitha, are acclaimed for their fair skinned beauty. Therefore, Dyer's white discourse on the privilege of the white people in the western society can be extended to Tamil society, where fair-skin is a sign of

privilege in a predominantly dark-skinned society. As discussed in Chapter Three, the roots of the relative advantage of fair-skinned people in Tamil society can be traced to British colonialism, where white was 'the sphere of power and history'(Dyer 1997, p. 197).

Graeme Turner: narratives and nationalism

In his book, *Understanding Celebrity*, Graeme Turner explains the distinction between stars and celebrities:

> John Langer (1981), many years ago, proposed such a distinction: that film created stars, while television created personalities. Stars develop their reputation by playing someone else (2004, p. 15).

Considering celebrities as commodities, Turner looks at the production and consumption of celebrities and their social functions. By historicising and contextualising them, Turner provides an insight into the plethora of celebrities— cinematic, sports, royal, DIY and so forth— in the contemporary mediatised culture. In *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (1986), Turner examines the roots of Australian narratives which go back to 'the nationalism and cultural cringe focusing on contemporary Australian life' (1986, p. 129). He explores the homology between film and fiction. The relevance of his argument to the Tamil context is demonstrated in the homology between film and theatre as mentioned in the introduction.

While analysing nationalism in Australian narratives, Turner (1986, p. 112) views nationalism as an ideology and its cultural function is not to define Australia as a real entity but to represent Australia as an ideological construction. Turner is also aware that this approach to nationalism has not necessarily been

accepted or appropriated by literary critics. However, Turner believes that narratives are by-products of culture as they represent values, beliefs and sentiments by generating meanings through their articulations. By adopting an inter-disciplinary approach with culture as his focal point to understand nationalism, Turner looks into two types of narratives- literature and film. He declares that Australian national fictions draw their sources from myths and discourses. He furthers his argument that these myths and discourses perform ideological tasks as they carry national character and identity. Even the contemporary representation of Australian nationalism has its 'cultural currency' in the bush legend of the 1890s.

Therefore, there is continuity in the depiction of Australian identity in the 19th century narratives to the contemporary narratives even though the definition of national identity has never been static. However, Turner disagrees with the view that nationalism presupposes hegemony. He says that nationalism can also be seen as a positive and resistant ideology. In other words, representing nationalism is not only an act of authentic assertion of national identity but also a sign of cultural maturity commensurate with the end of colonialism. Australian films depict nationalism by projecting landscape, portraying Australians as underdogs, glorifying bush legends, addressing mateship and advocating egalitarianism. By citing films such as *Breaker Morant* (dir. Beresford 1980) and *Gallipoli* (dir. Weir 1981), Turner says that Australian films glorified bush legends as a tool to distinguish Australian cultural identity and values from British. These films depict Australians as men of common authentic values who are constantly suppressed and tormented by the British authorities. In comparison with *Breaker Morant* and *Gallipoli, The Man from Snowy River* (dir. Miller 1982)

is more celebrated for its nationalist assertion. Turner, however, questions the authenticity of Australian-ness in this film for a number of reasons, including its two American protagonists, and the fact that film seems to be an example of the golden years of Hollywood rather than evidencing the 'renaissance' of Australia. Unlike the other two films, *The Man from Snowy River* (1982) did not rely upon the comparison with British. In this context, Turner talks about 'popularity':

> The notion of 'popularity' is open to several constructions; one can see it simply in terms of large scale commercial success, while another can see it as a resistant, subversive expression of the needs of a subordinated class. Popular art in this second formulation is a rejection of the dominant bourgeois ideology, and such a view of the popular could explain some for the critical response to *Snowy River* (1990, p. 125).

Turner believes that there is connectivity between artistic quality and cultural impact. He argues that the meaning of nationalism gets affected in 'soap opera' films more than 'quality' films as the form and style varies in both genres. In quality films the political dimension of nationalism is incorporated more than in soap opera. For instance, both *Gallipoli* and *The Man from Snowy River* highlighted nationalism; it was *Gallipoli* that was admired for its aesthetic presentation of nationalism.

Turner (1986) sees the peculiarities of the Australian version of nationalism as an ideology that has been intact since the 1890s. In other words, the idea of what constitutes Australian-ness has not yet lost its charm. However, Turner opines that the modern idea of Australian nationalism is 'more sophisticated', than it was in 1890s. While authenticating film and fiction as contributors to a larger ideological system, he criticises the fact that the similarities are being over-emphasized while differences are least addressed.

Turner (1986, p. 59), for instance, mentions, 'The representation of the barrenness of the Australian social context is also common in the major novels of the literary tradition— *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*— while the personal sacrifices necessary for survival on the land documented in the short fiction of Lawson, Baynton, and Rudd also litter the productions of the Australian film industry from Director Longford's *On Our Selection* (1920) to Miller's *The Man From Snowy River* (1982).'

Turner argues that there is a tendency to view literary fiction as an elite, privileged form while the feature film is produced by an industry for commercial purposes. Turner says that the reason for this stereotype is due to the fact that it was literary critics, who ventured into film criticism in the early days of film studies. He states further that film is 'often seen as an unproblematic medium as film has been systematically mistaken for the literature' (1986, p. 16). He cautions that that the relationship between film and literature is not uncomplicated. For example, he says that characterisation in film is radically different as film stars do have an ontological function in film.

In the process of asserting Australian national identity, it becomes imperative to distinguish Australian-ness from British. The difference lies not only in terms of usage of words but also in the way of life. For instance Turner says that while Australians 'sunbake', the English 'sunbathe'. The difference lies not merely in their meanings but also speaks a lot about landscape, culture, and lifestyles of each. He says:

> English nature is under control; it is orderly, and one may abandon oneself to it. Australian nature, on the other hand, is harsh, hostile; and the enjoyment of it depends on proving that one can survive its worst excesses (Turner 1986, p. 19).

Films depict and reflect the same type of national difference. Comparison does not just end there. Turner goes on to distinguish between Australian and American heroes. This assumes significance as all speak English and appear to be the same for an outsider's eyes. But there is an undercurrent that flows and pulls in three different directions. It is also to be noted that it was the British who settled and colonised both. Interestingly, what is being witnessed in both American and Australian narratives are their assertion of identity in order to make them unique and different from the British. For Australian narratives, the task is dual; they need to set apart themselves from both identities— British and American. Turner explains:

> [Australian films] are far more modest, preferring to define the individual as a battler against overwhelming odds which cannot be defeated even if they are confronted head-on, but which will allow survival if he/she suffers the indignities without asserting resentment. This individual is victim, a consumer of history, rather a participant in its course (1986, p. 21).

Having made an analogy between Australian and other forms of national narratives, Turner looks into the binaries in Australian narratives, namely 'country versus city, rural versus urban, nature versus society' (Turner 1986, p. 25). According to him this dialectic is a choice of preference in the radical nationalist position.

With regard to landscape in terms of addressing the idea of nationalism, Turner (1986, p. 28) compares the treatment of land by both narratives— fiction and film. Turner believes that in both film and fiction country life is glorified more than its urban counterpart. Rural life is not only beautiful but also brings in challenges. The reality of the land is harshness and the secret of survival rests upon accepting its hostile and harsh nature. Turner also argues that it was bush

legend that was the central theme of the early films and on which Australian film image was built and presented. Turner (1986, p. 29) claims, 'Certainly it is clear that our film-makers, just like our writers and painters, see the Australian landscape as more distinctive, more of a cinematic exotic, and thus they present more of it on the screen.' Turner emphatically carries forward this argument by referring to films such as *The Mango Tree* (dir. Dobson 1973), *The Irishman* (dir. Crombie 1978) and *All The Rivers Run* (dir. Miller & Amerta 1983), which in his words, 'exist for almost no other purpose,' than to display the landscape ((Turner 1986, p. 29).

During his analysis on 'the self in context,' Turner (1986, p. 54) quotes with approval Docker's 'gloom thesis,' and 'metaphysical ascendancy.' In this context Turner (1986, p. 57) applies the concept of the gloom thesis to Australian film, with some caution though. Turner also points out that although film criticism in Australia has grown out of literary criticism, the former has taken a different direction by drawing influences from the post-modernist, materialist, Marxist and structuralist theories. Turner says that these ideas are to be found in the narrative styles of self in Australian films. For instance, individuals are portrayed as alienated, isolated and with a growing disaffection with the society, while the narration of the landscape as an ambivalent entity offers the twin possibilities-freedom and defeat.

So far as the narration of self in Australian cinema is concerned, Turner detects a similarity between fiction and film. He says that while the protagonists are individuated and portrayed with their personal conflicts, they are also shown as powerless in relation to external social forces. He says that there is a 'sense of disconnection between self and society' in the film *Stir* (dir. Wallace 1980); in the

relationship between white and black worlds as shown in the film and the novel, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (dir. Schepisi 1978); and the indifference between the outside world and prison as portrayed in the film, *In Search of Anna* (dir. Storm 1979).

Turner also claims that death and suicide are widely prevalent in Australian narratives. In addition, Australian narratives revolve around convicts and imprisonment; both of which images are also related to the concerns for freedom, escape, subjection, and alienation. Turner argues that imagery of imprisonment is not only confined to Australian narratives but also evident in the industrialised Europe and Foucauldian analysis of social control wherein he argues that technology acts as prison in the industrialised societies.

The reason for looking into Australian screen narratives on nationalism is to find out the possibilities of drawing parallels between Tamil cinema and Australian cinema. It is true that these distant nations are different— politically, socially, economically and culturally— and their sense of identity, characterisation, and narration are diverse. However, Tamil Nationalism is used as an effective tool in Tamil cinema to represent Tamil-ness as Australian nationalism is used in Australian cinema to represent Australian-ness. Likewise, there are other similarities in these two different national narratives. While the ideas like 'bush-legend', 'mate-ship', 'convictism', 'British hegemony', 'landscape', and the 'city-outback divide' are often found in Australian narratives, these themes are in fact echoed, respectively, in Tamil narratives through 'ballads', 'brotherhood', 'casteism', 'North-Indian cultural hegemony', 'land as a form of mediation in films', and the 'rural-urban dichotomy.'

Hardgrave: symbiotic relationship of Tamil cinema and politics

Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., was the first scholar to study the interplay between film and politics in Tamil Nadu. Hardgrave demonstrates in *Politics and the Film in Tamil Nadu: The Stars and the DMK* that film stars' participation in Tamil politics had 'a touch of California' (1973, p. 289). He argues that South Indian politics has been hugely influenced by cinema, more than their North Indian counterpart. He also traces the historical link between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu to the early 1930s. He argues that invariably all political parties in Tamil Nadu, including the Congress Party, have used film stars to woo the masses, although some of the prominent leaders in the Congress Party such as C. Rajagopalachari (a former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu), regarded cinema 'as a source of moral corruption' (Hardgrave 1973, p. 289). However, Hardgrave argues that it was the DMK party that most identified and capitalised on the enormous potentiality of the film industry and the charisma of the stars such as MGR.

Hardgrave observes that soon after launching his political outfit in 1949, CN Annadurai, himself a scriptwriter and actor, invited theatre artists and film actors to join his party and a number of film stars, writers and lyricists soon joined the party. Annadurai had a strong influence over theatre artists with his inspirational writing skills and many theatre artists also belonged to the non-Brahmin castes. As writers infused party ideologies into films, the presence of actors attracted and brought in crowds to party meetings. Thus, as Hardgrave (1973) states, 'Some stars, like MGR and SS Rajendran, converted their

popularity on the screen into successful bids for seats in the Legislative Assembly' (p. 290).

Hardgrave notes that as DMK party leaders were associated with cinema one way or the other, they wrote extensively on socio-political-religious themes and stars carried out the messages through their films. With the advent of the DMK into the Tamil film industry in 1949–50 a stage was set for a new era in Tamil society. Party founder and leader CN Annadurai had written about 30 film scripts and Karunanidhi, who succeeded Annadurai in 1969 and still heading the DMK Party, is also a scriptwriter whose dialogues are still well received. Hardgrave refers to the two prominent films that were hugely popular in 1950s: *The Housemaid* (1949) and *The Goddess* (1952). These two films deal with social themes and attacks on religious dogma. Hardgrave asserts:

> Their films were vehicles for both social reform and party propaganda. Their themes were of widow-remarriage, untouchability, the self-respect marriage, Zamindari abolition, prohibition, and religious hypocrisy (1973, p. 293).

Quoting an interview with Murasoli Maran, one of the prominent leaders of the DMK, Hardgrave argues that without cinema the DMK party might not have achieved such phenomenal success. He claims further that the government noticed the DMK party's use of cinema and tried to stop it by means of various legislation and censorship such as The Dramatic Licensing Act of 1876. Nonetheless, the DMK used double-meaning dialogues and ideological symbols such as the party's colours of black and red in background scenes in order to escape the shackles of censorship. Being a Tamil ethnic national party, the DMK also used period films to glorify Tamil culture and culture.

Comparing the two prominent actors MGR and Sivaji Ganesan (also known as Sivaji), Hardgrave says that Sivaji kept politics away from his films while MGR embraced politics wholeheartedly. Sivaji had a deeply-rooted religious loyalty that separated him from the atheist DMK. Hardgrave mentions that in the early days, both actors provided financial support for the DMK party (1973, p. 296). Both in theatre and cinema, DMK had a number of sympathisers and ideological supporters. For instance, actors like NS Krishnan, gave moral support with their presence along with the DMK leaders, and although these actors did not formally join the party, their association helped in popularising the party, which was in a nascent stage. Regarding the image of MGR, Hardgrave describes it as follows:

> Known as Vadhiyar, (teacher), Puratchi Nadigar, ('revolutionary actor'), and as Makkal Thilagam, ('idol of the masses'), MGR is the symbol of hope for the poor in south India. He supports orphanages and schools and is always the first to give for disaster relief. After torrential rains in Madras, he gave raincoats to 6,000 rickshaw men. He is seen as 'one among the people', 'the incarnation of goodness', 'the poor man's avatar'. MGR's generosity is well advertised, for it is the grist of his fame. Every contribution to his philanthropic image is an investment in his continued popularity and following among the masses (1973, p. 298).

Hardgrave states that in MGR's films the hero is a pure, virtuous, valiant protector of the good and the vanguard of justice. Moreover, the image of MGR as an actor and a man in real life are seen as the same by his fans (Hardgrave 1973, p. 298). MGR carried out political messages in all his films so that by the time of the death of Annadurai, MGR's popularity outshone that of the DMK party. The popularity of MGR challenged other leaders, who felt threatened and worked against him within the party, until the bitter rivalry culminated in the DMK's

expulsion of MGR, who subsequently launched his own political party AIDMK in 1972.

In his study, Hardgrave (1973) interviewed various film personalities-cum-politicians, party leaders, party members, fans and public, using random surveys on film and society in Tamil Nadu to compare and analyse film star preference and political party support. He found that those who supported MGR voted for DMK and those who preferred Sivaji voted for the Congress Party. Hardgrave concludes that the relationship between Tamil cinema and politics is strong and highly 'symbiotic'.

Baskaran: cinema and society

Baskaran (2009) traces the link between film and politics, and film as a form of entertainment in a predominantly illiterate and economically poor Tamil society. He notes that cinema was introduced into south India in the early years of the twentieth century as a new form of entertainment where people flocked into cinema halls merely out of curiosity in order to see the moving pictures. As far as the cultural ambience of Tamil society was concerned, traditional music and arts, like, carnatic music, classic arts and *Kathakalatchebam* (musical narration) were predominant. However, film as a medium of new entertainment surpassed all other forms of traditional arts and began influencing people in matters of nationalism, social reforms and war and started to shape public opinion even during the colonial days. Baskaran states that the intensity of this influence was unprecedented.

Baskaran looks at the influence of films in Tamil society in its socio-cultural context. Indian society is vertically stratified and hierarchically defined. Power, prestige, privilege, rewards and occupation are all decided and determined by the social stratification as a result of caste. Film is no exception to this. Baskaran claims that in its initial days, cinema was seen as a medium for low-caste, low-class and illiterate people. Baskaran finds the reason for this stereotype in the seemingly democratic nature of cinema halls that allowed even 'untouchable castes' into its premises. This development along the establishment of railways, postal services and establishment of mills witnessed the emerging middle and working-class population, for whom cinema became the major source of entertainment. It was not only elites who viewed cinema with disgust but the popular print media also failed to recognize cinema in the early days. Baskaran explains:

> The popularity of cinema among the workers was another reason for the elitist apathy towards cinema. It was seen as an entertainment of the working class that did not deserve any serious notice (2009, p. 112).

It is, however, argued that apathy towards cinema was not only in South India but it was also well documented in other parts of the world. For instance, Baskaran mentions, the Catholic Legion of Decency in America and British writer such as George Bernard Shaw who ridiculed cinema and viewed cinema as a source of moral corruption.

Baskaran affirms that migration from the theatre world to the cinema world started with the beginning of talkies. He mentions that as early talkies were just remakes of dramas, film makers needed theatre artists, lyric-writers, stunt heroes and so forth from drama companies. Hence the exodus from

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drama industry to the film industry as films began rapidly replacing the dominance of drama as a main source of entertainment. However, Baskaran criticises the intelligentsia for failing to understand, appreciate and recognise the cultural meaning and social importance of this new popular medium. Similarly, the British government that was ruling India during that time was concerned about the public safety if there were fire threats, since films were screened in tents made out of canvas, or law and order problems related to the masses that gathered to watch the films.

According to Baskaran there are two events that brought respectability to cinema among academia and elites, namely, the entry of classical musicians and the genre of patriotic films. The practice of introducing nationalistic symbols, such as *charka* (spinning wheel), and Gandhi's characteristic white cotton hat, began even during the silent era itself. Nonetheless it was the Non-cooperation Movement of 1919, which gave impetus to use cinema for political propaganda. In terms of political activism in cinema, Baskaran explains:

> When artists from the world of company drama, with its tradition of political activism, came into cinema, they brought with them a repertoire of plays and songs with political overtones. In the wake of the Civil Disobedience movement, when the struggle for independence gained a fresh momentum, there was an increased reflection of patriotic ideas in films (2009, p. 118).

While talking about films with patriotic sentiments, Baskaran (2009, pp. 118-119) explains that films were mushrooming with Gandhian ideals such as the abolition of untouchability, temple entry for all castes, and urging the people to use domestic goods and clothes instead of foreign made products. Songs, dialogues, and characterisations were expressly made with the purpose of addressing these issues and propagating nationalistic sentiments. Numerous films

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were made with anti-colonial overtones, for instance, *The Lion from the Low-caste* (*Harijana Singam*, dir. Mani 1938), *National Development* (*Desa Munnetram*, dir. Mahindra 1938), and *The Earth of Sacrifice* (*Thyagabhoomi*, dir. Subramanyam 1939). This development initiated discourses among the academic elite about cinema, in turn acknowledging the importance of cinema as an influential medium in Tamil society. Nevertheless, Baskaran refers to Gandhi's dismissive views on cinema. For Gandhi, cinema was evil, like gambling or horse-racing. Another nationalist leader from Tamil Nadu, Rajagopalachari also viewed cinema as poison to the society. Consequently, Congress leaders and party men derided cinema. Interestingly one of the nationalist leaders, Swaminatha Sharma, who was also a journalist, is said to have quoted Hitler's statement that any art or literature that causes disrepute to the nation should be repressed by legal enforcements.

Baskaran observes the increasing importance of cinema among the people during the post-independence era of the 1950s. Among various reasons that facilitated the popularity of cinema among the poor and people in the outback, the arrival of electricity supply (locally known as rural-electrification) was the major reason. The concept of touring-talkies, which brought cinema to the remote rural areas in mobile vans, was yet another reason for the democratisation of cinema. This resulted in a situation where it was impossible to ignore the presence of cinema. Although writers started to refer to films and cinema halls, they used pseudonyms as it was considered a taboo subject and demeaned the writers' positions.

It was within this context that Dravidian politics entered the world of cinema. To Baskaran, it was the Dravidian leaders who realized the power and

potential of cinema in shaping and structuring the public mind. It was Annadurai's entry, a popular playwright of the day, into the cinema that set a stage for the plethora of DMK writers to enter the film industry. The revolutionary rhetoric and flowery dialogues of these films were the major attractions for the masses, and the presence of DMK became phenomenal with the success of stars like MGR.

MSS Pandian: MGR as a modern day political myth

One of the renowned post-colonial scholars from Tamil Nadu, MSS Pandian, provides a detailed account of MGR in his *MG Ramachandran in Film and Politics: The Image Trap* (1992). By naming him 'the modern day political myth' (1992, p. 11), MSS Pandian examines the saga of MGR from his birth through his cinematic entry until his death. He argues that through characterisation, dialogues, lyrics and songs MGR targeted all sections of the society, especially 'the subaltern' (a post-colonial term of South Asian origin that refers to the people who fall outside the sphere of caste-class-gender hegemony).

Pandian points out that the *mise-en-scène* in MGR's films is carefully constructed in such a way that subaltern people can identify themselves with the role of MGR. He gives a detailed account of *The Labourer* (*Thozhilali*, dir. MA Thirumugam 1964) to explain the ideologically-laden *mise-en-scène* in MGR's films. In the film MGR drinks gruel (locally known as *kacha* food) from an earthen pot and licks pickle from his fingers in much the same way as a typical low-caste agricultural labourer. By referring to many films in this regard, Pandian illustrates how MGR reflected the poverty and struggles of the poor in their daily lives. By eating gruel with the poor, MGR identified himself as one among them.

MGR even intervened in the film making process by altering the storylines, dialogues, lyrics and even camera angles, empowered through his financial control over the industry. With this 'he was able to mark or mar the producer,' Pandian argues, 'MGR had a clear idea about the values and virtues of Tamil society, which enabled him to create emotional oneness between himself and the common people' (1992, p. 101).

In order to identify with the masses, a cinematic hero needs to establish himself with the popular beliefs and mingle with the prevailing myths of the society. The ballad is a device that is immensely popular and can be orally transmitted from generation to generation. Pandian explores the link between the roles of MGR and the pre-existence of ballads in Tamil society, especially among the subaltern people, who constitute the majority of the population. He argues that MGR's film roles resonated with ballad heroes. So that the subaltern people could identify themselves with MGR, the link that ultimately provided a political platform for MGR:

> The hero's invincibility on the screen acquires a certain authenticity and appears credible not merely because of the dream-like experience that film-watching essentially is, but equally because the subaltern consciousness most often dwells in the interface between the impossible myth and possible history (1992, p. 45).

Pandian observes not only the similarities of the heroic ballads and MGR's films but also the discrepancies. For instance, while the heroes in these ballads face untimely and unfortunate deaths masterminded by the landlords and upper caste people, in his films, MGR emerges victorious over the upper caste/class people/power. Moreover, in his films, while there is no total elimination of the system, the landlords eventually change their minds and become 'good citizens'.

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In a way, the caste/class hierarchy remains unchanged. Social transformations in MGR's films are only symbolic not structural. Pandian traces the reason for this situation in MGR's films to the power of elite, upper class people and their ability to manipulate things to suit their interests and keep the hierarchical system intact.

Paradoxically, the success and failure of a cinematic hero is largely dependent upon the back up from the upper-castes. Tamil cinema is thus quite fragmentary in terms of class relations. While those who make films are upper caste/class elite, those who watch them are lower caste/class people. Pandian argues that the success of MGR along with the lines of ballad heroes is primarily due to the back-up from the elite section of the society. In a composite yet diversified caste society like Tamil Nadu, caste is always a crucial factor in political success. If someone needs to have all-caste appeal, he needs to be someone who does not belong to any caste, thus MGR— who was a non-Tamil by birth— was acceptable to the elites of all castes. Hence, Pandian asserts that MGR enjoyed the support of the Tamil elites as well, during the initial days of his career. On the contrary, MGR's contemporary, Sivaji Ganesan failed to gain such an acceptance in Tamil society as he was identified with a particular caste of southern Tamil Nadu.

The successful creation and sustenance of the screen persona is also achieved with and bolstered by political endorsements as well as simultaneously substantive support from the other forms of media. Pandian claims that MGR created his screen image so meticulously, so that it was also endorsed by the DMK party and the press. MGR's screen image was also strengthened by the carefully constructed biographies that made the subaltern people see no difference between the reel MGR and real MGR. These biographies reinforced

his 'subalternity', as his early days were full of misery and pain. He was also projected as the 'renouncer' of the world far ahead of his becoming the chief minister. What this shows is how all this accounts for an undisputed place and position for MGR among the 'subaltern' masses (MSS Pandian 1992, p. 98).

Understanding the values and articulating one's image in consonance with those important social value systems is very important in asserting one's identity among the poor, which ultimately clears the way for playing a leadership role. Pandian states that by affirming and asserting the ideals and values such as avoidance of alcohol, negligence of smoking, reverence to mothers and elder members of the family and by engaging in violence against the elites, MGR could captivate the subaltern society with various other forms of mediation. The hero in a MGR film is the one who emerges victorious from the subaltern struggles; he is well educated, well-dressed, well-mannered, respects woman and he never engages in sexual violence, whereas heroines in his films have no other job than helping the hero and longing for his love. Her job is just to love the hero, MGR. In this context, Pandian (1992) repeatedly argues that although MGR's films opposed the dowry system and *hypergamy* (sociological term meaning low-caste girl marries an upper-caste man) his films validated male-chauvinism, patriarchy, chastity and purity of woman, and marital shackles for women.

Pandian further argues that the 'social universe in MGR's films is (of) asymmetrical power' (1992, p. 42). By applying the idea of binary opposition such as rich and poor, Pandian considers that power relations are all-pervasive in MGR's films. He lists the predominance of three signs in MGR's films, 'the authority to dispense justice and exercise violence, access to literacy/education and access to women (1992, p. 42). Furthermore, he observes that although MGR

portrayed women as helpless subjects of male dominated society, his films did offer some sort of liberation in terms of 'voyeurism' (MSS Pandian 1992, p. 82). Likewise, MGR's films also give primacy to the role of the mother, as is reflected in the titles of the films, for instance, *It Is Wife After Your Mother* (*Thaikkupin Thaaram*, dir. MA Thirumugam 1956), *Do Not Disobey Your Mother* (*Thaai Sollai Thattaathe*, dir. MA Thirumugam 1961), *The Son Who Saved His Mother* (*Thaayai Katha Thanayan*, dir. MA Thirumugam 1964), *On Mother's Lap* (*Thaayin Madiyil*, dir. KR Balan 1964), *The Divine Mother* (*Deiva Thai*, dir. P Madhavan 1964).

In MGR's films, as Pandian (1992) observes, the hero hails from the lower caste/class background and often ends up marrying an upper caste/class woman. It is the subaltern hero, who emerges victorious as upper caste/class villain always comes in the way. Such filmic logic operates within a broader social setting of Tamil culture. Caste society is comparatively a closed society, wherein mobility is limited. Nonetheless climbing up in the social stratum is an incurable drive of any human being. Marrying someone from the upper caste is a distant possibility but a dream of almost all lower caste people. Tamil society is not only patriarchal, but also polygynous and sexual relations are mediated, dictated, and dominated primarily through caste/class. It is not uncommon to see an upper caste landlord raping lower caste labour women, often wives of his labourers. The victims just kept quiet and underwent the sufferings as defiance meant the end of making a living. In this context, Pandian views MGR's relationship with women on the screen as another important sign of authority in his films.

Distribution of justice is another area wherein dominant caste exercises its authority over the lower caste people. Even in the institutionalised justice system,

it is the dominant castes who occupy the helm of affairs due their educational and economic advantages. Consequently, it is not only social justice but also legal justice, which predominantly favours the rich and mighty. With their lack of education, awareness and limited opportunities, poor people accept whatever comes in their way. Pandian satirically remarks that MGR faces all odds and injustices but he eventually overcomes all, including establishing his own version of justice against humanly impossible hurdles. Pandian exemplifies this with stunt scenes in MGR's films:

> 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 explain 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 (Sivathamby 1981, p. 38).

In Tamil Nadu, subaltern people and women are the dominant and dependable vote banks. Pandian argues that through his films MGR could successfully speak to both these sections of the society. Having played the roles that gave hope to the subaltern and women, MGR also engaged in charity activities through his fan clubs. As fan clubs were taking care of charity works in real life, MGR could build the bridge between his screen image and real image.

The discussion on MGR's political ascendancy would not be complete without mentioning the Dravidian movement, the DMK party and their appropriation of theatre and cinema. It is also debatable whether MGR benefited by DMK or DMK benefited by MGR's popularity. By citing the interviews of politicians and other observations, Pandian mentions that once MGR left the DMK, the latter were unable to come to power until the death of the former.

Pandian also observes that DMK inspired films juxtaposed visuals and clips of party activities and functions. Having said that, Pandian also refers to several other films that carried political messages, in which MGR acted as protagonist. He says that MGR overwhelmingly splashed the colours black and red, which are also the colours of DMK, across the screen for instance in *Good Brother* (1949), *The Housemaid* (1949), *Mysterious Sage* (*Marmayogi*, dir. Ramnoth 1951), *The Dictator* (*Sarvathikari*, dir. TR Sundaram 1951), *The Emperor's Daughter* (*Chakravarthi Thirumagal*, dir. P Neelakantan 1957), *Gateway to Paradise* (*Sorga Vasal*, dir. A Kasilingam 1954), *Nadodi Mannan*, and *The Sacred Thread Tied by Mother to the Daughter* (*Thai Magalukku Kattiya Thali*, dir. RR Chandran 1959). Pandian refers to these films as examples of overtly propagandist films inspired by the *Dravidar Kalagam* (DK) and the DMK party (1992, p. 34). Pandian further mentions that food and costumes in MGR's films 'erased the difference between the hero and the subaltern masses/audiences' (1992, p. 42).

The practice of deification is deeply rooted in Tamil Nadu where it is 'a generalised religious-cultural practice' of the subaltern people, 'particularly among non-Brahmin middle and lower caste groups.' He further strengthens this argument by stating that the practice of deification of human beings was also 'promoted' by the political elites of Tamil Nadu. The deification of MGR is yet another dimension of MGR's image. During and after his reign as a cinema star, MGR's cut-outs were garlanded, sculptures were erected in busy areas, and temples were built (MSS Pandian 1992, p. 132). To this day, MGR shrines exist in Tamil Nadu.

Pandian concludes that 'the success of MGR is a failure of Tamil Nadu' (1992, p. 144), because during MGR's tenure Tamil Nadu witnessed a range of human rights violations along with the centralisation of power, maladministration, political corruption, bureaucratic excess, police brutality, the suppression of press freedom, and a stagnant economy. Yet, MGR could not be defeated. Pandian finds that the reason in the way he built his image, made subaltern people believe that MGR is good but those working under him were preventing and appropriating his good deeds from reaching them. In his films, MGR provides the socio-economic and political situation of Tamil Nadu, which played a pivotal role in the elevation of MGR as 'an idea' (1992, p. 129). MGR was also very clever and cunning in utilising state machinery for keeping his image intact. For instance, Pandian notes a famous mid-day meals program in this context. The program was a state-funded one but the publicity was such that people believed that the program was an outcome of MGR's generosity (1992, p. 144).

Sara Dickey: the urban poor, class, and populism

Supported by multiple field works (1985–2005) in the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu, the American academic, Sara Dickey has provided the first ethnographic account on the fan clubs, the devotion to MGR, and the integral and influential role of film stars in the daily lives of Tamils. Dickey focuses upon the audience, especially the urban poor in Tamil Nadu. Rejecting the elitist disdain of popular cinema as a 'mindless, immoral and divorced from reality', Dickey believes, 'popular cinema could hold meaning for its audiences or provide insight into their lives,' by providing answers and ontological solutions to 'everyday

audiences' (1993, p. 5). She also notes the tendency to look down upon popular cinema that paradoxically exists even among the most frequent film viewers as well.

Dickey provides a 'visual and aural' presence and significance of cinema among the urban poor in the city of Madurai, Tamil Nadu. By 'urban poor' she refers to the, 'skilled and unskilled labourers or low-level office workers, and their household members, who possess or control little in the way of land and other property and endure a general lack of economic security' (Dickey 1993, p. 7). By adding a number of other paid but low-income groups to this category, Dickey names them as people with 'self-ascribed identity', as those people perceive and refer to themselves as poor. She also mentions that these people are afflicted by shared poverty and economic insecurity and an absence of socio-political power:

> Both middle and upper classes can be distinguished from the poor by their awareness and expectation of personal opportunities in education and employment, a sense of hope and potential much unlike resignation expressed by the urban poor— who are often struggling to maintain a grasp on what they have rather than expecting or achieving improvement (1993, p. 8).

Although Dickey looks at the significance of cinema from class orientation, she avoids using 'classical Marxist labels'. She argues, 'Marxist categories rarely correspond to the most meaningful local divisions in India' (1993, p. 9). In the caste-ridden Indian society, no single caste can said to be dominant at a national level. For that matter, no caste is dominant even at the state level and Tamil Nadu is no exception to that. Castes are regional specific and fragmented in Tamil Nadu. For instance, Gounder and Naidu are dominant in western Tamil Nadu while Mudaliyar and Vanniya are dominant in the northern region. In citing Sharma, Dickey echoes the idea that besides occupation, the groups share an

identity based upon the sense of insecurity, which is yet another similarity (1993, p. 167).

In terms of the audience's preference, Dickey points out that Tamil audience reject films that are too realistic as they provide little room for play within the individuals' imagination. Popular Tamil films function around utopian fantasies. Unlike parallel films, popular films appeal to the masses by picking up real-life problems and anxieties, providing solutions to the problems by assuring that future will be bright, emphasising moral values, and making them believe that they have high values of integrity and morality. She argues, 'Modern-day film watchers, including Tamil film watchers, want illusion, enjoy playing with the image' (1995, p. 151).

People also apply the morals from the films in their day-to-day lives. The urban poor never fail to see the connection between the reality and film fantasy, which is often ambiguous. People do not admit in public to their admiration for film stars as cinema going is perceived to be a low-culture entertainment. Dickey says that one can observe the tendency to take pride in one's own culture while distancing oneself from it due to the dominance of middle and upper class values. This 'conflict between identification with and distancing from the lower class' are also seen in other contexts such as fan club activities, voting for film star politicians, and the praising of film star's personal lives:

> While the significance appears to lie largely in an escape constituted through utopian fantasy, the pleasure of that escape derives from its roots in real-life social and psychological stresses and from the soothing of those stresses through melodramatic crisis resolution. This connection between escape and reality also appears in viewers' ready distillation and application of morals from film stories and in the concrete and very personal connections they see between those stories and their own lives (1993, pp. 174-176).

Pointing out the role of caste, class, gender and age factors in the fan club activities, Dickey notes that while it is lower Hindu caste, lower and middle class youth, especially in their late teens and early 20s, who are found in fan clubs, it is very rare to find women in fan clubs. She argues that fan clubs are well organized at the state and national levels for actors like MGR, Sivaji Ganesan, Rajinikanth, and Kamal Haasan. Fan clubs organize meetings, which are generally informal with talking about their hero's latest films, functions, and with intermittent neighbourhood gossiping (Dickey 1993, p. 149). Eulogising the favourite heroes is one of the most prominent things in Tamil society. These glorifications extend to the deification of their heroes. Dickey finds that it is these beliefs and practices that played a pivotal role in the political transformation of MGR, calling him the Douglas Fairbanks of South India (Dickey, Sara 1993, p. 168). In other words, one of the salient features of MGR's political ascendancy is his manoeuvrability to convert his well-organized fan clubs into a powerful political support system.

MGR quit acting immediately after becoming the Chief Minister of the state in 1977. He ruled the state for little more than a decade (1977–87). Although Dickey conducted her studies in 1993— almost 16 years after MGR stopped his acting career and several years after his death— people continued to believe in his magical powers. Dickey observes:

> In his many films, MGR smashed tyrants and replaced them with his own populist rule, worshipped his mother, condemned the use of alcohol, gave food and clothing to the poor. He played rickshaw pullers and revolutionary leaders, charming lovers and dutiful sons. His characterizations identified strongly with the lower class. Combined with a bewitching glamour and charm, it added up to a glittering championship of the poor. This was an image that voters believed in (1993, p. 169).

One of the interesting aspects of MGR was that he could maintain his screen image even after becoming the Chief Minister, even though he did not act even in a single film in a decade. Dickey argues that MGR's followers, especially the urban poor, felt a personal proximity to him. The reason for this lies in the fact that Chief Minister MGR, like Actor MGR, associated himself with culturally sensitive issues like the prohibition of alcohol, housing assistance, and the meals and clothing of children. She also notes that state-funded programs were regarded by the poor as welfare programs personally funded by MGR because his image was strongly endorsed not only by films and fan clubs but also by 'popular myths' (1993, p. 170).

Dickey states that MGR was the first actor to systematically organize his fan clubs, which begun in 1950s. These fan clubs served as crucial 'grass-root networks'. When he left DMK party to launch his own political outfit in 1972, AIADMK, it was his fan clubs, which served as his loyal political back-up. His fan clubs were the primary and prominent fundraisers, and gathered crowds during the public meetings and rallies. Sometimes fan club leaders even put up a slate of political candidates during MGR's tenure. On top of all this, Dickey notes that social service activities remained the main form of engagement that allowed fan clubs to act as a mediating force between MGR and the masses. Furthermore, she states that by engaging in social service activities MGR's fan clubs could see themselves as 'helpers' rather than 'helped', which again provided them an escape from their real identity, by interpreting their actions as an indication of higher status (1993, p. 176). Due to this combination of various factors like meticulously constructed image, well organized fan clubs, loyal supporters, and social

activities, MGR could survive unconquered till his death, despite many attacks by political rivals against his political corruption, and maladministration.

In a later observation, Dickey points out that the role of fan clubs continue to be important in addressing the issues of working-class, since the fan clubs engage in welfare activities such as distributing free livelihood tools for the poor (D Karthikeyan 2009). Regarding the relationship between cinema and politics Dickey says:

> Cinema and politics have a long, multi-sided history in Tamil Nadu, more so than in any other Indian state of film industry. Films have been used to make socio-political critiques and to advance political ideologies, stars have campaigned for parties, and film personnel have entered electoral politics (2008, p. 78).

Dickey's observations lead us towards further discussion on the adoption and skilful manipulation of populist policies by cinematic politicians to keep their image intact. She, however, does not mention anything against populist policies of DMK and she finds MGR's populist measures were more appealing to the masses as his fans continue to remember and recollect his programs in comparison with the contemporary schemes. Dickey also states that the urban poor nostalgically remember that MGR's programs were more beneficial than the modern day populist measures introduced by both DMK and AIADMK.

To conclude, this development underscores the unfailing devotion and unconditional hope in the cinematic charisma of their stars. Together with Weberian charisma and Dyer's *the signs of characterisation*, this thesis provide an understanding of the cultural functions of cinema in Tamil society by combining text- and context- based analysis through the application of the works of Turner, Hardgrave, Dickey, and Pandian, as in the graphical illustration in Figure 2. As

Dyer (1997, p. xiv) admits, 'In a work of this kind, there must always be an interaction between generalisations and specific instances, between theoretical and empirical.' To understand the ideological aspects of culture that it embodies, it is important to study film by going beyond its formal characteristics. Turner recalls:

> Carroll warns against the 'routine application of some, larger unified theory to questions of cinema, which... unsurprisingly churns out roughly the same answers, or remarkably similar answers, in every case'. The result, he says, is 'theoretical impoverishment' (1999, p. 182).

This study goes beyond the 'routine application' of textual analysis. With the combination of various theories, concepts, and thematic perspectives, the thesis contributes to the theoretical growth in the field of Film Studies by proposing terms such as the 'politics of sentiment', referring to the filmmakers' manipulation of popular feelings for the actors' political objectives.

The next chapter deals with the legendary actor-politician MGR and his status as 'a modern day political myth'.
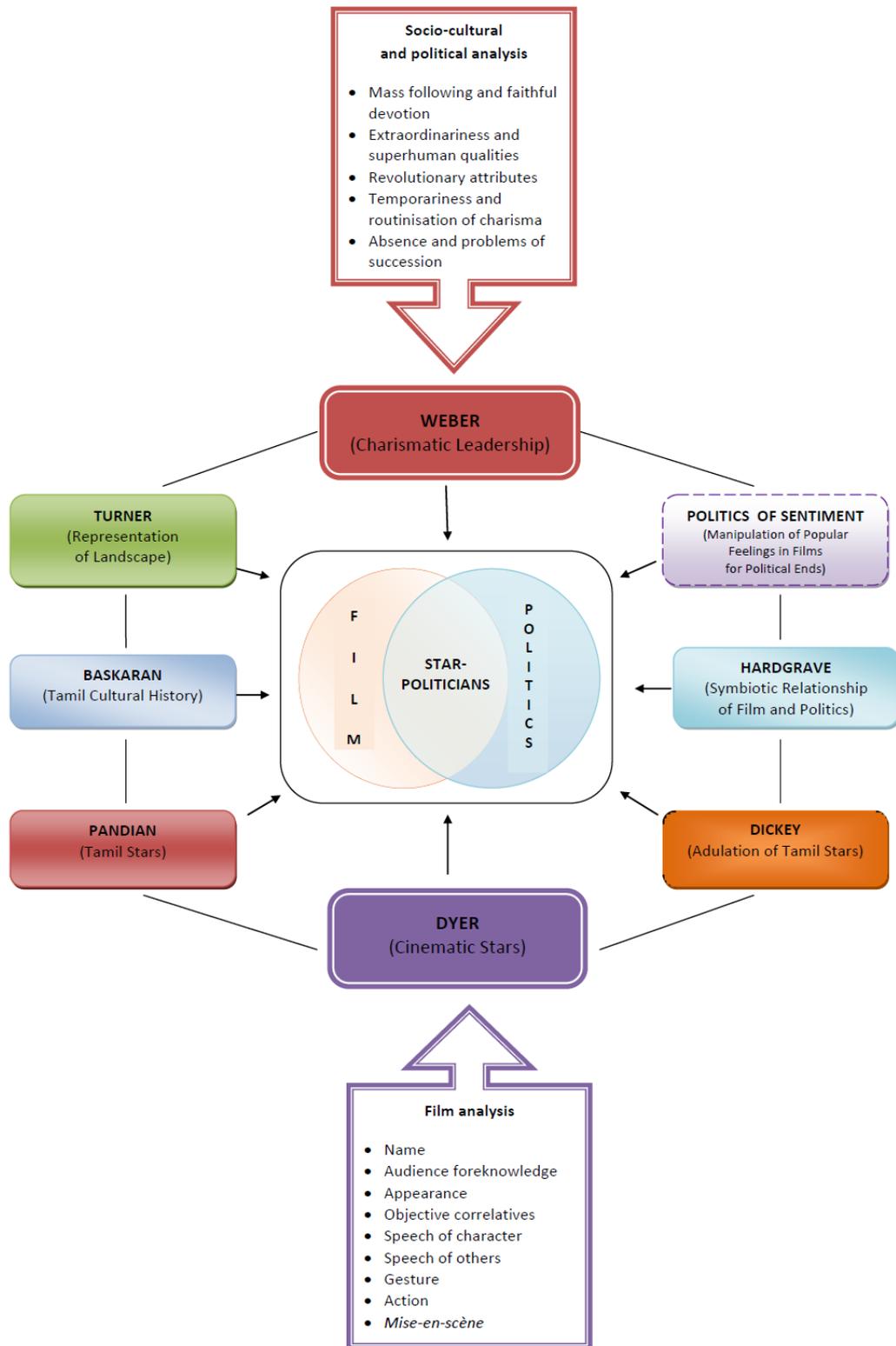
Figure 2. Theoretical underpinning

Chapter Two

MGR: a modern day political myth

This is MGR. He was the first actor to take full advantage of cinema's features as a political tool— in particular, its potential for broadcasting a carefully crafted and widely appealing image in an area with no comparable mass media, and the accompanying network of fan clubs.

Sara Dickey 1993a, p. 165

Tamils believe that the greatness of a person is judged by the number of people that attend his/her funeral. For this reasons, the best way to begin this chapter is to recall the funeral procession of Marudur Gopalamenon Ramachandran (or MGR). More than two million people attended his funeral; those who were not able to attend the event conducted mock funerals of MGR on their own; countless young men shaved their heads (a standard Hindu ritual, performed following the death of the parents or elder members of a family), and thirty one of his followers committed suicide, unable to contain their grief (MSS Pandian 1992, p. 17). As the first film actor-politician in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, MGR's film career lasted over forty years and 140 films during which he became an invincible political figure, serving as Chief Minister of the state for over a decade (1977–1987). Apolitical in his early days, MGR first joined the Congress Party and later become a filmic face of the Dravidian Progressive Federation (DMK). In 1972, he founded his own political party, All India Anna Dravidian Progressive Federation (*All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kalagam*, also known as AIADMK), named in honour of his political mentor and former scriptwriter and politician, CN Annadurai. Having won the state assembly elections in 1977 with a stunning margin, MGR became Chief Minister and ruled

the state continuously until his death in 1987. That only death was able to dislodge him from power indicates the unconquerable charisma MGR enjoyed among the masses. Throughout his life MGR spoke to the masses in their language by identifying himself as one among the poor. In one of his public addresses, MGR says:

> I am not a scholar who has mastered Economics. But I have suffered hunger and poverty in my life. I have climbed thousands of steps and sought employment and was tired of the statement 'no job.' I know the suffering of my mother who could not give us a ball of rice when we returned from school. Till my last breath, I will work [for the people] that no mother in Tamil Nadu suffer the way my mother did (MSS Pandian 1992, p. 100).

This chapter will provide an insight to the most remarkable career of MGR, by examining the film *Nadodi Mannan* (1958). The career of MGR is remarkable because he was the first cinematic actor-politician to achieve the position of Chief Minister. Moreover, he became the first actor in the Tamil film industry to construct an image that ensured his future political ambitions. Finally, MGR was the first film actor to organise fan clubs as a launching pad for his own political career.

Figure 3. MGR in Nadodi Mannan

Nadodi Mannan: film summary

The story of *Nadodi Mannan* was inspired by the Hollywood film, *The Prisoner of Zenda* (dir. Thorpe 1952). In *Nadodi Mannan* protagonist MGR plays dual roles— as a downtrodden Vagabond and an aristocratic king. The kingdom of Naganadhapuram is undergoing a crisis of transition. The dead king's only daughter, crown princess Rathna (Saroja Devi), was abducted in her childhood and was still missing until his death. Consequently, the nephew of the king, Maarthaandan, (the aristocratic MGR) is all set to ascend the throne. Some senior ministers, headed by the Royal Advisor (PS Veerapaa), conspire to kill Maarthaandan before the crowning ceremony to enthrone their puppet King.

Maarthaandan survives the assassination attempt but is unconscious in coma. Veeraangan (the vagabond MGR) reluctantly agrees to act as Maarthaandan to spare the country from the machinations of the ministers. During his tenure, Veeraangan introduces populist reforms and wins the people's support. In addition, he exposes the conspiracy of the royal advisor, who had abducted the crown princess Rathna, and plans to become king himself. Veeraangan defeats the treacherous elements in his ministry, withstands tragedies, and keeps his character clean, while encountering moral dilemma. Ultimately, he discovers Rathna after thwarting the evil forces. Rathna is impressed by the bravery, sacrifice, intelligence, and revolutionary ideals of the Veeraangan and marries him. He succeeds in his 'revolution' by replacing the monarchy with a democracy.

Why *Nadodi Mannan*?

In many ways, *Nadodi Mannan* is significant in the history of Tamil screen not only because this is the first Tamil colour film but also due to its political and social implications. In terms of style and content, the film marked a turning point in the history of Tamil film making.

The star persona of MGR and the structure of his film characters are popularly known as the 'MGR formula' in the Tamil film circle (The MGR formula shall be discussed in detail later in this chapter). Even though the 'MGR formula' belongs to the mid-20th century, the current film stars in Tamil Nadu continue to emulate the same formula, which testifies to the cinematic charisma of MGR. Sarah Dickey acknowledges:

> Since MGR's death there has been a rush among actors and directors to associate themselves with the former leader, even among those who previously supported other parties, in an attempt to gain popular support among audiences who remember MGR nostalgically (1993, p. 56).

This illustrates how the charisma of MGR can cut across political differences. MSS Pandian further supports this claim in his emphatic argument that MGR is 'the saint of the poor in Tamil Nadu' (1992, p. 11). Dickey's more recent observation validates this view that the charisma of MGR is still influential in the political landscape of Tamil Nadu, especially among the poor (Dickey 2007). Henceforth, understanding the MGR formula is fundamentally important to discern the forms and meanings constructed through the screen image of the most charismatic Tamil film star. This chapter unpacks *Nadodi Mannan* by looking into Richard Dyer's signs of characterisation of Stars such as titles, audience

foreknowledge, *mise-en-scène*, dialogues, songs, and most importantly the cultural context and narrative structures of the film.

In regard to the cultural relevance of cinematic narratives, Graeme Turner argues:

> It is based on the conviction that narratives are ultimately produced by the culture; thus they generate meanings, take on significances, and assume forms that are articulations of the values, beliefs— the ideology — of the culture (1986, p. 1).

The Filmography of MGR contains 136 films. There is more than one reason for choosing *Nadodi Mannan* for this thesis. The film was scripted, directed, and produced by MGR himself for the first time in his career. Before *Nadodi Mannan,* MGR was just another actor. With this film, MGR experimented with his well constructed screen image— the saviour of the suppressed, protector of the poor and women, and a morally upright man. The film is infused with ideological contents, as well as packed with connotative political discourses that underscored the existing socio-political and cultural issues. Pandian describes *Nadodi Mannan* in these terms:

> The DMK's association with such propagandist films was not subtle and distanced; rather, it was blatant and articulate. When Nadodi Mannan, in which MGR starred, completed a successful 100 days run, the party organized a huge colourful procession in Madurai to celebrate the event. The public meeting that followed the procession was addressed by eminent leaders of the party, including CN Annadurai (the founder of DMK party) Addressing the meeting, MGR said, '*Nadodi Mannan* has been produced to show that the DMK is the party which is serving the people of this country.' The film was significant for the party that it found a place in the official history of the DMK (1992, p. 34).

As *Nadodi Mannan* turned out to be a commercial success, MGR proved that he has a powerful persona to his fans and his image is unique, thus

strengthening his position in the politics of Tamil Nadu. Besides setting a trend in Tamil cinema as a superhero, the structure of MGR's cinematic characters became the real persona of MGR to his fans.

Nadodi Mannan: a neorealist Tamil film

In 1958, when *Nadodi Mannan* was released in Tamil Nadu, India had already celebrated its tenth year of independence from British rule. Yet, the country was still struggling to solve many of its socio-economic and political problems such as poverty, famine, unemployment, communal violence and the population explosion to name a few. People were increasingly frustrated over the failure of the Indian National Congress Party, headed by Jawaharlal Nehru, to resolve the problems faced by the infant democracy. Down South in Tamil Nadu, the ruling Congress Party faced intense opposition from the mass movement consolidated by the Dravidian Party. The Union (Federal) government's decision to impose Hindi as the national language infuriated the ethno-linguistic Tamils. They regarded the imposition of Hindi upon them by the North Indian politicians as a fundamental attack on their identity and an act of cultural hegemony and racial superiority. In response, the Dravidian movement began to consolidate the Tamil masses against the politically powerful Congress Party. Dravidian leaders launched their campaign against the mighty Congress Party by attacking their casteism/Brahminism and racism, as North Indians believed they were descended from Aryan ancestry while Dravidians belonged to the Mediterranean group (for further details refer to Chapter Three), and their unjust distribution of resources to the South Indians. As Dravidian leaders lacked political power, they used popular culture, such as theatre and cinema, to reach the masses. Theatre artists and film

stars, scriptwriters, and lyricists infused Dravidian ideology into their performances. MGR, being the most popular star for the masses, was no exception to this. To paraphrase Pandian (1992), having sensed the mass base of MGR, Dravidian leaders started to use him for party propaganda and MGR was equally cunning in using the party for his political career.

As previously mentioned, the socio-economic-political crisis in Tamil Nadu during the 1950s can be compared to the situation in post World War II Italy when the neorealist films began to emerge. Known for his cinematic expertise, MGR kept updating himself with cinematic trends, although mainly from Hollywood. Neorealist style might be one such approach, with which he experimented in his films.

It is worth mentioning here that Dravidian ideology was inspired by various elements from the Renaissance, Marxism, and anti-fascist movements. It becomes evident in the Dravidian rhetoric and political campaigns which projected North Indians as fascists and the same is reflected in MGR's films as well. In this context, *Nadodi Mannan* concerns itself with the problems and plight of ordinary men and women, much like the neorealism of *The Bicycle Thieves* (dir. De Sica 1948) and *The Earth Trembles* (dir. Visconti 1948).

The construction of MGR

The screen image of MGR is a careful construction and the product of meticulous manipulation by MGR himself. Born in an impoverished family, his biographies glorify his childhood poverty. He, intrinsically, understood the ground reality of the poor section of the society. He was able to capitalise on his personal

experience of poverty in his films, as he knew exactly about what the poor would expect from his films. After *Nadodi Mannan*, MGR emerged as the undisputed hero of the masses and the dominant figure of the Tamil film industry, known not just for his acting skills but also for his technical expertise in areas such as editing and cinematography.

Due to these skills, his popularity and his financial strength, MGR was known for intervening into story lines, screenplay, plots, lyrics, and even the direction. His biographer Muthukumar (2009) writes that MGR's interference in filmmaking started with the film, *Princess of Marudha Country* (*Marudha Naattu Ilavarasi*, dir. A Kasilingam 1950), in which he played the protagonist for the first time. MGR installed his friend, M Karunanidhi as the dialogue-writer for this film. In *Alibaba and 40 Thieves* (*Alibabavum 40 Thirudargalum*, dir. TR Sundaram 1956), MGR wanted to change the climax, but he was overruled by the producer. In his next film, *The Legend of Madurai Veeran*, (*Mathurai Veeran*, dir. D Yoganand 1956), MGR forcefully removed a religious dance which he found it to be detrimental to his political ideology. In this context, Muthukumar strongly argues that egotistic MGR was so eager to prove his heroic persona not just on-screen but off- screen as well, which only went from strength to strength after *Nadodi Mannan* (2009, pp. 31-44). MGR left a legacy to the next generation of actors, including Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth, Sarathkumar, and other leading actors who would all intervene in the film-making process in areas such as choice of the co-actors, songs and the location.

MGR's films are value-laden and full of moral lessons. His films' protagonists are monogamous, even when beautiful girls offer themselves to him. In *Nadodi Mannan*, the moral uprightness of MGR is illustrated three times with

three different heroines. At one point, Veeraangan describes his role when the character meets the queen, who is a mistress of Maarthaandan. Due to political treachery, Maarthaandan is trapped in the hands of villains, while loyal ministers persuade Veeraangan to act like the aristocratic king to defeat the treacherous forces within the palace. The queen, who is oblivious of this, makes her intimate moves. Morally upright Veeraangan is not tempted and stops her seduction and calls the queen, 'sister'. The queen tries to kill herself as her husband does not make love with her and strangely calls her 'sister'. In order to prevent the queen from committing suicide, Veeraangan discloses the secret. He says that he began his life as an ordinary soldier and became a rebel as he could not tolerate the exploitation of the masses by the aristocracy. Having seen the troubles of the poor, he finds that the solution lies in the replacement of monarchy by democracy through peaceful means. This scene is very significant in the sense that MGR's image is built up and consolidated as morally strong, sexually attractive but a self-disciplined man with undoubted concerns for the poor through issues which are easily identifiable in the film, such as landless labourers, poverty, and exploitation.

The MGR formula

For Richard Dyer stars are not born but are made. The fabrication of film stars is fundamental to the industry. Thus, Marilyn Monroe on wide screen was the film industry's response to the threat of television in the 1950s (2007, p. 11). If we apply this argument to the stardom of MGR, his screen image and the subsequent transformation of the same into the political terrain of Tamil Nadu, was carefully planned and meticulously executed. As mentioned, MGR was the

first actor in India, and probably in the world, to use his fan clubs as his political platform. The making of MGR was not the result out of any 'demand-supply' or 'production-consumption' formula, but was the deliberate manipulation of MGR's image over the problems faced by masses. In the time of terrible crisis in the Tamil society, such as poverty, unemployment, casteism, and the North Indian hegemony, the masses needed 'divine intervention' in the form of a human saviour as exemplified in mythological stories. During the British rule, people had hoped that independence would solve all their problems. On the contrary, a decade of independence only compounded the existing crisis. Tamils in India started to realize that the remedy (independence) had turned out to be much worse than the disease (British rule). As mentioned, the masses needed a saviour to rescue them from their existential issues. MGR, probably due to his impoverished childhood days, was able to understand what common men and women in Tamil Nadu wanted from the modern film spectacle. Consequently, he developed a formula for his cinematic roles. Muthukumar sums up MGR's formula as follows:

> The hero in MGR's films is a good, honest, benevolent, brave, valiant and invincibly powerful man. He does not drink; he does not smoke; he does not gamble. He happily and enthusiastically comes forward to help the poor and needy; he behaves kindly towards the old-aged; he protects the chastity of the women; he rescues and saves the young woman, no matter where they are, when their chastity is under threat; he defeats the demonic forces; he never fails from justice; he does not run after his heroines but they are swirling around him; glamour scenes are allowed only in the dream scenes, apart from that, he is a 'decent' man (2009, p. 64).

It is interesting to observe this formula remains stable for those contemporary actors who aspire to become politicians—Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth, Sarathkumar, and Vijay (for further discussion refer to Chapter Seven). Drawing

from Dyer's argument (2007, pp. 21-22) on stars in this context, MGR is God, a hero, model— an embodiment of ideal ways of behaving. The aforementioned image was invented and created by none other than MGR himself. As no producer was ready to apply his newly found heroic formula, MGR applied it in his own production, *Nadodi Mannan*. The *sui generis* of the film is evident since it was well received when the same film was re-released in a digitalised format in March, 2011 over fifty years after its initial release. Earlier the film was re-released in 2006, ran for 100 days, drawing crowds in huge numbers (D Karthikeyan 2011). Even though the film has been well quoted by many scholars like Sivathamby (1971), Hardgrave (1975), Baskaran (1981), MSS Pandian (1992), and Dickey (1993), no analysis of the film has looked at its cinematic aspects. This chapter attempts to bridge the gap while looking at the cinematic charisma of MGR and how he used his stardom for his political success.

Louis Lumière (1864–1948) once stated, 'the cinema is an invention without a future,' suggesting that people's curiosity over the motion pictures would not last long. Paradoxically, MGR was able to see clearly that his future was in cinema. MGR's father, lawyer by profession, migrated to Sri Lanka before MGR was born on 17th January 1917 (according to Pandian MGR did not disclose his original date of birth and remains a mystery to date). Two years after his birth, MGR's father passed away, which consequently led to the economic crisis in the family. MGR's mother Sathyabama re-migrated to Tamil Nadu to make a living. MGR's fair skin made him special among his schoolmates and teachers in the Brahmin dominated city of Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu. Muthukumar (2009) mentions the relative advantage MGR received due to his fair skin (a further discussion on fair skin is in Chapter Three). Attracted by MGR's

fair skin, MGR's school teacher chose him to act in school dramas. As expected by the school teacher, MGR was welcomed by the audience and the response inspired MGR and his family to consider acting as his future career. MGR's biographical narratives glorify the economic poverty of MGR's family after his father's death. In a country like India, wherein more than half of the population live below the poverty line, the masses tend to easily identify or associate themselves with leaders who can trace their roots to poverty-ridden families. Knowing this very well, MGR never failed to mention his early days of poverty during his public speeches and during the launch of new schemes.

Interestingly, MGR's mother tongue was not Tamil but Malayalam, an offshoot of Tamil and one of the four South Indian languages, spoken mainly in the state of Kerala. As mentioned in Chapter Three, fair skin is linked to the Brahmin caste in Tamil Nadu. MGR's acceptance and growth in his early days while he was in the Brahmin dominated city of Kumbakonam (Tamil Nadu) might be due to his fair skin and its perceived association with Brahmin caste. The reason for mentioning MGR's non-Tamil background is that during the mid-1970s, as Dickey acknowledges, his 'Malayali' ancestry became a political issue, and MGR replied to his critics by saying that whoever speaks Tamil is Tamil and his fans and followers accepted this without any resentment (1993, p. 193). Pandian (1992) underscores this by arguing that MGR's rebuttal and his non-Tamil ancestry made him an acceptable leader among the caste-ridden society.

Sociologically speaking, MGR's acceptance as a pan-Tamil leader can be seen as an 'orthogenetic change.' Introduced by the eminent sociologist Yongendra Singh (1973) in his modernisation in India discourse, the term 'orthogenetic change' means that the change is situational and individuals try to

depict some adjustments in their behaviours according to the changing circumstances. MGR's contention that anyone can become Tamil if he or she speaks Tamil is, in a way, an answer to his critics in an 'orthogenetic' style. This discourse is manifested in many ways. For instance, due to his association with the anti-Hindu/Hindi/North Indian Dravidian movement, MGR refused to play religious roles, and he never accepted any scenes wherein he is seen as religious. I would argue that MGR's intention behind shortening his full name, MG Ramachandran (another name of the Lord Vishnu) could have been to cover up the religious tone of his name. Paradoxically, however, MGR's earlier roles were religious and mythical.

Starting his career as a theatre artist, MGR made his film debut in *Sathi Leelavathi* (dir. Dungan, 1936). The Irish-American director, Ellis R. Dungan (1909–2001), made a series of commercially successful Tamil films from 1936 to 1950 without knowing a single word in Tamil (S Muthaih 2002). In *Sathi Leelavathi,* MGR played a small role as a police inspector. He had to wait for fourteen years to become a hero. MGR became a hero through the film, *Princess of Marudha Country* (1950). At that time, he had been married twice and both of his wives had passed away due to illness. Later MGR married the heroine of *Princess of Marudha Country*, Janaki, as his third wife. She became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu after his death, during the tumultuous succession war. Eventually, she retired from politics after losing the electoral battle, which culminated in the unquestionable ascendancy of Jayalalitha as MGR's heir. As mentioned, MGR's early career had its quota of uncertainties and struggles. Since his persona was shaped by all these adversities, he was insecure, jealous, cunning,

erratic, and unpredictable personality. The same traits can also be detected in

Jayalalitha (refer to Chapter Three). Muthukumar rightly mentions:

> MGR's persona has many dimensions. A leader for his followers; saviour for the poor; an invincible peak for the opposition political parties; stamp of profit for the film producers; generous for the downtrodden; God for the elderly women and what not! MGR is a mystery— impossible to understand, who is known for doing things others cannot even dream of! He is unpredictable, who is known for making swift decisions in an unexpected way and change it upside down within moments. The irony is he made people to believe that whatever he decides that is good for the masses (2009, p. 11).

Part of his insecurity means that MGR was able to foresee that his

popularity might not last long, if he is not backed up by substantive political

support. Keeping his future in mind, MGR started to devise his plans. Even

though, he was associated with the Indian National Congress Party, he decided to

embrace the Dravidian party as it was popular among the masses and in the Tamil

film industry. Dravidian leaders, such as CN Annadurai (aka Anna) welcomed his

entry, as the hero MGR gave glamour appeal to their radical political ideology. In

a way, it was a mutually beneficial well calculated move.

Hollywood inspiration

MGR's demeanours, choice of costumes, and characterisation of his roles

can be compared with icons such as Will Rogers, John Wayne, Jane Fonda, and

Ronald Reagan. Just as Wayne and Fonda did in Hollywood, MGR individuated

the collective experience and common plight of ordinary folks. It would be

apposite to note Dyer's observation in regards to Wayne and Fonda:

> John Wayne or Jane Fonda, both stars with obvious political associations, act unavoidably to obscure the political issues they embody simply by demonstrating the lifestyle of their politics and

displaying those political beliefs as an aspect of their personality (1998, p. 27).

In the context of Tamil Nadu, MGR demonstrated his political association with the DMK and projected himself as the human and heroic manifestation of the Dravidian movement. In, *Nadodi Mannan*, MGR opened the film with the unfolding flag of his Dravidian Party, thereby sending a clear message to the masses and his party and cinematic colleagues. In return, Anna, the leader of the Dravidian Party (DMK), organised a massive celebration on the 100th day of screening of *Nadodi Mannan*. MGR was taken in a well-decorated van and was presented with a golden sword on a stage that was occupied by the leading political figures. MGR's earlier film, *The Emperor's Daughter* (*Chakaravarthi Thirumagal,* dir. P Neelakantan 1957), coincided with the decision of the Dravidian party to contest its first ever elections. MGR's name in the film was *Udhaya Suriyan* (The Rising Sun), which is the symbol of his political party, DMK Party. The argument here is that MGR was very serious about his political affinity, as he had already realised the importance of political machinery for his cinematic success. He was clearly cunning in expressing his political leanings in his films and his public appearances. Moreover, he never failed to assert his identity whenever he wanted and wherever there was a threat to his career.

As mentioned, the characterisation and functionality of MGR make one to compare him with the likes of Rogers, Wayne, and even Reagan. The cowboy characters and social commentaries of Will Rogers and John Wayne can be seen in MGR's film characters as well. For instance, in *The Hunter* (*Vettaikaran*, dir. Thirumugam 1964), MGR is a cowboy with the characteristic hat, gun, and horse.

It is interesting to observe that cowboys in Tamil society do not have any resemblance to a western cowboy, yet the film did well.

Figure 4. MGR in cowboy outfits

Another resemblance between Will Rogers and MGR is their one-liners. In *Nadodi Mannan,* Veeraangan's famous one liner is this: 'There are many people who have lost their lives as they didn't trust me but none have ever gone bad for trusting me.' As John Wayne was known as the 'all-time money making star,' MGR was known as the producers' pride, as his films guaranteed return of investment and enormous profits. As John Wayne is acclaimed for his gruff demeanours, MGR is known for his charming demeanours, which continue to be imitated by the contemporary stars as well. Furthermore, Ronald Reagan's presidential tenure (1981–1989) and MGR's political term (1977–1987) are about the same time, and like Reagan, MGR is known for his flamboyant lifestyle.

In this context, it would be interesting to apply Dyer's *speech of character* and *speech of others*. He writes:

> What a character says and how s/he says it indicate personality both directly (what a character says about him/herself) and indirectly (what a character betrays about him/herself). Importantly, we are more inclined to trust our perception of the latter than the former (1998, p. 112).

The tactic of one-liners was developed first by MGR. One-liners are rhythmic, poetic and philosophical comments referring to the existing socio-political situation, locally known as 'punch dialogues.' These punch dialogues come out with political messages, promises for the future, and often convey the intention of the actor's role and his influence in political affairs. In Tamil cinema, nowadays, punch dialogues are always expected from their heroes. Narayanan argues that MGR used punch dialogues as early as in 1951, within five years of starting to act in hero roles (2008, p. 369). In *Mysterious Sage* (*Marmayogi*, dir. K Ramnoth 1951), MGR gets applause from his fans as he utters, 'I never miss my target. If I miss it, then, I did not aim.' In *Nadodi Mannan*, Veeraangan declares, 'Those who have been here before were not here yesterday, those who were here yesterday are not here today; and those who are here today won't be here tomorrow...' These dialogues are intrinsically political. This film was released while the Congress government was ruling the state, a time when there was a popular discontent with the regime and the DMK was trying to cash in on the disenchantment through all possible means. With this dialogue, MGR conveys his political message to his fans that Congress government will not be ruling the state next time. The dialogue does not stop there. The scene closes with MGR looking at his detractors, 'even though I am to be in power for a short term, I will strive to do good for the poor as much as I can and that is my priority.' Given the anti-incumbency campaign and food scarcity, one can imagine that the people could not ask for more than a promise of a better future from their favourite film star politician. However, in pointing out that MGR's tenure did not bring any structural change in Tamil Nadu, Pandian stated, 'MGR's films provided imaginary solutions to real problems' (1992, p. 29).

Tamil nationalism

Tamil nationalism is another salient feature in MGR's films, more noticeably evident in song lyrics, costumes, and of course in *mise-en-scène;* and in the carefully scripted and politically influential dialogues in his films. As mentioned previously in this chapter, MGR was never hesitant to depict his political loyalty in his films. On the one hand, his political affiliation with the DMK Party secured his cinematic career while on the other the DMK Party needed a charismatic figure such as MGR to reach the masses. The masses went euphoric whenever MGR waved the DMK flag in his films or appeared in a metaphoric costume symbolising the party image. Moreover, MGR conveyed political messages through dialogues and lyrics in his films. For instance, in *Come on Dear* (*Anbe Vaa,* dir. AC Thirulogachandar 1966) he does the lip-synchrony for a song:

> The world wakes up as the rising sun looks out,
> As the cold breeze from the Himalayas touches the heart;
> Reminding us of the day Chera king of Tamils unfurled his flag
> on the Himalayas!

Figure 5. MGR dressed in DMK party colour in
Anbe Vaa, 1966

The *mise-en-scène* of this song is extremely noteworthy. The aforementioned lyric of the song goes on in the film for thirty five seconds with four cuts. MGR wears a jacket with black and red vertical stripes (Figure 5). Black and red are DMK party colours and the rising sun is the official emblem of the DMK party. MGR wears this jacket throughout the song. As these lyrics play in the background, the screen stalls the silhouette image of the rising sun as the song lines are voiced over in the background, 'the rising sun' looks at the audience.

The next cut shows MGR pointing his finger at the sun; the foreground is of a grass field lit by the rays of the sun indicating that prosperous life is possible only with the sun. In thirty five seconds the song features the rising sun twice for about ten seconds. The colour of MGR's clothing, the lush background, along with the cheerful music form a political inspiration for the masses, as it comes from their charismatic leader. The song is shot in the Kashmir valley, located in the beautiful Himalayas. After emphasising the rising sun, the lyrics emphatically underscore that the cold breeze from the Himalayas brings to memory the Tamil King from the Chera dynasty (one of the three major dynasties in the medieval Tamil Nadu, which marched until the Himalayas). This lyric infuses the *raison d'être* of the current Dravidian party with the past glory of Tamils, which they have lost under North Indian rule. In other words, the song subtly asserts Tamil nationalism by strongly substantiating the past glory of Tamils. It is also worth mentioning here that the song did not escape the government— controlled censorship. The filmmakers were forced to replace the phrase 'the rising sun' with 'the new sun.' However, as audios were not subject to censorship, the records of the song still have 'the rising sun' phrase. Because of the popularity of the film

music, this song conveyed the DMK message. What is important to note here is that despite the strict censorship, MGR was able to find a way to assert his political messages into his films.

In yet another song from the film, *The Divine Mother* (1964), the lyrics are: 'My life lies in three letters; Even after the end that will continue to speak.' For the audiences 'the three letters' stands not only for DMK but also for MGR. In the film, *If I Were to Order* (*Naan Aanaiyittaal,* dir. Chanakya 1966) MGR does the lip-synchrony for the song, 'If I had the power to order, and once my orders are implemented, the poorest of poor will never suffer.' MGR did the lip-synchrony for thousands of songs which are still popular, and played in public as well as private broadcast media, namely, 'Philosophical songs of MGR'.

These films appeared much after MGR had firmly established his image as someone for the poor and to look up to. The argument here is that MGR started the image-building exercise from the film, *Nadodi Mannan* as early as 1957. Pandian quotes MGR explaining the importance of the latter's intention to construct such an image:

> It is not enough if you are a good man. You must create an image that you are a good man. Every man [actor] must have an image. Each of us [film actors] has a distinct image. The image is what immediately strikes you when you see a person or hear his name. You put forward an image of yourself if you want to get anywhere (1989, p. 64).

One can also see a freeze frame of the statue of the couple akin to MGR and his second wife are unfurling the DMK party flag. The muscular man with a crown on his head is holding the flag with his wife who stands behind him. Together, the couple holds the flag in the same shot. For the audience, the scene is a sign that conveys many associated meanings clearly: the statue symbolises

MGR; the flag is the symbol of DMK party; the crown symbolises that MGR is a 'king,' who can rule justly and protect the rights of women by providing them with decent life and ensuring them an equal place in society.

Both Pandian (1992, p. 82) and Dickey (1993, p. 157) lay particular emphasis upon MGR's overt insistence on portraying his physical prowess. In *Nadodi Mannan* this becomes evident on at least two occasions. The statue in the aforementioned scene resembles MGR's well built body. In the next cut the screen unveils a portrait of MGR's actual mother.

This and other scenes demonstrate what I call the 'politics of sentiment.' I use the term 'politics of sentiment' to emphasise the manner in which Tamil cinema uses existing Tamil cultural sentiments towards the mother, marriage, wife, and other cultural symbols such as the sacred wedding thread for constructing an image for the stars towards their political ascendancy. My argument, therefore, suggests that by displaying his mother's portrait MGR sends the signs to the Tamil society, especially women audiences, that he respects and reveres his mother. Because of that he will treat all women fairly and affectionately. Hence, the 'politics of sentiment' is an effective tool to talk to the audiences.

Film-makers in Tamil Nadu have always used public sentiments to maintain that the film is of them and for them. I would argue that the 'politics of sentiment' in Tamil cinema began in the late 1950s coinciding with the emergence of social themes in films. As far as MGR's films are concerned, they are filled with the 'politics of sentiment' around the theme of mother. In this way, he is able to capture the attention of the female audience as his actions signal that respecting and revering one's mother is the first and foremost duty of a responsible Tamil. If

we recall the portrait of MGR's mother in *Nadodi Mannan*, MGR speaks in the background that he dedicates the film to his mother who is his goddess. In Tamil culture equating one's mother with a goddess is widespread throughout the cultural texts. For instance, a Tamil proverb says that 'there is no temple that can match one's mother and there is no *mantra* than the wisdom of one's father.' MGR gives a figurative meaning to this intertextual reference. By worshipping his mother, MGR informs his fans and the audience to construct a meaning that he is someone who respects tradition by paying respect to his mother (this aspect is discussed further later in the chapter).

As previously mentioned, Tamil nationalism was very prominent in MGR's early films. The ideas echoing Tamil nationalism and Tamil identity can be seen in his dialogues, lyrics, and *mise-en-scène*. The title song of *Nadodi Mannan* exemplifies this. The song is played in the background as credits start to unfold. MGR's full name comes first, which is no longer the case in his later movies, as the acronym of his name (MGR) is used ever after. The lyrics of the song glorify Tamil language, by highlighting its social significance, cultural uniqueness, and historical specificity:

> Greetings, Pure Tamil for clearly explaining the lives of Ancient Dravidians
>
> We greet you for pioneering the world with promulgation of five rules of grammar
>
> The people's heart is Temple as they lived in flawless ideology
>
> Salute to Pure Tamil for teaching us that there is no other god up above the parents who gave birth to us
>
> You had a justice system which has no caste or religion and you lived in our hearts and lives as one among us

This song underscores what has been argued in terms of Tamil nationalism, the 'politics of sentiment', and the infusion of political metaphors. The very first line in the lyrics talks about the purity of the Tamil language and the historical significance of Dravidians. In the next line, the song extends to the glory of the Tamil language and subsequently emphasises the importance of treating the masses as a sacred temple. 'Politics of sentiment' is seen in the next line as it equates parents with god. In the next line the song dreams of a society which is caste-free and egalitarian. Discourses such as these are revolutionary and are not to be seen in other film industries in India during that time. For instance in the Hindi film *Mother India* (dir. Khan 1957), a contemporary to *Nadodi Mannan*, one can find 'Indian-ness' in the sense that India is symbolised as the mother who is an epitome of love, affection, and sacrifice. In the case of *Nadodi Mannan* there is not a single reference to India but only to Tamil nationalism. While the Hindi language films emphasise Indian nationalism and parallel the Indian nation with the mother, Tamil films, more prominently MGR's films, speak for Tamil nationalism and the glorifying of Dravidian culture. As we can see from Chapter Three, majority of the South Indians are Dravidians while the majority of North Indians are Aryans. My argument here is that MGR was probably the first film star to openly assert Tamil nationalism and *Nadodi Mannan* was the starting point. From this film onwards, MGR's discourse on Tamil nationalism grew from strength to strength in successive films. This was a very revolutionary act at a time when the political climate of Tamil Nadu was not conducive to such a rebellious voice.

Nadodi Mannan furthers this 'politics of sentiment' from the second shot. The shot opens up as a curtain is unveiled, showing the picture of Sathya, MGR's

mother. MGR's voice-over says, 'We affectionately dedicate the film to our god that is nurturing our lives.' In the next shot, two hands are holding the name board of MGR Pictures under the feet of the portrait. This became the permanent sign of MGR productions. Two things are worth mentioning here. Until his death, MGR maintained his image as someone who did not believe in a religious god but worshipped his mother as goddess. After becoming the chief minister, some of the state funded programs were named after his mother. Secondly, in Tamil culture, respect for parents and elders is shown by falling prostate at their feet. MGR's political life is dominated by signs of submission, such as prostration of the party workers and ministers. If one looks at this practice in the cultural context, the prostration is expected to be performed either to a god, parents or elders. In appointing his ministers, MGR exhibited his authority. MGR's anointed heir Jayalalitha followed his example even more crudely. It was not only the cabinet ministers of Jayalalitha, who prostrated before her, but also the government officials. The controversial aspect of this action is that some of the senior ministers, who were as old as her father, touched her feet by lying on their belly in public gatherings, to get 'mother's blessings,' (*ammavin aaseervaadham*).

The DMK ideology was also influenced by communism. Having been associated with DMK, MGR always wanted to project himself as someone who initiates and supports 'revolution.' MGR was given the honorary title of 'Revolutionary Actor' in 1952 by the scriptwriter-politician Karunanidhi during the political ceremony in which MGR was formally associated with the DMK political party (Muthukumar 2009, p. 38). During his acceptance speech, MGR assured his supporters that he would live up to the expectations of the revolutionary actor. It has to be noted here that ever since, Tamil actors are very

particular about honorary titles. For instance, Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth, and Sarathkumar utilise the honorary titles Super Star, Revolutionary Artist, and Supreme Hero respectively. This is yet another validation that the MGR formula is being followed by the actors from subsequent generations. Moreover, MGR's willingness to project himself as the real 'revolutionary actor' harmonised with his self-produced and directed film, *Nadodi Mannan*.

After the title song, *Nadodi Mannan* opens with a procession. An analysis of the demography of the procession shed more light on the analysis. The first shot shows the banners 'Hail democracy' and 'Give us employment,' the primary all-time existential problems. It was not that Tamil Nadu was not under the democratic system in 1957 when the film was released. However, the indexical meaning of the discourse is that the hegemony of North Indians and the complete control of Brahmins in public employment, and poverty of the masses alienated Tamils from the Indian federal set up. The political propaganda of the DMK emphatically attacked the federal government for the problems of the Tamils and as such the Dravidian Parties demanded a nation of their own. In the next shot, the camera goes for a long shot as the banners are seen to be carried by people. In the background, however, women are standing on the balcony, watching the procession seriously. Furthermore, this scene highlights a couple of interesting facts: MGR's meticulous attempt to appeal to female audiences; in Tamil culture any activity that begins with a woman holds high sentimental value that it is believed to ensure its success. However, the woman witnessing the activity should not be a widow, who is considered to be inauspicious and an omen of misfortune. In this shot, the women watching the procession from the balcony are married as they are wearing the traditional *saree* (Tamil women's traditional clothing).

The next shot shows the ground on which the procession is taking place. People are walking in the procession barefooted, in a way that point to the economic status of the masses who cannot even afford to have sandals/slippers. The camera continues to focus on the lower bodies of the people, showing the dresses that they wear. This is another motif to underscore the poverty-ridden situation that is prevailing in the society. Intermittently the camera shows the boots of soldiers with weapons. In the next shot, a cavalry force gallops towards the procession with a thunderous background score. With this scene comes a paradoxical meaning. On the one hand, people who are barefooted without proper clothing are asking for jobs and democracy; while on the other hand, soldiers wearing heavy boots and holding weapons are thunderously marching ahead and the cavalry is being used against the poor unarmed people, depicting the deployment of dictatorial force against a peaceful democratic procession. The masses represent the Tamils and the soldiers represent the government led by the Congress party, which is seen and shown as dictatorial and undemocratic. In their political campaigns, the DMK party exploits this issue against the then-Congress-led government in Tamil Nadu. The reference is made again in *Nadodi Mannan* during the meeting of Veeraangan and Maarthaandan. In their conversation, Veeraangan enlightens Maarthaandan about the plight of the poor, during which he mentions, 'Your servants are spreading silk carpet in your palace for you to walk on while the poor go barefooted on thorny paths and lead their lives in pains.'

To add further to the demography of the procession and onlookers, the sequence has equal representation of men and women. As MGR leads the procession from the front, women are coming out of the houses to watch and

support the procession. Those who are taking part in the procession are enthusiastic and emphatic, indicating that MGR's followers are calling for a revolution. As the procession gains momentum, the soldiers stop the procession. All these events happen in the first forty-six seconds of the film, which includes twenty-one cuts. The significance of the cut shots lies in the portrayal of demographic distribution, class, and power signs. In addition, having more than twenty cuts in a motion picture in the 1950s speaks about the seriousness of the situation in the sequence. The significance of this context is a mass movement fighting against the dictatorial and monarchical power through democratic means.

The procession is interrupted by the cavalry. A serious looking, Veeraangan stops his followers from walking further. The soldier leading the cavalry yells at the people, 'Stop now. Neither a crow nor a sparrow should go beyond this point.' Veeraangan replies calmly but strongly, 'we are neither crows nor sparrows but, human beings.' After a heated verbal exchange, the soldiers arrest Veeraangan. Before being taken away to the prison, Veeraangan addresses his followers, with the camera positioned from the viewpoint of the crowd. He appeals to the crowd to maintain calm and stay patient as they work to achieve the desired goal of ending the sufferings of all mothers and the pains of the poor. The procession sequence is significant in the sense that throughout his film career and political tenure, MGR maintained the same image: as someone who is brave enough to fight for the poor and kind enough to protect women. In the above mentioned verbal exchange, MGR begins his dialogue in the film, 'we are neither crows nor sparrows but human beings.' This metaphor enacts the 'politics of sentiment' as it portrays his sympathetic image to the masses and his opposition to the inconsiderate treatment of the people by government forces, and MGR's

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empathy to the plight of the poor. The dialogue also serves as a metaphor to the inhumane treatment of the masses by the authority as the cavalry men ask MGR to stop the procession, not by addressing the people as people, but undermining them as 'crows and sparrows'. This should be seen in the context of the society where there are no human rights, let alone animal rights. MGR retaliates by insisting that people are neither crows nor sparrows. It underscores the fact that MGR is someone who treats the poor as people not as animals. *Nadodi Mannan* is not just the beginning of the construction of MGR's image but also a strong signal against the Congress Party-led government in Tamil Nadu and the Indian Federal Government.

As mentioned, MGR's films are full of moral lessons, more particularly in the songs. Songs from MGR's films are used in political campaigns as well. In public gatherings it is not uncommon to listen to the 'story-dialogue' (an audio version) of entire MGR's films. *Nadodi Mannan* is one of the 'story-dialogues' frequently played in public gatherings and political campaigns. There is always a song that talks about the importance of hard work, honesty, discipline, discarding superstitions, and upholding moral integrity. The emphasis on moral preaching can be attributed to two factors: Tamil cinema's association with Dravidian politics and Dravidian ideology, in turn, was influenced by the renaissance, scientific rationality, and socialism.

Tamil cinema, just like any other film industry, has theatrical roots, which have served not only as a mode of entertainment but also as a reliable source of information. This was evident during the Indian freedom movement. Masses were mobilised through theatres by enacting dramas on patriotic themes. Having its roots in the theatre, Tamil cinema has been a moral preacher to the masses ever

since its first penetration in Tamil society. The influence of the theatre could be seen in Tamil cinema till the 1970s.

The lyrics of the song in *Nadodi Mannan*, 'Do not sleep, young brother, do not' is important. MGR does the lip-synchrony for this song from prison. Interestingly, the prison guards are also enjoying and dancing to the song. This gesture also talks about the paternalistic aspect of MGR's roles in the films. In the films, the masses are always illiterate and ignorant and they have to be taught, preached to, and helped. In this song, the inclusion of the prison guards and their dance to Veeraangan's song sets him apart as someone who knows everything, who has the right to 'advise' anyone, anywhere at any time, commanding respect and authority even among his enemies.

To return to the song lyrics, 'Do not sleep, young brother do not,' the way Veeraangan addresses the masses through this song needs to be understood. He calls the masses, 'young brother,' another validation of the paternalistic image of MGR. In the cultural landscape and with the patriarchal family fabric of Tamil Nadu, elder brothers assume enormous authority, next to fathers. Younger brothers are expected to respect the elder brother, by heeding his advice and obeying his commands. One can even trace the evidence for this in intertextual references, such as the famous Indian epic, *Mahabharatham* where five siblings blindly follow their elder brother. Similar examples can be seen in other ancient Tamil literature, such as, *Silapathigaaram.* MGR's screen image, therefore, has the support of intertextual references, with which the masses can easily identify themselves. In the abovementioned songs, the lyrics emphasise the importance of being awake and alert to claim one's rights. It inspires the masses by reminding them about the glorious past of their people. At the end of the song, the lyrics

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subtly inject a political message by saying that the people in power are lazy and ignorant of their responsibilities, consequently, the masses suffer. The lyrics point to the failing of the Congress Party leaders, against whom Dravidian politics was launched. A few more lines in the song are worth mentioning here because these lines, especially the last one, referred to the officials in the Congress government.

> The soldier who sleeps in the war loses the victory,
> The student who sleeps in the school loses education,
> The seller who sleeps in the shop loses his business,
> The man who slips from his duties loses fame,
> Due to the sloth of the people at the helm of affairs,
> Many golden responsibilities are at bay.

As one can clearly see from these lyrics, the moral preaching of MGR covers all social arenas: education, commerce, war, fame, and finally politics. This feature of MGR's films is typically Tamil, if one compares it with western films where films do not take up the responsibility of moral policing in such an overt way. The fundamental argument here is that the MGR's films always considered the masses as ignorant; therefore, they need to be taught in matters concerning politics or morals. At one point of time in *Nadodi Mannan*, the father of MGR's heroine says of the masses: 'They forgot their primacy; oblivious of their plight. They are blinded by spectacles that they believe that life is nothing but spectacles. It is our responsibility to educate them about the new king, who is coming to enslave them.' This dialogue provides an important insight into the positioning of the masses in regards to MGR's revolutionary heroism. It asserts his position as one from the masses who can save the masses from slavery. If one applies Weberian charisma into the characterisation of MGR in *Nadodi Mannan*,

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it becomes clear that the revolutionary leaders are charismatic leaders who emerge during a crisis and in whom the masses put their blind faith in charismatic leader.

In the film, MGR underscores crises such as hunger, unemployment, and the anti-poor policies of government. Then, he projects the idea that only revolution can bring about change and change is possible only through him. The lyricist of this song is a communist poet, Pattukotai Kaliyaana Sundaram. MGR has the ability to find the right man for the right job. He chooses the most talented artists who have the potential to execute his plans. He hires them and invites them to work for him. Poet Vaali and singer TM Soundararajan are some of the artists who have rendered their services to build up MGR's screen image.

Besides asserting Tamil nationalism in his films, another aspect of MGR's screen image is his sacrifice, along with identifying himself as someone who always speaks and works for the poor. The roots of this reputation can be traced to *Nadodi Mannan*. At one point of the film, Veeraangan is crowned as the King of Rathnapuri. In the acceptance speech, he donates half of his wealth to the welfare schemes such as unemployment benefits, aged care and disability funds, and to building industries and schools. When he faces sarcastic remarks from the senior ministers, Veeraangan rebukes them, 'Our lives are short lived, therefore, my first and foremost job is to do something good for the poor.' This dialogue became the political rhetoric of MGR with which he captivated his fans. As widely known, his fans still go euphoric in the cinemas during this scene. Two aspects of this dialogue are important to examine. Veeraangan offers to donate half of his wealth to the social security schemes. Secondly, he remarks that his 'first and foremost job' is to ensure that the poor live well. The image that MGR was able to maintain in all his films and his political life is that he is someone who volunteers his own

money for philanthropic activities and he is someone who always considers alleviating the poor as his priority. Pandian (1992) and Dickey (1993) point out the way MGR was able to construct and carry on the pro-poor image through his films, personal life, biographies, and political career. During MGR's tenure as the Chief Minister of the state, he projected the false idea that the state funded projects as coming from his personal money.

Identifying himself with the poor is the motif of the film. At one point, vagabond MGR claims that he hails from the working class not from a royal dynasty, henceforth, 'we [working class] never like to have weak oxen, broken plough, or a powerless position.' From this dialogue it is clear that MGR identifies himself with the cultural virtues and work ethics of the poor. Moreover, he associates the working class with hard work and their aspirations to obtain power, not just position. This needs to be seen within the political climate of Tamil Nadu in the 1950s and the Dravidian ideology of a separate nation for Tamils. The phrase, 'powerless position' serves a connotative meaning for the subjugated positioning of the state governments in the Indian federal polity. With regards to oxen and plough, oxen are an important part of the Tamil society as agriculture is the core occupation of Tamils and oxen are an integral part of the agricultural activity since a major portion of Indian agriculture is still traditional (not mechanised as in Australia or other developed countries). Oxen and plough are the symbolic signs of agriculture and hard work. By bringing oxen, plough, and power together, MGR expresses the ideals and aspirations of the Tamil working class— right to rule themselves rather than being ruled by North Indians.

There are many signs of agriculture in *Nadodi Mannan.* The song, 'What is the use of having harvest as nothing is left except our hands and legs?' opens

with shots of agricultural labourers walking to the field, toiling on the muddy soil and a pan shot of the cloudy sky indicating the nearing monsoon. MGR does the lip-synchrony for the song with his heroine, as they travel on a bullock-cart, a typical and traditional mode of the transportation of Tamil agriculturists. The lyrics of the song delineate the difficulties and disappointments of agriculture in Tamil Nadu. However, the song offers positive promises of better future— a salient feature of MGR's films. The paradox here is that most of the problems mentioned in the song such as indebtedness and traditional techniques, still continue to haunt the agriculture in India.

As far as MGR's films were concerned, he made it a point to limit the propaganda through his dialogue and incorporate more moral lessons through his lyrics. With his name, film roles, and party propaganda, MGR could successfully blur the boundaries between his screen persona and his personal image on the public. Dickey writes:

> Fans knew that MGR was what they saw in the movies, and accepted the movie image as the real person. Poor and uneducated voters especially saw MGR as their hero. Unlike most other film stars, MGR was perceived as someone who not only understood and cared about the problems of the disadvantaged and oppressed, but also possessed the necessary power to attack and solve these problems (1993, p. 169).

Dickey's comment refers to what Dyer (1998) calls 'audience foreknowledge,' that the audiences have their ideas and beliefs about MGR and his on- and off- screen persona, not only his films. Lyrics from MGR's films are extremely popular among the poor and women even now. Film songs are the major source of inspiration, education and entertainment for the Tamil masses, next only to films.

Let us examine this in the context of a society that is deeply fragmented in terms of caste hierarchy. Arts and music were monopolised and limited to the upper caste people, until the advent of the motion picture. With the arrival of talking cinema, songs become inseparable ingredients of Tamil cinema, with all its pervading impact, cutting across caste-class lines. As Baskaran (2009, p. 76) writes, 'film music is an applied art and comes as an integral part of filmic narration. It is for this reason that it may be difficult to examine it without filmic context.' An MGR film will contain at least five songs— on various themes such as romance and philosophy. Romantic songs in MGR's films are equally as popular as the other genres of songs. With simple, yet, powerfully worded lyrics, MGR does not just entertain, but also injects political messages by identifying himself as one among the poor with sensitive and easily identifiable concerns for the masses, for instance, in *Nadodi Mannan* a song comes at the first hour of the film indicating the importance of the same. It has to be noted that agricultural work in Tamil Nadu is segregated, based on gender. Although women are employed, they are not allowed to plough, but only to harvest and plant seeds. With these visuals, a melody is sung, depicting the miserable situation of the farmers. MGR's costume here identifies him with that of a typical rural farmer, a towel wrapped on his head, moustache on his face, and whip on his hand as he is riding a bullock cart. Again, driving a bullock cart is a male's duty in Tamil society. The heroine Banumathi is shown in traditional silk *saree* with jewels and gold ornaments, a characteristic feature of a rich farmer's wife and a source of envy among other Tamil women.

After a while, Veeraangan argues that he is looking at the palace through the people while others in the palace are seeing the people through the palace.

With this metaphor, he brings in Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy, 'Democracy is by the people, of the people, for the people.' Veeraangan further asserts that while he has become part of aristocracy, his heart will continue to beat for the people. This motif of pro-poor became the mantra of his personal and political image.

While tracing nationalism in Australian narratives, Turner (1986) talks about the mythology, landscape, and mateship as the integral components of the Australian national identity. In addition, Turner mentions the willingness of Australian narratives, particularly films, to separate themselves from British hegemony. One can apply similar arguments to MGR's films. As we have seen previously in this chapter, MGR's films revolve around mythology, camaraderie, landscape, and more importantly freedom from North Indian hegemony. In *Nadodi Mannan*, the story plot is set in medieval times; however, the narratives resemble Tamil mythology, for instance, the paternal role of men to protect women, the distribution of justice, and the establishment of an egalitarian people's government. The similar application of landscape, camaraderie, and the application of mythology in the narratives can be seen in other actors included in this thesis as well.

One can link the constructed image of MGR in the film *Nadodi Mannan* to the specific ideological realities of the time when the picture was first released. *Nadodi Mannan* was released in 1957, a decade after Indian independence. It was the time when people were facing numerous difficulties such as, poverty, casteism, corruption, discrimination and so forth. The common and unifying enemy, the British, was gone forever, yet, the problems persisted. The state of Tamil Nadu was no exception. In fact, the situation was worse due to Brahminical

hegemony in all aspects of Tamil life, from politics to education. The Dravidian movement rose in retaliation to the Brahminical hegemony in the state. As the movement made use of the fame of film stars, the party symbols and ideologies were represented on screen. Being the most popular and the most democratic form of entertainment, cinema reached the masses thereby increasing the reach of Dravidian ideology even further. As the stars projected the party ideology, people started to personify the same through the stars. MGR was probably the first to sense the people's pulse when he came out with an idea of making a film such as *Nadodi Mannan*, and spinning his formulaic image around his understanding of the problems of the poor.

It is not just the existing social problems that are the central themes of MGR's films but also the promise for the future through a valiant and benevolent leader, who understands their issues and brings about a solution to the problems, as well as a government that ensures socio-economic, and health reforms for the betterment of the needy and neglected people in the society. These are all also meticulously orchestrated in his films. Most of the agricultural land was in the hands of a few rich landlords, the majority of them aligned with the Congress Party. Calls for land reforms became a burning issue in the 1950s and 1960s. *Nadodi Mannan* featured and supported the need for land reforms. At one point in the film, MGR introduces emergency reforms and orders for their immediate implementation. The reforms are seen as the simplified and cinematic version the DMK Party's manifesto which talked about the removal of casteism and untouchability, implementation of land reforms, social security, and sophisticated shelters for the homeless and slum dwellers. While introducing the reforms MGR says, 'Keeping the national interest in mind, I am to introduce a few reforms and

implement the same forthwith. You may express your support or objections without any fear.'

This dialogue should be seen in the context of the recently ended colonialism. Due to the strict restriction on the right to freedom of speech and expression, and fear over harsh punishment for breaching the law the people did not dare voice their resentment against the British raj. The situation was no better after independence under the Congress Party rule. Thus, the right to freedom of expression was one the main features of the Dravidian ideology. Having ordered his deputy to read out reforms, MGR asks the public to express their happiness or unhappiness over the proposed land reforms without fear. The public expressed their support for the reforms by silencing the opposition coming from the senior ministers. MGR's dialogue asking the people to express their opinion without fear underscores the DMK party's fight for the right to freedom of speech and expression. Ironically, when MGR came to power, the press was attacked and journalists were arrested and freedom of expression was politically curtailed.

Charisma of MGR

From a Weberian perspective, MGR's charisma fits well with the mass perception of his 'super-human' traits and 'revolutionary attributes' which were both depicted in his films through his characterisation. In *Nadodi Mannan* Veeraangan exhibits 'superhuman' power in his stunt scenes, while the dialogues and the deeds of Veeraangan display revolutionary attributes. MGR's screen image set him apart from ordinary men and other film stars. As mentioned

previously, the boundary between the reel and real persona of MGR is blurred among the masses in Tamil Nadu. As Weber defines:

> A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional power or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as leader (1947, p. 358).

The revolutionary Veeraangan in *Nadodi Mannan* brings about democracy in Naaganaadhapuram kingdom single-handedly. Veeraangan's revolution is not a bloody revolution but a peaceful eviction of evil forces in the palace through his personal prowess and the people's support. The first six minutes of *Nadodi Mannan* demonstrates the transcendence of MGR's image as a crowd puller, mass leader, and the symbolic face of revolutionary change for the poor and downtrodden. As mentioned, the *Nadodi Mannan* image of MGR is still intact in the heart of the people and continues to influence them, even after five decades. In order to understand the charisma of MGR one needs to go back to his biographical details such as his name and his early cinematic career for two reasons. Firstly, his name connotes religious signification. Secondly, MGR's religious roles in his early films such as *Daksha's Ritual* (*Dakshayagnam*, dir. Raja Chandrasekar 1938) and *Lord Murugan* (*Sri Murugan*, dir. M Somasundaram & VS Narayan 1946), gave him the gracious image as he played divine roles, Weber calls that 'other-worldly.' In Tamil cultural context, religious and mythical significations of MGR allowed the masses to associate him with the divinity and folklore heroes. If one applies Weberian theory of charisma here, audiences attributed a super-human image to actor MGR.

According to Muthukumar (2009), MGR's fair skin is also a crucial factor in his theatrical entry as well as for being given religious roles. Another interesting factor is the connotative meaning of MGR's name itself: Ramachandran happens to be the name of the Hindu mythical god Rama, who is known to be a symbol of moral uprightness, bravery, honesty, and values such as unfailing respect to the elders, as someone who protects the poor, and more importantly as someone who destroys the demonic forces. As mentioned, MGR's roles in his earlier films had religious undertones from figures such as Jesus Christ and Tamil ethnic god Murugan.

MGR acted in lead roles in films during 1947–1957, which were mainly based upon folktales such as *The Princess (Rajakumari,* dir. ASA Sami 1947) and *The Legend of Madurai Veeran* (1956), and made such a strong impression among the audience that he was a screen portrait of god and a cinematic representation of folklore heroes. The popularity of cinema in rural Tami Nadu and the consolidation of the image of MGR need to be seen in consonance with the rural electrification programs in the aftermath of Indian independence, which allowed the people to experience the sight and sound version of the mythical stories that they hitherto accessed through the oral tradition. Having been aware of this situation, throughout his life MGR maintained his image, on- and off the screen- as a generous and approachable person by demonstrating his love of the poor in cash and in kind, as well as being always available to the masses.

On screen MGR was projected as a good person, law-abiding citizen, and a man of character. Charity and benevolence are the ineluctable features of both MGR's films and biographies. To paraphrase Pandian (1992), MGR was a cunning celebrity that he was able to manipulate his biographies to suit his screen

image. Thanks to his political roots, his money, and his influential role in the film industry. MGR was able to make his fans to do almost anything for him, which can be witnessed from the following excerpts from MGR's recent biography:

> One fan wrote a letter to him letting him know that he is ready to give Rupees 40 thousand by selling his house so that MGR could pay the income tax returns.
>
> MGR fans sent hundreds of *saree* (traditional dress of Tamil women) to M.K Muthu, the son of the then Chief Minister Karunanidhi. M.K.Muthu challenged MGR's bravery to release his films in the city of Madurai. He vowed to wear *saree* in public if ever MGR is able to release any of his films in Madurai. But MGR's films were released in Madurai. This has to be seen in the Tamil cultural context. As *saree* is the feminine costume, an extreme shame for a man would be to wear the *saree*. It means man has lost his manliness.
>
> MGR asks his fans, followers, and party men to have tattoos of MGR's political mentor and DMK founder CN Annadurai and party flag. The party member obliged and had tattoos of CN Annadurai, party flag, and MGR (Muthukumar 2009, p. 137).

The loyalty and devotion of MGR's fans were also seen when MGR was shot by a fellow actor, MR Radha on 12th Jan 1967. This happened at a crucial juncture when MGR was contesting an assembly election. His fans went hysterical as soon the news spread. As soon the news reached the masses, the entire Tamil Nadu came to a standstill due to the vandalism and violence by his fans. MGR and the DMK party used this event for their political advantage. A photographic image of MGR with a bandage on his neck (see Figure 6) was published in the media and was used for political propaganda in order to capitalise on the wave of sympathy for MGR. Although professional rivalry between MGR and MR Radha was alleged to have been the reason for the shooting, there are many questions that remain unanswered to date, according to the biographer, Muthukumar (2009, p. 86). One needs to remember here that attacks and

vandalism are not uncommon in India, however, shooting and gun culture is very rare.

Figure 6. Hospitalised MGR signs nomination papers for elections, 1967

What this incident demonstrates is the existence of hostilities and professional rivalry among film actors in Tamil Nadu. As far as MGR is concerned he is intolerant of his professional rivals, especially his arch-rival, actor Sivaji Ganesan. As mentioned previously, MGR reprimanded a lyricist for writing a song for Sivaji Ganesan. Both acted together in just one film, *Caged Parrot* (*Koondukili,* dir. TR Ramanna 1954) and their fans clashed bitterly in cinemas after the release of *Koondukili.* Citing the restlessness of the fans' rivalry, MGR and Sivaji Ganesan did not act together again anymore. This is a *sine qua non* of Tamil film industry, if one compares it with other south Indian film industry or Hindi film industry in which no two leading actors cast together in the same film as discussed in the introduction. One can argue that MGR is the trend setter for encouraging his fans and mates to be hostile to professional rivals. Be that as it may, the success of MGR lies in the fact that he capitalized on those incidents to

keep himself in the limelight. Coupled with his 'charismatic traits' and the careful tactics over his personal events, MGR stabilised, strengthened, and stuck to the minds of the masses. MGR's charisma was 'routinised' with his meticulous moves and carefully crafted publicity of his personal life.

Muthukumar mentions another incident wherein MGR fans attacked the veteran Hindu spiritual leader, Kirubanandha Vaariyaar. The reason for the attack was that the Hindu spiritual leader made some indirect remarks about Annadurai's atheist ideology. As Vaariyaar commented upon MGR's mentor and the DMK president Annadurai, MGR's fans engaged in violence against the spiritual leader. This incident is worth mentioning here because MGR fans have zero tolerance for anyone talking against MGR or anything to do with MGR (Muthukumar, 2009, p. 87). There are many incidents such as these where MGR fans showed their anger and intolerance whenever something happened to MGR or someone bad-mouthed him. For instance, his fans ransacked the DMK party offices in Tamil Nadu and attacked DMK party men when MGR was expelled from the party in 1972.

Conclusion

The trajectory of MGR's stardom is mysterious and extremely interesting. MGR's life is like a drama or a thriller, full of suspense. The twists and turns of MGR's biography can be narrated by the film 'roles' he played in his eventful life. A fatherless boy, youngest member of the family, an émigré child, a bonded labourer, a theatre artist, a 'B' grade film actor, a star, a celebrity, a cult hero, a chief minister, and a god. For his fans and followers, and the Tamil masses, MGR was a good hearted, generous, valiant saviour, but in his personal life MGR was

known be an insecure, jealous, suspicious, short-tempered, and unpredictable opportunist. Pandian asserts that his eleven years rule (1977–1987) was undoubtedly one of the darkest periods in the contemporary history of Tamil Nadu with the stagnant state economy— benefitting only the profiteers of different kinds— while the poor (the mainstay of MGR's support) continued to live in misery (1992, p. 12). However, Dickey considers out that the poor in Tamil Nadu believe that his films show his true character to society and the people, therefore, idolise him as god (1993, p. 43). Although both Pandian and Dickey examine the adulation of MGR, the former takes star studies approach while the later explores the same through ethnographic study. These two academics, however, converge in acknowledging that the people persist to believe in the charisma of MGR even after his death.

Figure 7. MGR hugs a poor elderly follower

The Tamil masses did not see his flamboyant lifestyle as a flaw, rather they attributed it to his privilege and the controversies during his chief ministerial years barely affected his image. Extending her argument for the veneration of MGR among the urban poor in the 1990s, Dickey (1993, p. 23) argued further that

only a few had in-depth knowledge of the party's past or present political record. The image of MGR is indelible and puritan among the masses despite the dominance of a dark side of his political career, making his life profile even more perplexing. This was partly due to the way he projected his personal life, which blurred the boundaries of screen image and real persona. While alive, MGR ensured that his biographies, stories in the popular media, and other narratives about him always projected him as someone who would lead his life in a manner that matched his words with his deeds. As Dyer (2007, p. 35) mentions, 'the lifestyle is the assumed backdrop for the specific personality of the star and the details and events of her/his life.' MGR's lifestyle is not just a backdrop but also the bedrock of his image. Let us conclude this chapter on MGR by quoting Pandian:

> The saga of MGR is analysed as a modern day political myth in this book. Eulogised by his followers as the undisputed patron saint of the poor in Tamil Nadu and lampooned by his opponents as a sadistic political clown, MGR thrived in Tamil politics like nobody else had done before (1992, p. 11).

As a cinematic legend and charismatic politician, he has left a formula for success, which has been appropriated by the next generation of actors, including Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth, and Sarathkumar. In other words, the structure remains intact despite the contents being replaced from time to time. The structure started with *Vagabond King* (*Nadodi Mannan)* depicting MGR as 'a ruler', who was benevolent, pro-poor, and a man of character. His fans and followers still see this film as vision that bespeaks the ideals and aspirations of MGR.

In the next chapter, we shall examine the actress-politician and MGR's long-time lover, the fair-skinned Jayalalitha.

Chapter Three

Jayalalitha: charisma of complexion

Indeed, many North Indians have a vague prejudice against South Indians because of their dark skin colour. Similarly, people from the topmost castes are generally fairer than the Harijans [lower most caste].

André Béteille 1967, p. 450

Skin colour has always been a matter of concern and controversy for people across the world, more noticeably for cinematic celebrities. Michael Jackson's colour is still very much debated— and remains an inconclusive element of the arguments around him— which media and critics ramified into the label, 'wannabe' (Fischer 2011). Colour and discrimination based on colour are one of the polemical issues among academics, for example, emphasising the privileged position of white people in Western society, Dyer writes:

> Yet we have not yet reached a situation in which white people and white cultural agendas are no longer in the ascendant. The media, politics, education are still in the hands of white people, still speak for whites while claiming— and sometimes sincerely aiming— to speak for humanity (1997, p. 3).

Other authors such as Bridget Heneghan (2007) and Amina Mire (2001) argue that whiteness has become the epitome of aesthetics and spectacle in the commercial and cosmetic industries. Many studies reveal that whiteness is equated with beauty, intelligence, charm, grace, purity, and morality. Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992, pp. 22-40) report that students with light complexion are more likely to succeed in colleges, and get accepted in churches, media, and even in Hollywood compared with their dark-skinned counterparts. Davis, Daniels & See (1998) discovered in their study that there is a strong correlation between low

self-esteem and dark skin. One of the most troublesome observations made by the authors when examining the variable of skin colour was high level preference for people with lighter skin tones. Quoting various studies, the authors maintained that the colour problem still rages in America. Similarly, Esposito (2009) aptly points out that even though there have been efforts to develop the construct of a 'colourless society,' preference for light skin continue to play a significant role in our daily lives. Hage (1998) underscores the relative privilege of 'whiteness' in multicultural Australian context. Osuri (2008) traces the reason for the transnational circulation and transformation of Bollywood star, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, referring to her as 'a cultural form' mainly because of her fair skin.

As elsewhere, the colour of one's skin is personalised and institutionalised in a way that plays a pivotal role in determining an individual's life chances in Tamil society, where fair skin is revered and dark skin is devalued. This chapter examines the representation of fair-skinned female actors and their cinematic and political success in Tamil Nadu, by probing into the life of actress Jayalalitha, one of the most famous stars and the current Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. By applying Richard Dyer's 'signs of character in film' and Max Weber's theory of charisma, the chapter further proposes the idea of a 'charisma of complexion', to demonstrate how fair complexion adds to the charisma of female actors in Tamil Nadu. While problematising colour, this chapter also underscores the instrumental role played by the conjugal relations with iconic actors, and the ascribed status of caste in the success of female actors.

Jayalalitha is known for her fair-skin and for being a noted paramour of MGR (Uma 2005, p. 4). Jayalalitha's meteoric rise in her film career and her subsequent shift to Tamil politics bring in yet other debates to this study—

'charisma of complexion' and cultural hegemony. The cinematic and political success of Jayalalitha has been phenomenal. As mentioned, she has acted in nearly 150 films; she has ruled Tamil Nadu for more than ten years and she won the state assembly election in March 2011 with a thumping majority, winning 146 seats of the total 234 assembly seats (NDTV 2011b). Jayalalitha became a political celebrity because of her film star status. Notwithstanding, being a woman in the complex cultural fabric of the Tamil society, Jaya's political ascendancy from her cinematic platform is unprecedented in many ways. She is the only female actor in Tamil Nadu who has been democratically elected to rule the state three times as mentioned in Chapter One. It is worth mentioning here that Jayalalitha heads the political party, AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Progressive Federation), founded by the charismatic MGR. By studying Jayalalitha's cinematic success and political succession, this chapter will shed light on issues including the socio-ethnic background of female Tamil film actors, their affiliation with Dravidian political parties, the chaste representation of womanhood in Tamil society, and the conformity to traditionally conservative values.

Early life

Jayalalitha was born on 24 February 1948 into an affluent upper caste (*Tamil Ayyangar/ Brahmin*) and orthodox family. Her father Jeyaram was a jobless graduate who spent his time in sports and lavish activities; her mother was Vedavalli, who took on the name Sandhya when she became a film actor. Her grandfather was a surgeon to the Mysore-based royal dynasty in the state of

Karnataka. They were living in their paternal grandfather's house as a joint family. As the family's economic condition deteriorated rapidly, Jayalalitha's father died under mysterious circumstances. Jayalalitha was just three years old. The family moved into Jayalalitha's maternal grandfather's house. It was Jayalalitha's mother who was the breadwinner of the family. One of Jaya's maternal aunts was a liberal, outspoken, and westernized woman. She, at first, worked as an air-hostess (which was a rebellious action at that time for a religiously orthodox family) and later became a film actor. Jaya's aunt played an influential role in introducing Sandhya and Jaya in the film industry.

Figure 8. Jayalalitha in one of her early films,
circa 1970

In the early days, baby Jayalalitha was everyone's favourite due to her fair complexion, sparkling eyes, and dark hair. Jayalalitha's biography describes her birth and beauty:

> Baby Jayalalitha was born on the most auspicious day of the Hindus: Goddess Parvathi's birthday. Astrologers had predicted based upon her horoscope that she would lead a life, which is full of fame and prosperity.... Jayalalitha did her schooling at the elite

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private institution. Even at the tender age, she had been an intelligent, witty, angry, shrewd, and obstinate girl (Manimegalai 2011, p. 12).

The biography mentions further that fatherless Jayalalitha's early childhood days were full of longing for her mother's attention and love, pain of separation and loneliness, as she grew up in the dictatorial ambience of her grandfather's household. At first, neither Jayalalitha nor her actor-mother had wanted her to become a film actor. Jayalalitha, however, was pushed into the film industry by her mother herself as their family was in difficult financial circumstances. Furthermore, the biography poetically points out that it was Jayalalitha's fair-complexioned skin, which was the main reason for her success:

> Her complexion is as tender as sandal,
> Her face shines like the full moon,
> Her speech is rhythmically flawless,
> Her acting is nothing but natural,
> Her beauty is besieging! (Manimegalai, 2011, p. 5)

In the above poetic description, the emphasis is not upon her acting qualities but her complexion; it underscores yet again the uniqueness of Jayalalitha through the colour of her skin. This quotation brings in the main argument of this chapter—'the charisma of complexion' of Jayalalitha as the bedrock for her cinematic success and political succession. Having light skin is considered to be a feature *par excellence* in Tamil society, more specifically for female film actors. One might also argue that the preference for white skin is probably because it is easy to photograph. It would be relevant to bring in the concept of *photogénie* popularised by French filmmaker-theorist Jean Epstein in the first half of the twentieth century. The term *photogénie* is associated with youth, luxury, stars, and at least implicitly, whiteness (Stam 2000, pp. 26-27).

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Therefore, even if one argues that some people are photogenic, it might implicitly mean 'whiteness'. However, not all fair-skinned people are photogenic and not all photogenic people are white/fair skinned, for instance, Tamil stars such as Rajini and Vijayakanth are much darker-skinned. What is important to mention here is that Tamil viewers have a different tolerance toward male and female actors. There appear to be certain factors that function behind the fame of the fair skinned female actors. For instance, Tamils prefer their girls to be light coloured as it is associated with 'beauty' and it is easy to arrange a marriage for a beautiful girl. As the eminent sociologist Beteille says:

> The ideal bride, whose beauty and virtue are praised in songs sung at marriage, almost always has a light complexion. A dark girl is often a liability to her family because of the difficulty of arranging marriage for her. Virginity and a light skin colour are among the most desirable qualities in a bride (1967, p. 451).

The relative advantage of fair-skinned persons in marital hunts does not happen only in Tamil Nadu but also in countries like Japan, China and The Philippines where white is more valued and preferred. On the contrary, pop stars Beyoncé and Halle Berry are known as 'black Americans', signifying the notion of beauty and identity with reference to whiteness. Looking at the stardom of Paul Robeson, Dyer mentions:

> Robeson was taken to embody a set of specifically black qualities— naturalness, primitiveness, simplicity and others — that were equally valued and similarly evoked, but for different reasons, by whites and blacks. It is because he could appeal on these different fronts that he could achieve star status (2004, p. 67).

What Dyer underlines here is that the charisma of Robeson falls in line with discourses of white as well as black. In this context, the relationship between

the skin colour and fame of female actors needs more investigation. The xenocentric (viewing another culture/race as superior) view which most Tamils hold concerning fair skin can best be understood if we look into the same phenomenon in its historical, anthropological, cultural, and colonial contexts.

Adimaip Penn: film summary

In this film Jayalalitha plays dual roles: Jeeva and Pavalavalli. Jeeva is a modest, self-sacrificing, orthodox rural woman; Pavalavalli is an arrogant, egoistic, aggressive, and suspicious queen. The story revolves around a feudal battle for power, money, and women. The head of the Soorakaatu Kingdom, Sengodan (Ashokan), attempts to rape the wife of another tribal king. The queen cuts the leg of Sengodan and escapes. The wounded and permanently disabled Sengodan kills the queen's husband. The queen escapes into the jungle leaving behind her baby boy who is captured and imprisoned by Sengodan. The baby boy, Vengaiyan (MGR), is put in solitary confinement for two decades. Without any external contact, Vengaiyan (who is also the crown prince) grows into a physically matured man, but without the ability to communicate and lacking basic survival skills. The crown prince is saved by a loyal old man, who hands him over to his young and beautiful granddaughter, Jeeva. Jeeva transforms the life of the innocent and illiterate Vengaiyan by teaching him all the necessary skills of survival. Also, Vengaiyan meets Pavalavalli, who is the queen of another kingdom. She wants to marry him; however, Vengaiyan is in love with Jeeva. Now, jealous Pavalavalli plots to kill Jeeva. Vengaiyan saves not just Jeeva, but also Pavalavalli from being assassinated by her minister. He liberates his own

kingdom and people from Sengodan. In the end, good triumphs over evil and Jeeva marries Vengaiyan.

As far as the film narrative of *Adimaip Penn* is concerned, it is episodic in structure as it opens with one plot and moves on to another plot, and then to the third. As noted, Jayalalitha portrays dual roles in this film: Jeeva and Pavalavalli. Even though Jayalalitha co-stars with MGR, in this particular film she outshines MGR with her acting, glamour, (belly) dancing, and musical performances. The two roles played by Jayalalitha serve as binary opposites: good versus bad, conformity versus deviance, and humility versus arrogance. While Jeeva is a modest, affectionate, soft-spoken, young rural girl, Pavalavalli is an immodest, egoistic, distrustful, and seductive queen, who tries to have an intimate relation with Vengaiyan even after knowing that he is in love with Jeeva. Jayalalitha's second role as Pavalavalli is said by some to reflect the real personality of Jayalalitha. For instance, one of the popular English periodicals in India, (Naqvi 2008) describes the current-day Jayalalitha as, 'arrogant, aloof, suspicious, imperious, and fiercely independent, who has never encouraged a second line of command in her political party.' If one examines the character of Pavalavalli in this film with reference to Jayalalitha's biography, the boundaries of Jayalalitha's on- and off- screen persona become blurred.

Dressed in a white jacket and matching skirt with a prominent belly, and long, dark, and loose hair, Jeeva is introduced in the eighteenth minute of the film, which runs for nearly three hours. The costume and the context speak a lot about the characterisation of Jayalalitha. The white costume embroidered with a flowery design is a visual signifier of purity and prosperity. The neatly combed, long and dark hair highlights her flawless beauty. Jeeva, who lives in the jungle, wears

ornaments around her neck and ears which indicate her high status. The powdered and bright cheeks underscore the obsession over makeup during the 1960s. In those initial moments of exposure, the characterisation of Jeeva not only reflects the purity and prosperity of the role but also provides a glimpse of glamour by showing a belly. The first few glimpses at Jeeva encapsulate her affection, moral integrity, patriotism, self-sacrificing tendency, and the enormous responsibility that she is to shoulder through the rest of the film.

Figure 9. Jayalalitha in Adimaip Penn

Two things need mentioning here: Jayalalitha's fair complexion and sexuality. In the sixties and seventies, mainstream Tamil cinema did not dare to show female bodies as Jayalalitha did in *Adimaip Penn.* Displaying the belly, navel, legs, thighs or bosom were considered taboo. By breaking the taboo, Jayalalitha was the forerunner of cinematic sexuality of female actors in Tamil Nadu. With her skin exposure, Jaya was not just controversial but also demonstrated that breaking the taboo would also make her famous. Similar to some extent to Monroe in Hollywood, Jayalalitha is a 'taboo breaker' (Dyer 2004,

p. 24). Secondly, Jayalalitha's fair skin gave her the image of innocent and divine beauty. As with Monroe, Jayalalitha's sexuality is coupled with innocence in making her more desirable. Dyer says:

> Monroe conforms to, and is part of the construction of, what constitutes desirability of women. This is a set of implied character traits, but before it is that it is also a social position, for the desirable woman is a white woman. Monroe could have been some sort of star had she been dark, but not the ultimate embodiment of the desirable woman (2004, p. 40).

Similarly, Jayalalitha could have been an actor with dark skin, but she became a charismatic star because of her fair complexion.

In a further investigation of the film, the establishing shot of the opening sequence unfolds with a long shot as someone tries to swim across a mighty river. In the backdrop, a lush green hill can be seen with suspenseful musical score. The next shot, towards the banks of the river, shows an old man trying to keep Vengaiyan (MGR) from being swept away. As he is safely carried onto a rock, the shaky and shivering old man shouts, '*Jeeva..... Jeeva.... Jeevaaaa....*' The old man gets a response from a girl, his granddaughter, Jeeva, forthwith, as if she has been expecting her grandpa. In the next shot Jeeva runs towards the river from the plains as the blue partly cloudy sky enhances her beauty. In the following shot, Jeeva sees her grandfather with Vengaiyan and is shocked as he is injured and distressed. When she came closer to them, Jeeva keeps her grandpa steady and worriedly starts asking him about what has just taken place:

Jeeva: What happened to you? Who is this?

Grandpa: He is our leader, who has been under solitary confinement for 20 years. Having rescued him from prison, I have done my duty to my **motherland**. Even though he is physically matured he is still a child, who can't even communicate. Can you do me a favour by **teaching and educating** our leader with basic

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skills to live and the brave qualities of a warrior as I have taught you? Until he becomes competent and completely independent, you must protect him without making his presence known to anyone, including his mother, as his life is in danger.

(As they keep talking, the camera takes a pan shot showing the river, trees and the jungle).

Jeeva: I willingly accept, Grandpa! I will sacrifice everything for him and I will not sacrifice him for anything, I swear!

Grandpa: The future of our **motherland** is in your hands, Jeeva!

(Having said that, the old man breaths his last and Jeeva wails, 'Grandpaaa...')

The location of the scene and the verbal exchange, which come in the early part of the film, assume enormous significance. While Turner (1986) emphasises the inseparability of the link between the Australian identity and landscape, Tamils also have an indivisible association with their land as well. To paraphrase (Turner 1986, p. 26), 'a nature is conventionalised' in Tamil society, 'and the combination of mysticism and romanticism' is in their 'representation in their narratives'. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Tamils attach divine meaning to the land by worshipping it as a goddess. In terms of the importance of landscape in films, Anand Pandian argues, 'Cinematic landscapes express not only the feelings of film characters, the intentions of their makers, and the hopes of their viewers but also the force and quality of material worlds that enfold and exceed them all' (Pandian 2011, p. 53). In this scene, the first meeting of two lead roles (also two most charismatic leaders) take place on the river bank of the unpolluted, green, and mountainous landscape, indicating purity, innocence and prosperity. This enriches the visual spectacle for the audience as the narration offers them hope about peace, growth, and a future for the viewers. Quoting a

famous Tamil director, Bharathiraja, A Pandian writes, 'Location [landscape] itself is a character. It will speak; the location [landscape] will speak to you' (Pandian 2011, p. 55).

The interaction between Jeeva and her grandpa is even more important to analyse as it ultimately provided a platform for Jayalalitha's political career by projecting her persona as conforming to the traditional roles of a typical Tamil woman, which is to bring a man into the mainstream whenever and wherever he fails. From an intertextual perspective, this particular value system falls in line with one of the five great epics of ancient Tamil literature, *Silapadikaaram*. Written during the second century BC by Ilangovadigal, one of the lead female characters in *Silapadikaaram* helps her immoral husband earn back his lost fortune. The literary epic deals mainly with the three major virtues: Truth will punish the irresponsible erring king, a woman with great morals will be praised by the intellects, and past deeds will haunt you to give back their yields.

In *Adimaip Penn*, the characterisation of Jeeva and Pavalavalli echo these virtues. Jeeva's willingness to accept the responsibility of training an immature crown prince to project the character of someone who can lead from the front, while in conformity with the already existing value system. In a way, it creates the image of an ideal woman, while at the same time legitimizing her influential relationship with MGR. As MGR himself produced the film and played an instrumental role in making it, the characterisation of Jayalalitha had been meticulously planned and carefully constructed.

Stephanie Tawa Lama (2001) argues that in her political career, Jayalalitha projects herself as a mother, subsequently as the goddess of Tamils. Lama further traces the origin of projecting women as goddesses to ancient Hindu literature

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such as *Mahabharatham* and to the freedom movement in modern India, during which leaders such as Gandhi, popularised this practice by glorifying women as goddesses and propagandising ideologies such as Mother India. The similar argument can also be made in regards to the characterisation of *Adimaip Penn*. In the brief exchange above, the country has been referred to as 'Mother Land', then Jayalalitha is projected as someone who performs motherly duties to MGR. The idea here is the image of mother culminating in the construction of goddess identity, as what happened in the case of Jayalalitha. This goes in consonance with a popular Tamil saying, 'Mother and Father are the first god and goddess.' At one point, in the exchange in *Adimaip Penn*, Jeeva swears to her grandfather that she would sacrifice everything for MGR, but she will not sacrifice MGR for anything. Such self-sacrificing nature is the most extreme form of commitment a woman can show to her husband. The depiction of such sentiments in cinema may be termed as the 'politics of sentiment', as those sentiments politicise human emotions in order to construct a particular star image. Throughout history, Tamil society has revered women who sacrificed themselves for the significant males in their lives, starting from father and brothers, then husband and children and grandchildren. To be accepted as one among them and to be glorified as ideal, film characters play around the existing notions about women. For male audiences, such women pose no threat and for female audiences, these kind of women characters offer an acceptance and acknowledgement of what they are already doing in their families. One might argue here that this is how the ordinariness of daily lives is being celebrated in cinematic characters, paving the way for the image construction of film stars.

The construction of the image of Jayalalitha as the mother of the Tamils has its origins in this film, given the fact that she began her cinematic career at the age of 16 in 1965 and here at the age of 20 she plays the role of a mother figure to MGR, who was already in his 50s. This becomes evident in the above mentioned dialogue from *Adimaip Penn*, as it has also been remembered in her biography (Manimegalai 2011). As Lama (2001) argues the adulation of Jayalalitha (the person) as a goddess stems from her cinematic image, an image which also helped her to dissociate herself from her cinematic image as a glamour queen, which had been used by the opposition political parties against her. As Jeeva's grandfather hands over the innocent and much older Vengaiyan to Jeeva, he asks his granddaughter to take care of and to 'teach and educate the child-like' Vengaiyan. Along with this discourse, her emphasis upon self-sacrificing values underscores the image construction of the very young Jayalalitha as the mother. The image construction of the mother has been further emphasised in a song, where Jeeva sings (the actual voice of Jayalalitha, which is very unusual, as Indian actors almost always have background singers):

> Mother means love; father means wisdom; teacher means education; There is no other God in this world except them

This song is preceded by a scene in which Jeeva feeds MGR with fresh cow's milk and the song is juxtaposed with scenes of a calf drinking milk from the mother cow. The cow is sacred to Tamil society. In the song, Jeeva is shown as living in communion with nature and domesticated animals such as cows, deer, rabbits and pigeons. It is worthwhile to mention here that throughout his cinematic, as well as public life, MGR always revered his own mother as goddess. One could easily visualize the way MGR's followers have seen the constructed

image of Jayalalitha as mother. As the song proceeds, the second stanza comes with more powerful lines:

> When you start realizing that mother tongue and mother land are equal to the two eyes in the face, it will ensure our well-being.

This exchange is more powerful in the context of Tamil society in the late 1960s, during which Tamil nationalism was at its peak and many of the leading personalities in cinema, mainly MGR, were advocates of the Tamil separatist movement in South India. By making his favourite co-star to sing this song at the very early stage of her film career, MGR clearly sends signals to his followers and fans, by indirectly expressing his willingness to induct Jayalalitha in his political arsenal.

It is not only that Jayalalitha has been projected as a serious and ambitious actor in the film *Adimaip Penn,* the seriousness of Jayalalitha's characters were supplemented with her glamour as well. For instance, throughout the film, Jeeva wears short skirts and blouses of different colours. The glamour does not stop with that. Jayalalitha has another song in which she performs a belly dance, and there are some bathing scenes, too. *Adimaip Penn* is an example of the carefully crafted screen image and the juxtaposition of the image of the fair-skinned Jayalalitha as a youthful, teenage glamour queen, a motherly figure, and cultural icon.

Conformity to conservative values

As far as Tamil films are concerned, female actors are expected to conform to the traditionally conservative values of women such as chastity— a

necessary value for Tamil women. Little has changed since the early days of Tamil cinema. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Four, 'a normal Tamil woman' is expected to fully support her male counterpart, which is evident in *Padayappa* where an assertive and outspoken woman faces an untimely death. Films such as *Naattamai* and *Captain Prabhakaran* (see the later Chapters) reflect the same sentiments and values of female characterisation. In the view of Jacob-Pandian, chastity is the 'master symbol' of Tamil society, 'a linguistically and culturally distinctive group in South Asia' (1977, p. 52). Glorification of chastity is also found in ancient Tamil literatures and embedded in religion. Tamil goddesses are believed to be the symbols of chastity, for instance, the goddess Kannagi. The connection between female characters in films and divinity can be seen in other Indian cinema(s) too. For example, looking into the portrayal of goddesses in Bollywood (Hindi) films, Robert Rintoul (2011) argues that Bollywood films maintain the portrayal of traditionally iconographic images of goddesses, such as, Devi-mata (Divine mother), Shakthi (Universal force) and so forth. He argues that a woman becomes a goddess or assumes this role when she possesses the divine qualities by defending conservative values even during tumultuous phases of life. He writes:

> Along with the phenomenon of darshan, dharma and rasa, the Bollywood masala film exhibits an unmistakable influence of incorporating the divine feminine, or Shakti, into its representational iconography. Shakti is a very esoteric Sanskrit term usually referring to occult power (siddhis), manifested by women through their chastity or via the implementation of complex yoga techniques and/or *tapasya* (extreme austerity). Notable examples of women in the Hindu epics, who have inculcated divine powers due to their purity or tapasya include Kunti-devi (mother of the Pandavas), Draupadi (the wife of the Pandavas), Amba, Savitri, and Gadhari (all from the Mahabharata epic), and Sita-devi from the Ramayana tradition. (2011, p. 42).

The first and foremost virtue of Tamil women is to protect their chastity, and the most important duty of any man is to defend his woman whenever there is a threat to her chastity; and. Losing chastity is utterly disgraceful and a woman must be prepared to lose her life rather than lose her chastity. Tamil narratives, both fictional and figurative, reflect this ideal. Falling in line with this tradition, Tamil films represent and revere chastity by characterising leading female roles in the same way. To add further, a female film character can have a leading role, only when she keeps herself safe from sexual disgrace. This is usually done with the portrayal of female protagonists in opposition with another, such as a deviant female character, who rebels or opposes mainstream values. In *Adimaip Penn* the traditionally conservative Jeeva is contrasted with the arrogant, ambitious, and adventurous queen Pavalavalli. As Jayalalitha plays both roles, these two characters are sharply contrasted in terms of their demeanours, social positions, costumes, class situation, and more importantly, the values and virtues that they uphold. In the end, Pavalavalli is tamed by Vengaiyan who transforms her into a good (conservative) individual.

Characterisation of Pavalavalli

As the narrative of *Adimaip Penn* unfolds Jeeva and Vengaiyan are in love with each other, Pavalavalli enters into their lives thereby setting a stage for the unfolding of a love triangle. An analysis of this sequence will help in understanding the deep-rooted value of chastity in Tamil society. As mentioned, Pavalavalli wants to marry Vengaiyan even after knowing that he is already in love with Jeeva, who as the story unfolds, happens to be Pavalavalli's own sister.

The introduction of Pavalavalli takes place in conjunction with class, power, masculinity, and lust. A close up shot of the flag, red carpet welcome, beating of the drums, words of praise from the servants, and the triumphant music show the aristocratic life style of Pavalavalli. This is juxtaposed with the image of an exhausted and angry Vengaiyan. He is tied in metal chains to two opposite pillars, displaying his powerful biceps. This particular scene is probably the first ever attempt in the history of Tamil films to project a muscular body as sign of masculinity. As Pavalavalli ascends to her throne, a tracking shot spins around the fort of Pavalavalli, depicting her affluent lifestyle. The next shot offers a close up of the unperturbed queen, Pavalavalli. She stares straight at the shackled Vengaiyan and glances at the minister asking him to explain the situation. The minister explains that Vengaiyan is detained because he was caught red-handed engaging in espionage acts. Vengaiyan is ordered to be killed in front of the queen, but with his might, he breaks the metal chains. Pavalavalli becomes attracted and seduced by the masculinity of Vengaiyan, that she assigns him to be her personal bodyguard. From the demeanour of Pavalavalli, it is evident that she has been enticed by the muscular strength of Vengaiyan. In this way, Pavalavalli breaks the tradition since the Tamil culture does not allow a woman to display her sexual desire openly.

According to the law of Manu, the ancient Hindu law, women are compared with the soil while men are equated with seeds. The metaphor further emphasises that seeds are more important than the soil (Wadley 1977). As Krishan (1986, p. 117) rightly mentions, 'Women in India were traditionally members of a stratified society, characterised by the ideology and practice of inequality.' In traditional India, women have a distinctly inferior status within

familial, economic, educational, social, and religious spheres, when compared with their male counterparts (Ghosh & Roy 1997). Her subsidiary status in domestic and social affairs extends even to the sexual life. Be it a queen or a common girl, a Tamil woman must be docile in matters regarding sex and the opposite sex. For instance, Ravindran and Balasubramanian (2004) found that Tamil women (even in the younger age group) have limited decision-making power within the household, including matters regarding sex. In the above-mentioned scene from *Adimaip Penn*, appointing Vengaiyan as personal bodyguard is just a pretext for Pavalavalli to sleep with him. Even though there is no explicit dialogue in the scene, the way the plot unfolds gives sufficient contextual clues about the intention of Pavalavalli. Having done so, the queen Pavalavalli faces another taboo with regards to sex; Tamil society does not allow sex without marriage. In the next sequence, Pavalavalli tries to persuade Vengaiyan to marry her. In return, she promises to appoint him as King. The assertive attitude and aggressive approach of Pavalavalli is not appreciated by the audience; her behaviour gains her no sympathy, as it contradicts the core value system of the Tamil society, where a sexually assertive woman is considered a sinner and sexual aggressiveness as sinful. Pavalavalli's reckless behaviour, in trying to steal a man who already belongs to another woman, means that her character is certain to be shunned by society.

The MGR–Jaya relationship

It is essential for this study to look into detail about the most charismatic and controversial relationship between Jayalalitha and MGR as this relationship

goes beyond their personal lives and it still continues to shape the political spectrum of Tamil Nadu. MGR and Jayalalitha paired for the first time in the Tamil film, *One Man in a Thousand* (*Aayirathil Oruvan*, dir. B Pandhulu 1965). According to the biographer Muthukumar (2009, p. 78), *One Man in a Thousand* proved to be a turning point for MGR's film and political career. As MGR had the final say in his heroines, he was consulted by the director Pandhulu over the choice of Jayalalitha for the film. At first, MGR seemed to be unconvinced about Jayalalitha. He conceded, however, after shooting a few trial shots that he looked younger with a new and teenage heroine. Muthukumar (2009, p. 79) further adds that MGR had a liking for Jayalalitha's carefree and courageous attitude. What has made Jayalalitha special in the Tamil film industry was her close association with MGR. She paired with the great MGR even before her first film was released, and soon the couple became very prominent and popular among the Tamil audiences. Together they acted in 28 films in just eight years, from 1965–1973 (Manimegalai 2011). It is also worth mentioning that MGR has never paired up in so many films with any other female actor. Given the influential power of MGR in the Tamil film industry, the choice of his co-stars has always been his prerogative. Hence, it is no coincidence that the MGR– Jaya pair acted together in nearly thirty films. For the press and the public, the pair seemed to be more real rather than just on the reel, as MGR and Jayalalitha were seen together at film festivals, local cultural-political events, and overseas film functions. Describing the relationship between MGR and Jayalalitha, Dickey (2005) points out that people are able to relate Jayalalitha as the wife of their elder brother (*Annie*). One biography (Manimegalai 2011) of Jayalalitha mentions that in 1968 alone MGR-Jayalalitha paired in eight films. Furthermore, MGR did not opt for any other

female co-star in his next 14 films over a span of three years (1967–69). The relationship stopped in 1973, after which the pair never acted together on screen. However, Jayalalitha became an influential propaganda secretary for MGR's political party AIADMK in 1982. In another biography, Muthukumar (2009, p. 182) points out that since Jayalalitha was in MGR's good books, he wanted to give more importance to Jayalalitha in his political party.

At first, MGR asked Jayalalitha just to look after the organizational activities of the International Tamil conference held in Madurai in 1982. It should be noted that she became a member of the party only then, despite being with MGR for a long time. Later he gave her the responsibility of popularizing his dream project, a 'mid-day-meal programme,' under which, day care centres were established all across the state and poor children were fed and taken care of during the day. As the programme predictably became popular, so did Jayalalitha's fame. She soon became a canon of the party propaganda as MGR expected and he appointed her as the party's propaganda secretary. Muthukumar (2009, p. 195) notes that MGR's meticulous moves, along with Jayalalitha's charisma, pulled the crowd towards her, second only to MGR. She rose to prominence within the party and in the public mind. As MGR gave importance to Jayalalitha at the cost of sidelining some senior party members, it created animosity between them. Hence, MGR had to remove Jayalalitha from her influential position. However, it was believed that the removal was only a temporary arrangement (Manimegalai 2011). The situation was turned upside down during the 1984 assembly elections, when MGR was hospitalized in the USA for a kidney transplant operation and treatment for paralysis. Senior party leaders wanted to use Jayalalitha to fill the 'vacuum' created by MGR's absence (Muthukumar 2009; Manimegalai 2011). After

recovery, MGR made her a Member of Parliament on behalf of AIADMK. In this way Jayalalitha began her political journey at the federal level. In this context, it can be argued that it is her love life with MGR which made her interesting and appealing, as a 'star, in the same way that Dyer mentions in the case of Elizabeth Taylor:

> Whereas other stars may stand for types of people, Taylor stands for the type 'star' — the most expensive, the most beautiful, and the most married and divorced, being in the world. Her love life plus her sheer expensiveness are what make her interesting, not her similarity to you or me (1998, p. 43).

Chastity and misdemeanours

In India, especially in a relatively conservative society such as Tamil Nadu, a woman's character is weighed by her sexual docility (Ahuja 1997). Her sexual submissiveness is highly valued and respected throughout ages, right from the ancient literature such as *Silappathikaaram*, to the modern film narrative including *Padayappa*. A Tamil woman has to exhibit her virtues in the way she talks, walks, laughs, and wears clothes. Girls are not supposed to keep their heads up, they should not laugh out loud, they should not sit in the assembly of men, they always ought to sit politely and walk slowly, keeping their heads low. A Tamil proverb speaks volumes about the need for woman to be submissive: Tobacco loses its strength if it bursts in the plant while a woman loses her chastity if she laughs aloud (*Pombalai sirichaa pochi; pugaiyilai vedichaa pochi*). In such a society, Pavalavalli's provocative walking, mannerisms, assertiveness, and sexual advancements project her as a threat to the existing value system. In one of her encounters with Vengaiyan, Pavalavalli meets him in private. Vengaiyan is dressed like a Roman Emperor. Being astonished with Vengaiyan's handsome

appearance and masculine physique, Pavalavalli cravingly moves her eyes to behold Vengaiyan from head to toe. In contrast, Jeeva does not make any sexual advances to Vengaiyan even though she has been living in close quarters with him. She still maintains her chastity even though they are in love with each other; she waits for them to get married first. The characterisation of Jeeva is the embodiment of cultural conformity while the characterisation of Pavalavalli is a threat to society. As Uma writes:

> Traditionally, patriarchy tended to view and polarize women into two extremes: the subservient, pure 'Madonna' and the opposite, the 'evil seductress of men' (2002, p. 45).

In the clash between conformity (Jeeva) and deviance (Pavalavalli), it is conformity which is finally victorious. Pavalavalli gets tamed in the end; she becomes refined with the loving help of the conforming and compassionate Jeeva and Vengaiyan— the stereotypical Tamil hero who steadfastly defends and protects women— as the custodian of conservative values.

Colour, caste, and class

Indian society in general and Tamil society in particular is stratified based upon a caste hierarchy in what sociologists and anthropologists term as 'ascribed status'. As we can see from the following argument, people of different castes possess distinctive physical features (Béteille 1967). In terms of the diverse physical features of the Indian populace, many linguists and anthropologists refer to the different racial distribution in the Indian society. They also believe that racial differences in India are mainly based upon the caste stratification. Ram Ahuja (1999, pp. 18-19) argues that the Indian population is derived from six

ethnic groups: Negritos, Proto-Australoids, Mongoloids, Mediterraneans or Dravidians, Brachycephals, and Nordic Aryans. He mentions further that Dravidians (South Indians, mainly, Tamils) or Mediterraneans include three sub-types: True Mediterranean, Paleo-Mediterranean and Oriental Mediterranean. Ahuja (1993, p.19) argues that the Dravidians are reputed to have built up the city civilisation of the Indus valley, whose remains have been found at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa (both are located in Modern Pakistan). Furthermore, as the Aryans invaded the ancient Dravidian homeland, the Dravidians were said to have fled towards the contemporary South India. It is also argued that it was the Aryans, who introduced the caste system to India during 1000 BC (Ghurye 1969; Thapar 1996).

Both Romila Thapar (1996) and Béteille (1967) postulate that the current Indian population can broadly be divided into two: Indo-Aryans (North Indians) and Dravidians (South Indians). Scholars such as Sir Herbert Risley (under whom the 1901 Census of India was conducted), Edvard Westermarck (1903), DN Majumdar (1952), and GS Ghurye (1969) strongly argue that race is the fundamental base for the use of the caste system in India. According to their perspective, the clash of cultures and the contact of races crystallized castes in India (Ghurye 1961, pp. 119-135). Dark-skinned Dravidians were the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent before the fairer Aryans took possession of it. When the fair skinned Indo-Aryans, comprising the Romans, Iranians, Spanish, Portuguese, and Anglo-Saxons, migrated to the Indian subcontinent from central Asia in about 2500 BC, there came racial and cultural clashes (Ahuja 1999, p. 255). The indigenous Dravidians, seafaring commercial people by nature, did not have the knowledge of horses or iron. The Aryans brought with them the horses

and iron weapons. This resulted in the defeat and expulsion of the Dravidians in the hands of the Aryans. In the history of the world, whenever one group subdues the other, the winners exercise their power and losers have to accept the supremacy of the winner both at cultural and administrative levels. What made the Aryans' case more unique was the religious/ritual based discriminatory system that they brought, namely, Vedic culture, which became the cornerstone of the caste system in India. According to sociologist Ghurye:

> Being 'civilized' and fair in colour in comparison to the natives, the Vedic Aryans tried to show off their exclusiveness. They had developed the exclusive spirit in social behaviour and had cultivated a partiality for ideas of ceremonial superiority. They used rather strong expressions against the natives and imposed various restrictions in their social interactions with them (1961, p. 160).

The colour-based discrimination became inescapable for the Dravidians during the medieval times, when another stock of fair-skinned people from Central Asia such as Moghuls, invaded India. This, of course, was followed by the British colonisation of India for nearly two hundred years. As a result, the pale complexion of the skin is akin to pride, privilege, and prejudice, and more importantly, it indicates 'cultural imperialism' (Béteille 1967, p. 460). In the popular discourse, fair skin is a synonym for innocence, purity, and beauty. In Tamil society, as elsewhere, high social rewards go with certain physical traits. Fair skin is, perhaps, the most obvious disposition of all. It has become a symbol of superiority, authority, power, and beauty among the dark-skinned Dravidians. One has to remember here that racial intermixture has always taken place. Béteille observes:

> The reversal of the assumed (racial) correlation is viewed as not only unusual but sinister. For instance a South Indian proverb

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warns, 'Trust not a dark Brahmin or a fair Holeya [a low caste]'; another North Indian proverb maintains, 'A dark Brahmin, a fair Chuhra, a woman with a beard — these three are contrary to nature'; yet another proverb cautions, 'Do not cross a river with a black Brahmin or a fair Chamar' (1967, p. 452).

In other words, complexion of the skin and the prevalence of cultural stereotypes and privileges are not uncommon in Indian society in general and Tamil society in particular. In addition, skin complexion is associated with caste and class, which plays a pivotal role in economic, educational, and social benefits. My argument here is that having fair skin is viewed as an extraordinary trait by the Tamil societies, who have been subdued on the basis of dark skin for centuries. Whoever possesses extraordinary traits becomes charming and therefore an actor with fair skin becomes charismatic. As argued, in a society that is predominantly populated by dark-skinned people and in a society where mythologies and the popular discourses parallel fair-skin with divinity, the fair skinned photogenic Jayalalitha was extraordinary. Her extraordinariness was further strengthened by her intimate relationship with fair-skinned charismatic actor MGR. In other words, Jayalalitha became a charismatic actor due to her fair skin. As Max Weber defines:

> Charismatic leaders were seen by their followers to have some extraordinary power or quality that commanded obedience... The leader is literally blessed with a sign of grace or, in secular terms, is a genius. As Bendix puts, 'it is associated with a collective excitement through which masses of people respond to some extraordinary experience and by virtue of which they surrender themselves to a heroic leader. The use of the word 'surrender' is key—charismatic leaders are spellbinders who command fanatical support (Allen 2004, p. 106).

Jayalalitha's fair-complexion was regarded as a sign of grace, which commanded obedience, firstly from the already existing charismatic leader,

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followed by the 'surrender' from the masses. As a consequence, female political representation in Tamil Nadu relied upon a noted 'charisma of complexion,' as well as conjugal relations, and caste affinity. This study contends that Jaya's entry, elevation and retention in her cinematic and political position in Tamil Nadu is utterly due to the combination of her fair-skin, her extramarital relationship with MGR, and her upper-caste status. This argument can further be validated by looking into the national context. Unlike the situation in Indian national politics, where the Gandhi dynasty ensured political success for the female members of the family, Jayalalitha had no direct 'political inheritance' (Genovese 1993), except having cinematic fame as her background. I shall examine these claims by looking at the cinematic representation of the fair-skinned Jayalalitha in *Adimaip Penn.*

Fair skin in Tamil cinema and society

As mentioned, the fair skin of Jayalalitha has been cited as one of the main factors behind her successful cinematic and political careers. The reasons for the popular preference for fair skin (or seeing the light-skinned people as beautiful) can be traced back to ancient India, which was carried on through the medieval era and subsequently during the colonial years. It is appropriate to establish more clearly the link between fair skin and the perception of beauty, and preference for the white phenotype among Indians in general and Tamils in particular.

One of the popularly prevalent perceptions in India is North Indians are fair-skinned people while South Indians, especially Tamils, are dark-skinned people (Béteille 1967). Notions such as these have been there for centuries, thanks

to the colonial historians of the late 19th century, such as Max Muller and John Wilson. The idea of Aryans and Dravidians is also found in religious scriptures stating that fair-skinned Aryans are upper castes and dark-skinned Dravidians are lower castes. In the Indian social system caste hierarchy has been the most important determining factor for one's occupation and social status. Ahuja defines:

> The castes are hereditary endogamous groups with fixed traditional occupations, observing commensal prohibitions and social restrictions on interaction... The castes are linked with the four varnas (colours) for determining the status in ritual hierarchy (1993, p. 18).

According to the Hindu social system, there are four main castes, namely, *Brahmana, Kshatriyas, Vysyas* and *Shudras*. Ritually-superior castes such as *Brahmana*, *Kshatriya,* and *Vysyas* are fair-skinned people and the *Shudras* are dark-skinned *Dravidians* and they are subservient to the other castes. Consequently, the fair-skinned Aryans have been at the helm of power, authority, education and employment while the dark skinned Dravidians were untouchables and fit only for doing menial jobs.

The hierarchical caste system continued to operate without facing any intervention or any major threat even during the medieval times. Coupled with religious texts and ritual practices and most importantly the two hundred years of British colonisation have indelibly strengthened the popular belief that identifies whiteness with power, authority, cultural hegemony, and beauty. In South India, cultural hegemony of the fair-skinned North Indians (Aryans) and the white-skinned colonial masters have underscored the significance of skin colour. The invention of cinema and its subsequent arrival in Tamil Nadu have further

strengthened the association of beauty and fair skin in popular culture. The screen needs attractive people and the sexy actors are those who possess fair complexion. As Margaret Hunter (2005) noted, the light skin served as social capital for women since white skin was equated to beauty. She also argues that light-skinned women could use their skin colour to acquire other forms of capital, such as economic and educational. This became more evident with regard to the female actors, especially in Indian cinema as they are mainly used for glamour appeal and as emotional support for the heroes. With the arrival of colour films, fair- skinned female actors became the order of the day. It was in this context that Jayalalitha has begun her film career in Tamil through *White Garment* (*Vennira Adai*, dir. Sridar 1965) at the age of sixteen. Soon after, she was able to get the attention of MGR, a popular and fair-skinned star.

Whereas attributes such as social discourse and bravery serve as charismatic features for male actors, fair complexion is the pivotal factor for the charisma of female actors. This study refers to this phenomenon as 'charisma of complexion' and argues that it has been an essential part of Jayalalitha's cinematic success and political ascendancy. There are references in popular media about her skin complexion, stating that her skin is as tender as rose petals and as fair as the 'North Indians'. This brings in the cultural hegemony of the Hindi speaking North Indians, who belong to the fair-skinned Indo-Aryans. As Santhosh Chandrashekar points out, in popular imagination, South Indians are often depicted as darker than North Indians (2005, p. 3).

As MGR spearheaded the Dravidian movement through the screen, Jayalalitha's proximity to him drew her closer to the Dravidian politics. *Adimaip Penn* is probably the first film by which Jayalalitha made her first political step. In

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one of the scenes, Jeeva 'educates' Vengaiyan to become a 'human being'. One of the scenes opens with a silhouette shot of the sun. Vengaiyan points his finger at the rising sun and signals, 'What is that?' Jeeva replies:

> That is the rising sun. It is our god as it drives away darkness and brings life and light. Without the sun, neither you nor I will survive. In other words there is no world without the sun.

Jeeva, then, teaches Vengaiyan to worship the sun. This scene has to be seen with the political landscape of Tamil Nadu and Dravidian ideology. Firstly, the rising sun is an electoral symbol of DMK, one of the first Dravidian political parties. As Pandian (1991) points out MGR promotes political symbols and uses cinema to convey his political messages. In the aforementioned scene, the symbol of the Dravidian political party is being promoted in the pretext of highlighting the importance of the sun. Secondly, the Dravidian movement is an anti-religious movement. It does not accept worshipping of idols. It replaces religious piety with devotion to language, ideology, and rationality. In the above-mentioned scene, the idea is to encourage love and loyalty to Dravidian political ideology not religious worship.

In addition, popular imagination parallels fair skin with educational achievement, a sign of the elite culture and affluent economic status. Not surprisingly, Jayalalitha was educated in a convent and her command over the English and Hindi languages is widely appreciated by the media. This is in sharp contrast to her political rivals, who need interpreters to speak to North Indians and foreign delegates. The linguistic skills of Jayalalitha further strengthen the existing prejudices associated with fair skin. Chandrasekar argues that the colour of the skin plays a determining role in 'a person's marital options, educational

achievement, and other indicators of life chances' (2005, p. 6). He further emphasises the need to study 'pigmentocracy' (p. 3) as a form of social stratification in the Third-world context. In line with colour and everyday life, Esposito brushes aside the ideas such as 'colour-blind society or post-racial society' (2009 p. 533). Noting that colour still continues to 'structure our lives' (p. 533) because 'racism has been both institutionalised and personalised' (p. 522).

Broadly speaking, Jayalalitha's career can be divided in three phases: from 1965–1973, 1973–1991, and post-1991. The early phase (1965–1971) is the time when Jayalalitha made her debut in the film industry, establishing her position in the field, and the onset of the life-changing relationship with MGR. The second phase (1973–1991) was marked by a lot of controversies both in her personal life and professional life, which includes the tumultuous relationship with MGR as well. The third phase (1991 onwards) is important in yet another aspect. This has been the time when Jayalalitha has acquired a charisma, which was independent of MGR. During this third phase, Jayalalitha has been able to woo her vote banks based upon her charisma of complexion, which also incorporates latent caste and communal elements as well.

Colour and cultural hegemony

The cultural hegemony of North Indians and the perceived racial inferiority of South Indians go back to the British colonial times and their political unification of India. During the British raj, the entire Indian subcontinent was ruled from the northern city of Delhi since early 1900s. It is also important to mention here that uprising against the British rule was mainly confined to the

regions around Delhi, and the relatively stable and peaceful peninsular South India did not pose any threat to the British Empire. However, they needed to be vigilant over the activities in Afghanistan to stop the advancement of Russia in the region.

Even after Indian independence in 1947, Delhi continued to be the political, judicial, and cultural capital of India. In the modern parliamentary democracy of India, It is the Central (federal) government which has more power than the states and it is the north Indian states which have the dominant voice in federal politics as they are numerically superior in the Parliament. As Delhi becomes the centre of the power, so as the people located in and around the place. There was also a popular saying among the ruling class that whoever controls Delhi will control the South and Central Asia (Chandra 1996). In other words, power is associated with North India. Henceforth, the popular perception is that fair-skinned North Indians are at the helm of affairs; and having fair skin not only represents beauty but also power and cultural superiority as well. The argument here is that with Jayalalitha's fair skin she is able send a message that she is not just beautiful but also ethnically superior. Jayalalitha's superiority is further endorsed by caste prejudice. As previously mentioned, Jayalalitha belongs to the Brahmin caste, which is regarded as ritually superior and socially dominant as they continue to control education, public employment, and media. Even though the Dravidian movement has overthrown the Brahmins from the political sphere in South India, they still control the cultural capital of Tamil Nadu in areas such as the media, music, dance and arts.

Other actors with fair skin

Jayalalitha's fair skin sets her apart from the rest of her counterparts. This does not ignore or undermine the presence and popularity of other fair-complexioned actors such as B Saroja Devi, Jaya's contemporary who is well known for the film *Coxswain* (*Padagotti* dir. T Prakash Rao, 1964), and more recent actors such as Revathi (*Smell of the Soil*, *Mann Vasanai* dir. Bharathiraja, 1983) and Kushboo Sundar (*Year 16*, *Varusham 16* dir. Fazil, 1989), who are also well known for their whiteness. All of them are extremely popular among media and the public. Jayalalitha's arrival into the Tamil film industry also coincided with the retirement of another fair-skinned actor and one of MGR's most popular heroines, Saroja Devi. It has to be noted that before Jaya's arrival it was Saroja Devi, who was MGR's favourite partner in the films. She had starred in more than two hundred films in various languages, mainly in Tamil. She has paired with MGR in 26 films (next only to Jaya). She retired from acting soon after her marriage. Saroja Devi was seen (both by MGR and the public) as MGR's favourite. Unlike Jayalalitha, she was not involved in any controversial relationship with MGR. Revathi, who directed and played a lead role in an English-language film, *Mitr, My Friend* (2002), is another well-respected Tamil actor. Her cinematic career came to a halt, if not an end, after she married an obscure film director. Kushboo Sundar is another fair-skinned actor; besides her light skin, she is also famous for her glamour and, of late, for her TV shows and soap operas. She is married to a Tamil actor-director Sundar. Each of these actors acted in more than one hundred films and entered into politics at the end of their film career, just as Jayalalitha had done. Saroja Devi attempted to become a

politician after the death of her husband in 1986. Revathi entered into electoral politics as an independent candidate while Kushboo Sundar joined the DMK party. However, none of them were successful in their political venture, despite their illustrious film career that paralleled Jayalalitha's. They were unable to convert their cinematic charisma into political popularity. The difference between Jayalalitha and the other three actors is that only Jayalalitha had a conjugal relation with a charismatic actor, such as MGR, and none of them had an upper-caste (Brahmin) status. What this demonstrates is that the political success of cinematically charismatic stars also depends upon their conjugal relations with another charismatic star with an upper-caste status. In other words while the 'charisma of complexion' appears to be the main factor responsible for the political success of female actors in Tamil Nadu, their conjugal relations and caste status serve as auxiliary factors.

Charisma of Jayalalitha

In the context of Tamil Nadu, film actors attain star charisma through their popularity in films. Charisma has no form as such but charismatic leaders have traits that make them unique. What sets apart Jayalalitha from other actors is her attributes, such as her complexion, caste, and conjugal association with MGR. As far as Jayalalitha's charisma is concerned, it is manifest in two facets of Weberian charismatic theory: Jaya's fair-complexioned charisma and 'the routinisation of charisma', which fits appropriately with Jaya's political succession after the demise of the charismatic leader, MGR. As Allen argues:

> The routinisation of charisma occurs when people try to transform a unique 'gift of grace' into a permanent possession of everyday

life. Two main factors are involved. There is, first, the problem of succession. If the charismatic leader's qualities are exceptional, then what happens when they die? (2004, p. 108).

Figure 10. Jayalalitha in one of her films during the 1960s

Let me address two facets of this routinisation. As far as the first facet, which I coin the 'charisma of complexion', is concerned having fair skin is considered to be an 'extraordinary trait' in Tamil society. With such extraordinariness, Jayalalitha's charisma is obvious and immediately recognized by Tamil society. According to one biography, Jayalalitha was approached by a Kannada film-maker to act in his upcoming film, *Chinnada Gombe* (dir. B Pandhulu 1964). Jaya's next film (first in Tamil), *White Garment* (1965), was produced and directed by a famous film-maker of that time, Sridar, who belonged to the Brahmin caste and was also known for promoting people from his caste in his films. In that film, almost all crew members belonged to the Brahmin caste— from music director to the make-up man, for instance, Assistant Director, Rajendran (Jayalalitha's paternal uncle), actors Murty, Nirmala, Srikanth, 'Major' Sundararajan, and the Music Composer Viswanathan were Brahmins. Therefore,

in some ways, Jayalalitha's entry into the film industry and her initial chances were due to her charisma of complexion and caste. As Béteille (1967) argues besides ritual superiority, Brahmins have other social advantages, such as better economic, education, and employment status. In Jayalalitha's case, being born into an affluent *Ayyangar* (Tamil Brahmin) family, Jayalalitha was able to get her early education in well-reputed schools as well as English education and exposure to western culture, too. In other words, along with her colour as charisma, Jayalalitha is privileged in other aspects through her caste, class, and educational status.

As far as the second facet of Jaya's charisma is concerned, 'the routinisation of charisma,' Jaya tactfully handled the demise of MGR to her political advantage. It was evident that after the death of charismatic MGR in 1987 there was a succession crisis. As MGR had not formally named anyone as his heir, there was unprecedented chaos in the state such as mass suicide (refer to Chapter Two) and violence in the state assembly. This situation, according to Weber, is not uncommon, as Allen writes on Weberian charisma:

> The problem of succession is common after the death of the charismatic leader. Traditionally, the problem of succession has been dealt with through mechanisms such as revelation, whereby an oracle or wise men select the new leader; designation, whereby the charismatic leader chooses the new leader before his death; or a search for a new figure with particular qualities as occurs in the case of a new Dalai Lama... There can be a major period of instability before the new leader is found or proves their exceptional qualities (2004, p. 108).

In the case of Jayalalitha, I argue that 'revelation' made her triumph in the succession battle. This became even more apparent in her biography. Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines revelation as, 'a fact that people are made

aware of, especially one that has been secret and is surprising.' According to one biography, Jayalalitha makes the public aware about her 'promise' to MGR that had supposedly taken place in a secret exchange between MGR and her. Jayalalitha's biographer reports it as follows:

> After the death of her 'mentor' MGR, Jayalalitha wanted to die. But MGR came in her dream, reminding her of the promise she made to him that she would not commit suicide after MGR's death. Instead, she will continue to travel in the path led by MGR to carry out his good deeds by serving the poor and protecting the people of Tamil Nadu from evil forces (Manimegalai 2011).

Within a year after the publication of this biography, Jayalalitha was elected as the Chief Minister of the state. In this context, her 'revelation' ensured that she succeeded MGR to 'continue' his charismatic legacy.

This interpretation of events goes against the assertion in the popular media who stated that Jaya was not charismatic during her acting years and she attained her charisma only after assuming political power. This argument is fundamentally flawed. Firstly, Jaya stood tall among her female contemporaries in the male-dominant Tamil film industry mainly because of her beauty, based on her fair skin. Secondly, in the context of Tamil society, the acquisition of political power is nearly impossible without cinematic charisma. Jayalalitha would not have become a politician, let alone chief minister, if she had not been a film actor. It is true that Jaya's film career was not without controversies, as with most celebrities. My argument is that Jaya's colourful entry into politics was certainly due to her affiliation with MGR but her successive elevation, was mainly because of her own charisma, which was based on her colour, caste, and more importantly through cinema.

Conclusion

Jayalalitha has always been in the limelight both in cinema and politics. After attaining a position in the film world via her 'charisma of complexion,' she continued to woo the press, fans, and the masses through her 'conjugal' relations with MGR. Her 'relationship' with MGR is still a matter of ongoing gossip and controversy. After the death of MGR, she was in the news for more than one reason. Her tumultuous and a controversial relationship with a former video-store owner Sasikala is polemical too. Joseph (1996) mentions, 'Jayalalitha and Sasikala as Tamil Nadu's first roomies,' a thinly-veiled reference to a lesbian relationship. In a traditionally conservative society such as Tamil Nadu, a same-sex relationship is seen as 'an unnatural offence'. Jayalalitha did not deny such a relationship. Interestingly, she went on to exchange garlands with Sasikala on her sixtieth birthday (*Indo-Asian News Service* 2008), a tradition, according to the Hindu beliefs, that is done only between husband and wife; the controversies do not end there. As a Chief Minister, Jayalalitha is known to be dictatorial and has made many unpopular decisions such as the anti-conversion act stopping the poor from embracing Christianity (*Press Trust of India* 2003). Amidst all those controversies and bad press, Jayalalitha continues to be a charismatic leader, and the controversies and bad publicity seem to have created an indelible wave of sympathy for her among the masses.

In short, Jayalalitha's present charisma outshines her controversies. The combination of her fair skin with her willingness to show her skin on screen, which was considered to be a bold initiative during the 1960s and 1970s, has been successful. Jayalalitha's first Tamil film, '*White Garment* (1965) received an 'A'

(Adults Only) certificate from the film censorship board, the first film to be given an 'A' certificate in 14 years (Anandan 2004, pp. 26-10). As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Jayalalitha is seen wearing glamorous costumes throughout *Adimaip Penn*. It is worthwhile to bring in Pandian's argument that female fans of MGR engage in 'voyeurism' (1992, p. 82) while watching the fair-skinned and well-toned muscular body of MGR on screen. One might apply the same argument to the male audience watching fair-skinned Jayalalitha, wearing skirts showing her belly and fleshy legs. Jayalalitha juxtaposed the universally successful blend of 'innocence and sexiness,' while adding an extra local ingredient, namely, mother sentiment. As Dyer observes of Lana Turner and Marilyn Monroe:

> Thus if it is true to say that American society has seen sexuality, especially for women, as wrong and, in effect, 'extraordinary', and yet has required women to be both sexy and pure and ordinary, then one can see Lana Turner's combination of sexuality and ordinariness, or Marilyn Monroe's blend of sexiness and innocence, as effecting a magical synthesis of these opposites (2007, p. 26).

Putting these all together, this study argues that Jayalalitha's 'charisma of complexion' is the combination of the popular imagination, cultural hegemony, casteism, and the exploitation of popular stereotypes about beauty, glamour, educational achievement, elite culture, and affluent socio-economic status making her a success in cinema. In many ways, *Adimaip Penn* is probably the first and the best film to portray Jayalalitha's 'charisma of complexion', her aristocratic origin, the controversial characters, and other preferred female traits such as chastity. The popularity of Jayalalitha also coincides with the arrival of colour films in Tamil Nadu. Jayalalitha's light skin, while serving as a gateway to her film success, also

made her stand tall in a culturally deprived and socially stratified Tamil society. One also needs to note that her intimate relation with MGR both on- and off- the screen did not only enhance her popularity, but also projected her as the reliable successor to MGR. Her public credentials, validated through her film characters (albeit highly sexualised), endorsed the existing conservative values of women as loyal wife, loving mother and able political heir to MGR.

We now turn to examine the charisma of Rajinikanth, one of the most influential actors in Asia.

Chapter Four

Rajinikanth: the mystical sensation

Come June, class VI students going to schools opting for this textbook will learn about actor Rajinikanth, his life, and how he grew to become one of the top actors in the country.

The Hindu May 2008

The success story of Rajinikanth (popularly known as Rajini) and the trajectory of his stardom fascinate everyone in Tamil Nadu including school children. From a carpenter to a coolie to a bus conductor, Rajini rose to become one of the iconic film actors in Asia with more than 1.5 million registered fans (more than the population of Mauritius) in over 63,000 registered fan clubs (Raja M 2007). He is the second highest paid actor in Asia, next only to Jackie Chan, and politically influential in Tamil Nadu. His salary for one of his recent films, *Sivaji* (dir. S Shankar 2007) was $ 9.87 million (Raja M 2007). A more recent blockbuster *The Robot* (*Endhiran*, dir. S Shankar 2010) was made with a budget of $35 million (Appachi 2010) and was released in 2,250 screens worldwide, including China (Narasimhan 2010).

Rajini is a well-known film star in other advanced countries as well, for instance, he is celebrated in Japanese television shows, and is an unofficial brand ambassador for various consumer products such as the Tohato Co's packaged snacks. Japanese fans operate a website for Rajini (www.rajini.jp), and one of his recent films *Chandramuki* (dir. P Vasu, 2005) was dubbed and released in German cinemas. Thirty-five years after his cinematic entry, with over 200 films to his name, and now entering his mid-sixties, he continues to be an unrivalled superstar of Tamil cinema. Put simply, he is a modern wonder of the Indian

cinema(s). Before discussing the charisma of Rajini, let us look at the context of Tamil film industry at the time of Rajini's arrival in 1975, when new directors such as such as K Balachandar (who introduced Rajini to the film world), Bharathiraja, Balu Mahendra, and J Mahendran were influenced by the global cinema trends such as French New Wave and Italian Neorealism. These directors brought new styles of storytelling to Tamil audience. As mentioned in a newspaper article:

> The late 1970s was also a period of new ideas in Tamil cinema. Bharathiraja with his 16 Vayadhinile broke new ground. Narration of stories changed for better, filmmaking shifted outdoors and the villages were back in focus. Ilayaraja's compositions were refreshingly different and overwhelmingly welcome. Mahendran and Balu Mahendra made a significant impact with their films. Rajini benefited from the new climate and made most of it by creating an alternative idea of hero (Srivathsan 2010).

The 1970s and 1980s were the golden era of Tamil cinema for various reasons. This was the time Tamil cinema started to feel claustrophobic, therefore, begun to go out of the monotonous studio settings (locally known as indoor shootings). New young directors came out with more real-life based stories and adaptations such as *At the Age of 16* (*16 Vayadhinile*, dir. Bharathiraja 1977), the story of a beautiful, intelligent, ambitious, and rural teenage girl, who wants to become a teacher. Her life changes forever as she falls in love with an opportunist urban-based medical doctor who comes to the village on deputation. Other films such as *Falling Flowers* (*Udhirip Pookal*, dir. Mahendran 1979), an adaptation of a short story from one of the famous Tamil writers Pudhumai Pithan, also appeared. *Falling Flowers* is about a sadistic village headman. The story deals with the ruthless rural structure, caste hierarchy, inferior status of women, and the issue of dowry. With the arrival of these films, Tamil cinematic narratives

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witnessed a major shift in terms of storytelling and casting, for instance, in the physical appearances of a hero. As Tamil films became more realistic so did the demand for the actors who resembled real life guys- next-door such as Rajini.

Heterodoxy of Rajinikanth

Rajinikanth was born in 1950 to an impoverished Marathi family in the city of Bangalore, Karnataka. His original name was Shivajirao Gaekwad, which was changed for the film industry. He was the fourth child of his parents, Jijabai and Ramojirao Gaekwad. His father was a police constable and lost his mother at the age of five. He worked in various jobs, including as a coolie and bus conductor. Then, he travelled to Chennai from the neighbouring state of Karnataka with a dream of becoming a villain actor as he thought his dark skin would not fetch him a heroic role. Since Tamil was not his mother tongue; obviously, he had communication difficulties in his early days when he was still an aspiring actor. In addition, he neither had theatrical background nor any lobbying from any caste or political group (at that time) as in the case of other actors such as MGR, Jayalalitha, Vijayakanth, and Sarathkumar.

With unkempt hair and dark skin, Rajini is more of an ordinary bloke than a film star. It is, therefore, expedient to analyse the distinctiveness of Rajini in terms of his skin colour, appearance, caste, and ethnic background. As mentioned in Chapter Three, having fair skin is something that sets apart an actor (even ordinary people) from the rest in Tamil Nadu. It is not only the dark complexion of Rajini but also his facial features that defied the existing definition of a Tamil cinematic hero.

Unlike Rajini, stars such as MGR, Sivaji Ganesan, Gemini Ganesan, and Jaishankar were fair skinned and round faced (the existing preferential features of a film star). Since all these actors were already well established with audiences, the filmmakers continued to opt for heroes with similar facial features and skin complexion as audiences have expected foreknowledge on these aspects of the stars. Secondly, the abovementioned actors came from the dominant caste, and had backgrounds in theatre. In the case of MGR, as mentioned in Chapter Two, even though MGR did not belong to the Tamil caste structure, he strongly associated himself through Dravidian politics. Having none of these advantages, Rajini had to rely on his own merit and his next-door-neighbour appearance. When one looks at Rajini's unorthodox attributes in the context of Tamil cinema in the late 1970s and 1980s, it coincided with the time Tamil cinema underwent a paradigm shift in terms of storytelling.

The new wave in Tamil cinema along with the emanation of young and ambitious directors such as K Balachandar and Bharathiraja (the two directors who made Rajini popular in the early days) broke away from the traditional definitions of Tamil actors and the trajectory of Tamil cinema. Having actors that looked ordinary, and thereby were different from the orthodox definition was one of the many initiatives that they took in their attempt to make Tamil cinema more representative and realist, and Rajini was right there, at the right time, and with the right people. With his eccentric demeanours, strange style, and weird Tamil accent, Rajini made his debut in the film industry through the film *The Rare Melodies* (*Apoorva Raagangal,* dir. K Balachandar 1975). As we have seen previously, unconquerable legend actor-politician MGR left the Tamil film industry to become the chief minister of the state in 1977, barely two years after

Rajini's entry, creating a star vacuum in the Tamil film industry. There were actors such as MK Muthu, who tried to emulate MGR on-screen but were unsuccessful, indicating that only MGR can act like MGR. As this 'saint' of the poor attained political power through his, in Weberian terminology, 'routinisation of charisma' (1947, p. 363), the audience might not have wanted to have another saviour of the same type on the screen, at least temporarily. Therefore, there was no need for charismatic leadership, but of course, there was a quest for a star that had his own style, thereby enticing the crowd to the cinema halls, and Rajini was the industry's response to the audiences' demand for the star vacuum to be filled.

Similar to the MGR formula discussed in Chapter Two, Rajini has 'Rajini style'— which either evolved spontaneously or was self-created out of a desperate attempt to find his space in the film industry— making him quickly popular to the extent that he got invitations to act with Hindi film legends such as Amitabh Bachchan, an extremely rare call from the hegemonic Hindi film industry. In this context, one needs to remember that 'MGR refused to act in Hindi films due to his allegiance to the Dravidian ideology' (Pandian 1992, p. 105).

Be that as it may, Rajini's unconventional appearance and his ability to infuse peculiar elements in his acting style continued to attract Tamil audiences. Rajini's fast paced dialogue delivery, for instance, was different from the other actors and Rajini was particularly known for his cigar flicking style, in total contrast to the screen image of iconic actors such as MGR, who never smoked in their films. Rajini was also famous for his stunt scenes because of his agility and swift movements that were different from the rest during those days. On top of all this, one needs to reiterate the fact that while fair skinned actors such as MGR were seen as someone extraordinary, Rajini's dark skin made him the guy-next-

door. Combining all these, Rajini created his own space in the universe of Tamil cinema, which the media and filmmakers label led as the 'Rajini Style'.

Rajinikanth– Jayalalitha animosity

The film Padayappa released a few months later. Rajini played the hero and tamed the shrew-like heroine. The media and Jayalalitha naturally assumed she had been targeted. She fumed.

Sreekanth 2008, p.130

This section examines *Padayappa (The Creator,* dir. KS Ravikumar 1999*)*, a film that is clearly based on the Rajini-Jaya animosity. The female villain in this film, Neelaambari (Ramya Krishnan) is a fictionalised version of Jayalalitha. *Padayappa* contains an abundance of textual materials such as adulation of heroes, conservative cultural values, moral teachings, and patriarchy. Moreover, to understand the charisma of Rajini and his political influence, one needs to look at the Rajini-Jayalalitha animosity because it was through his public hostility to the Chief Minister Jayalalitha that Rajini was able to prove his mass following to the whole nation.

To begin with, Rajini's direct political entry had been a mystery, something the media started to speculate on since the late 1980s, after the death of MGR. However, Rajini's ability to politically influence the masses was witnessed during the 1996 state assembly elections when Rajini demonstrated the revolutionary attributes that he could use to bring about change in the political dynamics of the state. During this election, he asked the people of Tamil Nadu to oust Jayalalitha from her seat and the AIADMK Party out of power. The Jayalalitha government faced a whitewash defeat in the 1996 election, Jayalalitha

even lost her seat. What we can understand from this is that Rajini's revolutionary message influenced Tamils, cutting across age, gender, religion, class, and caste. In other words, the people of Tamil Nadu demonstrated their faithful devotion to Rajini by throwing Jayalalitha out of power. Let us look at this development in the context of the pre-existing hostile relationship between Rajini and Jayalalitha.

The animosity between Rajini and Jayalalitha seems to have its roots in their acting careers. It is reported that Rajini had once gone to see Jayalalitha in her opulent house. Rajini was just an emerging actor at that time and he was offered the chance to play an insignificant role in comparison with Jayalalitha in the proposed film. Rajini felt sheepish because he rode his old scooter to her mansion, and was insulted by Jayalalitha. Rajini was determined to humiliate Jayalalitha buying a house in the same affluent area, which he did soon after (*The Times of India*, 2007). The fact that Rajini and Jayalalitha continued to live in the same neighbourhood, heightened the acrimonious relationship between the two, with Rajinikanth's fans reported to have been harassed and hassled by Jayalalitha's security guards. Two things have to be noted here. Firstly, film stars' houses are tourist spots for people and visiting their favourite star's house is a pilgrimage of the fans. Secondly, during her tenure as Chief Minister in 1991-1996, Jayalalitha was widely criticized and was infamous for having impenetrable layers of security, causing heavy traffic jams that lasted for hours, culminating in an extreme inconvenience to the public. Jayalalitha's daily visit to her office always caused distressing traffic jams as people and vehicles were stopped for hours under the scorching sun, for so-called security reasons, to which ordinary people, including Rajini, become victims. A news report in *The Times of India* (2007) says:

By 1990, Rajinikanth became a superstar. One day in 1992, as his car was making its way; a police jeep overtook his vehicle and forced him to stop. They wanted chief minister Jayalalitha's car to pass. Something snapped and Rajinikanth got out of his car, walked down the road to reach a kiosk to buy a packet of cigarettes. He shook the pack, took out one- and begun to smoke. Within minutes, a small crowd gathered to have a glimpse of the star. As news spread, a huge multitude began milling around the area. Rajinikanth puffed away as he watched the whole area become grid locked. It became impossible for the chief minister to come out of her residence. Finally, realising their folly, the police begged Rajinikanth to drive away. He shrugged, got into his car and drove away. It was the star's ways of making a chief minister understand that she may the administrative boss of the state, but the icon of the masses was indeed Rajini.

This newspaper report stands as evidence not just of the Rajini-Jayalalitha tussle but also of the way the media endorses and reflects the glorification of film stars. Jayalalitha's government became increasingly unpopular and there was a chaos in Tamil Nadu due to the maladministration of the state. In addition, the extravagant wedding of Jayalalitha's adopted son, her lesbian relationship with Sasikala (Joseph 1996), and the latter's influence over public and party decisions added fuel to this fire. It was in this situation that Jayalalitha attended a silver jubilee function of Rajni's film, *Baasha* (dir. Suresh Krishna 1995). In the function, Rajini delivered a speech in which he attacked the Jayalalitha government. Subsequently, an infuriated Jayalalitha retaliated against Rajini, resulting in a series of bitter verbal exchanges, followed by bloody clashes between Jayalalitha's AIADMK Party functionaries and Rajinikanth's fans.

Having sensed the growing resentment against Jayalalitha's government and Rajinikanth's revolt against Jayalalitha, the opposition parties tried to capitalise on this. They featured Rajini's speech in their political campaigns, making the mass following of Rajini an anti-Jayalalitha uprising. Rajini's

revolutionary attributes and the mass following behind him sent tremors among the nationalist Congress Party including the then-Prime Minister, PV Narasimha Rao, who offered Rajini a Chief Ministership, if he would join the Congress Party (Sreekanth 2008, p. 115). Again, on the eve of the elections, Rajini 'voiced' his dissent against Jayalalitha and her regime by saying, 'even God cannot save Tamil Nadu if you vote Jaya back to power' (Sreekanth 2008, p.132). Along with an existing dissatisfaction and anger among the public against the political corruption, the aristocratic and anarchical style of Jayalalitha's governance, Rajinikanth's voice fuelled the fire and Jayalalitha's party was totally eliminated in the elections. Since the 1990s until *Chandramuki* (*2005*), the film which holds the record of the longest running Tamil film in one theatre for 800 days, all of his films have carried on mixed messages about his political entry. Let me now contextualise Rajini's charisma in the 1990s.

Throughout the 1990s Rajini had phenomenal success. All of his films released during the nineties were formulaic entertainers but blockbusters, more notably, *The Commander* (*Thalapathy*, dir. Mani Ratnam 1991), *The King (Mannan*, dir. P Vasu 1992), *Annamalai* (dir. Suresh Krishna 1992), *Hard Worker (Uzhaippali,* dir. P Vasu 1993), *The Soldier (Veera*, dir. Suresh Krishna 1994), *Baasha* (1995), *The Pearl (Muthu,* dir. KS Ravikumar 1995) *Arunachalam* (dir. Sundar C 1997), and of course, *Padayappa* (*The Creator*, 1999). It was during this decade Rajini transformed himself from superstar to '*bhagwan*' (god) status (Anand 2002). As mentioned, this was also the time when expectation about Rajini's possible entry into politics was at its peak. No film star in Tamil Nadu other than MGR had gained such fame and political expectation.

A comparison of the two actors reveals a few similarities, but rather more differences. On-screen, both of these actors worshipped their mothers; both were humble, obedient, respectful to their elders, and romantic with their co-actresses; they both fought against systemic injustice and people's poverty. In contrast, MGR as a film figure with a political ideology always represented a political party on- and off-screen, while Rajini portrayed his screen image as an angry young-man, and as a dedicated Hindu on- and off-screen. While politicians such as Karunanidhi and Kannadasan scripted screenplays, lyrics, and dialogues (*speech of character* and *speech of others*) for MGR, it was professional film writers without direct political affiliation such as KS Ravikumar that did the same for Rajini. MGR's films carried irreligious titles but with pure Tamil names, while Rajinikanth's names in his films come out as gods' names, which were also the names of the protagonist Rajini. Thus, curiously, in a state where atheist Dravidian Parties were still dominant, Rajini projected a pro-Hindu, pro-national and pan-Indian image, a trend that started to become more prominent over the 1990s. The film analysed here, *Padayappa* is one of the many names of a Tamil tribal god, Lord Murugan. *Padayappa* literally means 'the creator,' also known as *Aarupdaiyappan,* which means the one who rules six sacrilegious hilly places of Tamil Nadu. As we can see later in this Chapter, in the film *Padayappa*, Neelaambari (Ramya Krishnan) falls in love with the protagonist Padayappa (Rajini) for his six extraordinary qualities.

Rajinikanth's films are famous for their theme songs with inspiring lyrics highlighting Rajini's charisma as a hard worker, morally upright, and as the centre of excellence. The stories revolve around rags to riches themes, involving down-to-earth heroes, one-liners, mannerisms, comedy, fights, and colourful heroine(s).

The most important aspect of his films, especially since the 1990s, is their narrative structures which have always been formulated to suit the audience foreknowledge. *Padayappa* is no exception to the formulaic fabrication of Rajinikanth's image. Let us briefly look at the characterisation of Padayappan (Rajini) and Neelaambari (fictionalised version of Jayalalitha) played by Ramya Krishnan.

Padayappa: film summary

As mentioned, *Padayappa (The Creator*, *1999)* was released at a time when the speculations about Rajini's entry into politics were widespread after he proved his charisma through his revolutionary attributes in the 1996 state elections. In regard to *Padayappa,* one of the popular websites, Rediff, writes:

> There's a political angle to all this too -- one of the heroines, who behaves suspiciously like a vamp, Ramya Krishnan, is made to resemble J Jayalalitha. The film-makers have gone to the extent of using the voice of someone who sounds uncannily like the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam chief. And every dialogue between Rajnikanth and Ramya seems like a direct attack on Jaya (Nadar 1999).

Padayappan and Neelaambari belong to the richest families in a village. Padayappan's father is an upright village headman (Sivaji Ganesan). Neelaambari wants to marry Padayappan but he loves Vasundhara (Soundarya). Neelaambari tries to stop the marriage between Padayappan and Vasundhara but to no avail. Unable to stomach her failure, Neelaambari goes into self-imposed solitary confinement for eighteen years, awaiting an opportunity to destroy Padayappan and his family. In time, Neelaambari breaks her seclusion to carry out her revenge on Padayappan through her nephew. Padayappan defeats Neelaambari's attempts

to annihilate him by pitting her nephew against his daughter. Neelaambari commits suicide in the end as she fails to thwart Padayappan once again.

The melodramatic narrative is bound up with social discourses, including the 'politics of sentiment', and commentaries on caste, class, religion, superstitions, conservative values of women, hopes for the poor, all brought to life through the superhuman performance of Padayappan. Along with these elements, this chapter analyses the charisma of Rajini through his characterisation, name, audience foreknowledge, *speech of character*, *speech of others*, landscape as an *objective correlative*, songs, dialogues, and through *mise-en-scène* of the film. *Padayappa* is narrated within the rural social structure of Tamil Nadu through an engaging screenplay that allows the audience to guess answers to their queries while watching the film. The triangle in the love story is loaded with stereotypes, and dichotomies in the form of good and bad, rich and poor, village and urban, and arrogance and humility. The film reinforces patriarchal values related to women, such as chastity, in a world where women are defenceless and only men are capable of protecting them, and education spoils the traditional virtues of Tamil women.

Characterisation

Padayappan

The protagonist Padayappan represents a stereotypical portrayal for superstar Rajini. Let us look at the characterisation of Padayappan through Neelaambari's description (as *speech of others*) on him. While proposing to Padayappan, Neelaambari reasons why she fell in love with Padayappa:

When you saved the snake, I liked your bravery. When you fought to ban illicit liquor, I liked your anger. When you tamed the bull, I liked your valour. When you advised me in my house, I liked the way you talk. On top of all, I like your style. You are very lucky because you are the one I like. I want to have the best of everything – my dress, my car, bungalow, my bed room, and even my dog. From my pet dog to my husband I want to have the best in everything. You are the best; so I want to marry you. I want to marry you and proudly show you to my friends, and the society.

The monologue does not just speak about the extraordinariness of Padayappan but also about the psychology of Neelaambari's character (*speech of character*). As mentioned previously, the character of Neelaambari is scripted to reflect Jayalalitha. As a recap, Chapter Two introduced Jayalalitha, as being renowned for her arrogance, anger, stubbornness, and autocratic nature. One can also see that the characterisation of Neelaambari resembles the characterisation of Queen Pavalavalli in the film *Nadodi Mannan*, to make use of audience foreknowledge. Besides making indexical references about Jayalalitha through the characterisation of Neelaambari the scene also strengthens the caste/class- based mate selection. Prior to this monologue, Neelaambari asks her father about Padayappan. The father describes Padayappan as a good, brave, wealthy and well-educated man, and after a pause, he adds further that he belongs to the same caste. The caste reference, however, is not candid but connotative. Impressed by the extraordinary qualities of Padayappan, who is also from her caste, Neelaambari falls in love with him; however, Padayappan is in love with Vasundhara, a housemaid with conservative values, yet also from the same caste.

In regard to the caste of Vasundhara, her mother tells her at one point that they belong to the same caste as Padayappan and used to be equally rich in the past; indicative of the patriarchal endogamy of Tamil society. The base line of this

scene is the romance of the protagonist Padayappan who does not disgrace his caste status thereby maintaining the caste hierarchy. Even though Padayappan is in love with a poor girl, her caste is stressed with a monologue from her mother, signalling to the audience that Padayappan does not breach the existing customary practice of choosing marital partners from the same caste.

One of the most prominent features of Padayappan's characterisation is the group of loyalists who always stay with him. These loyalists represent fans, which Padayappan refers to as his 'army'. If one pays attention to the camera shots, the majority of the shots involving Padayappan are long shots to accommodate his dozens of loyalists. Even though Padayappan refers to his loyalists as his army, the film maintains his individuality and superhuman powers through costumes, gestures, actions and monologues. For instance, in the stunt scenes, it is Padayappan who handles the miscreants without any help from his loyal friends. Secondly, at one point, Padayappan's mother remarks, 'Howsoever big the crowd is, my son will manage single-handedly.' This monologue is directed also against Jayalalitha and her party, depicting Rajinikanth's prowess while strengthening his screen presentation.

The *speech of others* in Padayappan, also, praises him for his bravery, intelligence, moral uprightness, and his benevolence. At one point, on Rajini's arrival in Neelaambari's house, villain actor Nassar (Neelaambari's brother) says, 'I was wondering why it's so bright all of sudden only to realise that you are here.' This monologue is evidence of the existing practice of the hero-worshipping in the daily lives of Tamils that began with MGR; Jayalalitha endorsed it in her political life while Rajinikanth carried it in his films. This is one of the many features in which Tamil films differ from Western films in terms of

characterisation of heroes and hero-worship. While Western films depict their heroes with their actions, Tamil films couple these actions with verbal glorification.

Neelaambari

As mentioned the characterisation of Neelaambari is a fictionalised version of Jayalalitha. An affluent, haughty, egotistical woman falls in love with a protagonist, who for his part chooses her housemaid as his lover/wife. Having not been able to possess the man she loves, Neelaambari tries to kill her rival but in vain. Unable to bear the fact that housemaid taking away the object of her desire, Neelaambari goes into self-imposed exile for eighteen years within her house nursing her rage, coming out only when she senses an opportunity to take revenge against Padayappan. Nonetheless, Neelaambari fails to conquer Padayappan once again. Devastated Neelaambari kills herself in a public gathering. She chooses to die rather than live in disgrace as a loser. Even while breathing her last, she vows to get her revenge on Padayappan in her next life.

This character needs to be read in consonance with the popular discourse about Jayalalitha in the media during her first tenure as Chief Minister (1991–96). In a magazine article, Naqvi describes Jayalalitha:

> A fiercely independent [woman], that never encouraged a second line of command in her party, she talks to the media only when she wants to, imperious, dramatic, a real survivor with an armour of arrogance, and hard-headed loner (*The Outlook India*, 2008).

Similarly, while analysing the psychology of Jayalalitha in *The Hindustan Times* (1998), Kalyani Shanker, describes her as 'an ostentatious megalomaniac who could not see beyond her circle of artificial relationships.' One can, therefore,

clearly see the characterisation of Neelaambari resembling the real persona of Jayalalitha, providing the audience with a clear foreknowledge and understanding of the parody of their leader. Neelaambari's arrogant and outspoken character is contrasted with the modest and soft spoken Vasundhara, a binary opposite of the former. Vasundhara is an innocent, illiterate, religious, yet, good-hearted human being.

Figure 11. Vasundhara prays to the Cobra

The establishing scene in *Padayappa*, which establishes her character, features Vasundhara. Clad in a traditional saffron colour 'half-*saree*' (see Figure 11). The colour of saffron symbolises sacrifice and devotion for Hindus. Her hair is neatly oiled and braided. She prays with folded hands and closed eyes, offering milk and banana to the Cobra. The cobra has a prominent place in Hindu beliefs and customs, being worshipped as the goddess Eswari, wife of Lord Shiva, who is in charge of destruction.

In the next shot, a lavish sports car runs fast, like a rocket, on the dirt road of the country. The car's name plate carries the number TCE 5544 (see Figure 12). These numbers assume significance in the context that Jayalalitha is known

for her superstitions on numerology. She prefers to carry out her activities on dates having the sum total of nine such as 9s, 18s, and 27s. The aforementioned registration number of the car totals eighteen, a motif for the fictionalisation of Jayalalitha through Neelaambari. In the next cut, the car stops with a screeching sound, as it almost runs over the onlookers. A high angle shot shows the car doors opening upwards like the wings of a bird. Unlike Vasundhara, it is not the face of Neelaambari but the thighs and cleavage that are the focal points of the camera and thereby for the audience. She is wearing a short white skirt, with short but loose hair. As the camera moves closer to Neelaambari, her face becomes the focus of attention and the audience sees that she also wears sun glasses. All these attributes are considered to be anti-female (unwomanly) traits in Tamil society. This becomes even more evident when we examine the speech of the character and others.

Let us look into the first dialogue between the two women. Neelaambari begins a verbal assault on those she nearly ran over, by screaming at people as 'Fools' (Jayalalitha is said to use the same word often, against officials and party men). On the other hand, Vasundhara begins her part of the dialogue with, 'Oh please madam, don't kill the snake; it is our goddess.' In the process of her pleading, Vasundhara touches Neelaambari's hands. Neelaambari yells at Vasundhara to take her hand off her, then slaps Vasundhara, saying, 'After all you are my maid; how dare you hold my hand and speak?' Again, this scene symbolises Jayalalitha's tendency to distance herself from the working class, which is entirely opposite to MGR's approach, who used to hug and mingle with poor people to demonstrate to them that he was one among them. This particular scene not only endorses the acrimonious class relations but also the inhumane

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caste practice of 'untouchability', as working class people in Tamil Nadu are usually from castes regarded as 'lower' and 'untouchable'.

*Figure 12. Neelaambari does the verbal assault
on the working class*

Social discourse

This section attempts to understand the discourses in the film *Padayappa* on culture, society, and politics. I opt for the term 'social discourse' instead of phrases such as social commentary, because the former is less problematic and speaks more of political as well as cultural tones.

Just like *Nadodi Mannan* (1958) in Chapter Two and *Adimaip Penn* (1969) in Chapter Three, the social discourse in *Padayappa* revolves around the ongoing social issues, political problems, and moral crises in Tamil Nadu. At one point in *Padyappa*, a politician visits the birthday party of Rajini's daughter, Anita (Preetha Vijayakumar). As he enters the house his supporters hail him loudly, symbolising the real life situation of Tamil politicians. Upon his entry his party men push aside people standing on both sides, a parody on the hullaballoo of real life in Tamil Nadu, whenever a politician enters a public place. As he greets Rajini, he sees a wealthy industrialist beside Rajini and the politician whispers to

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his followers to shout slogans in support of the industrialist as well. This is a satire of the prevalence of the opportunistic Tamil politicians and their shameless pursuit of publicity and interest in establishing networks with wealthy industrialists. It is ironic in the sense that the supporters do not hail their leaders out of spontaneity or willingness, but rather they repeat what their leaders ask them to say and do. The politician here is not shy to grab the opportunity to establish ties with a wealthy industrialist. It is popularly believed that the personality politics and populism in Tamil Nadu started with the emergence of Dravidian parties to power. However, the criticism needs to be seen in the context of politics in other Indian states, where the situation is no better.

Another interesting social discourse in *Padayappa* is when the industrialist and the politician try to persuade Rajini to venture into politics. This, again, echoes the real situation in Tamil Nadu. As mentioned, the film was released during the time when expectations of Rajini's political entry were high— by his fans, the media, and the politicians. Rajini kept everyone guessing by not saying 'yes' or 'no' about his direct political entry into contesting elections, or joining or launching a political party. As we can recall here, there was no question about Rajini's possible entry in politics while MGR was alive. At that time, even Rajini's films were apolitical, for instance, in *The Helper* (*Velaikaaran*, dir. SP Muthuraman 1987) Rajini sings along to a song that states, 'Neither do I need a political party nor a political flag'. It was not only Rajini but no other actor ever challenged MGR directly when he was alive. The political participation of Rajini was dormant or even unthinkable until MGR's death.

A close look at the following conversation between Padayappan, the politician, and the industrialist gives us a better understanding about Rajini's elusiveness in regard to electoral politics:

> Politician: I ask him to enter into politics but he doesn't heed me. (Symbolizing the people's expectations about Rajini's political entry)

> Padayappa: Why do you ask me to become a politician? Don't you want me to be good? (Indexical meaning: Politics in India is bad, corrupt, and dirty)

> Industrialist: Why should you alone be good? People also should be good. Since you are good man, you can do well to the people by becoming a politician (Indexical meaning: Rajini is good. Tamil politics needs good people, such as Rajini. That is what people want!)

> Politician: He will make a difference by making the bad politics good, if he enters into politics (Indexical meaning: Rajini is clean, good, and unshakeable therefore, he will do well for the people).

> Padayappa: Nothing is in our hands (and raises his finger towards the sky, symbolizing that it is god's will).

The aforementioned conversation as a *speech of the character and others* brings in a lot of *objective correlative*s by referring to Rajini's real life events, more notably Rajini's unchanging ambiguity in regard to his political entry, and also by emphasising his religious faith. In one of his public speeches Rajini echoed the same, 'entering politics is not in my hands; God will write my political script' (Raj 2010). What these remarks demonstrate is Rajini's ability to sound similar on-and off- screen, in regard to his political entry. Both these aspects are in sharp contrast with MGR, who was categorically clear from the very beginning that he was going to be active in politics. Secondly, Rajini has been deliberately candid in terms of his religious affinity, which makes him different from MGR. With this dialogue Rajini exhibits his reclusive personality, his faith in god, while

keeping people guessing about his political entry. Speeches from other characters, such as the Politician, represent the real situation where politicians keep demanding that Rajini becomes a politician. Rajini made similar utterances in various other films as well, for instance, in *The Pearl (Muthu* 1995), Rajini makes a remark, 'Nobody knows when I arrive or how I arrive, yet I will be there as and when I ought to.'

Furthermore, unlike the atheist MGR, Rajini openly flaunts his religious faith in his screen roles and in real life. Through the abovementioned conversation, Rajini reveals that he is aware of the public annoyance towards his indecisiveness and redirects his decision to the hands of god. While MGR's irreligious characterisation made him cohere with Dravidian parties, Rajini's religious avowals associated him with right wing nationalist parties, such as the Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP). These were reinforced by Rajini's much-publicized, frequent, spiritual visits to the Himalayas, his use of religious signs in his public appearances and cinematic characters. In addition, Rajini's mentor was known to be 'Cho' Ramasamy, who is a Brahmin and the editor of the hardcore right wing magazine, *Tughlak*. Rajini often candidly admires the religious fundamental leaders such as Narendra Modi, LK Advani, and Bal Thackeray—who led a violent anti-Tamil movements in Mumbai and Rajinikanth called him as his 'father figure' (NDTV 2012)— indicating that he is tilted towards the religiously fundamental and ultranationalist political party BJP (Thapar 2010). Notwithstanding Rajini has neither disclosed it nor denied his loyalty to the BJP party. What all these demonstrate is that as the prophecy about Rajini's political future in an article in the *Outlook India* predicts, 'Rajini can emerge as an autocratic right-winger given his Hindutva-friendliness' (Anand 2002).

At one point in *Padayappa,* villain actor Nassar represents the politician who oftentimes jumps from one party to another. Political defection and horse-trading are big issues in Indian politics including those in Tamil Nadu, and for this reason the Indian federal government had to enact a law against political defection in 1986. Be that as it may, in *Padayappa* Nassar's helper makes a remark, 'In this country there are more flags for political parties than colours.' This statement bespeaks the mushrooming of political parties in Indian politics. The film firmly acknowledges the inadequacies of the Indian bureaucracy. Elsewhere, actor Manivannnan (Padayappan's uncle) remarks about the functionality of bureaucrats, 'You guys are always late to your office, yet you leave home early.' Tamil audiences need no further explanation to situate the sarcasm of this remark within their daily lives. The Indian bureaucracy, arguably the largest in the world, is known for its sluggish working style and red tape.

Be that as it may, Rajini's ambiguous and elusive answers to the questions about his political entry continue to date. Perhaps Rajini wants to keep his political options open, or perhaps Rajini knows that his 'yes or no' answer might end public curiosity and lose him media attention. Or he may be afraid of his remunerative film career if he becomes candid in regard to his allegiance to the nationalist Hindu fundamentalist BJP Party, which has literally no presence in Tamil Nadu.

Conservative values

Besides sidelining the role of female actors, Rajinikanth's films reinforce conservative values towards women, such as the idea that education spoils women

and that a woman cannot defend herself on her own but is safe only with her male counterpart. Male-dominated Tamil film narratives impose and superimpose these discourses on conservative values, sometimes subtly but most of the time strongly. We have looked at these signs of patriarchy in the previous two chapters and will continue to explore them in this thesis.

In the first place, female actors in the films starring MGR, Rajini, Vijayakanth and Sarathkumar reflect either the stereotypical docile housewives or the wanton vamp. Sometimes, women are mere sex objects running behind the male stars, seducing them, and hopelessly falling in love with them, even when the male stars continue to humiliate them. The scenario rarely changes even though the female actor may be a globally acclaimed personality like Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, who co-starred with Rajini in his blockbuster film, *The Robot (Endhiran* 2011). The task of Sana (Aishwarya Rai Bachchan) is to run behind Rajini showing her skin throughout the film, so as to become an object of seduction to Chitti (Rajini's robot). If that is the case with a high-profile actor like Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, it is needless to mention the situation of other female actors. In terms of the portrayal of women, *Padayappa* vilifies the shrewd woman Neelaambari (Ramya Krishnan) by contrasting her with a woman like Vasundhara (Soundarya), who is docile and conservative.

In *Padayappa* one can witness a number of value-laden and gender-specific monologues from Rajini along with visual texts (*objective correlatives*) and lyrics emphasising the importance of conservative values for women. Traditionally, by virtue of being a man, the Indian social system assigns them an advisory position over women. It is the man who knows everything and dictates to woman in every aspect of her life, for instance, her dressing style, her modesty in

behaviour, her talking politely, and walking on the streets by keeping her head down. Failing in these behaviours brings moral disgrace for a woman. It is assumed, for example, that if a woman fails to dress modestly, she will be raped, citing the dress as the reason not the criminal behaviour of the predator. As recently as 2012 police in New Delhi were in the news citing women's immodest dress styles as the reason for the increasing number of sexual attacks in the Indian capital (Hamad 2012). With this official validation, we can clearly understand the normative nature of the law-enforcing authority that reinforces the deeply rooted conservative cultural values over the 21st Century Indian women. In this context, it is perhaps no wonder that Rajini's films are highly normative in portraying the behaviour of women. In *Padayappa*, he describes the behaviour of a 'normal' woman in the following words:

> A woman should be patient not restless; she should be calm not angry; she should be quiet not bossy; she should be disciplined not squealing; she should be pious not pervert; above all, a woman should behave like a woman.

When Rajini delivers a monologue such as this, the entire cinema comes to a standstill with thunderous applause, demonstrating popular support for the subjugation of women. In many ways this monologue is seen to be directed towards the actor-politician Jayalalitha; yet, the audience sees this as applicable to all shrewd women, and a warning to those women who attempt to challenge the tradition. Whenever Tamil television telecasts a program on Rajini or his films, this monologue always finds a place. Another popular one-liner serves as the motif of the Padayappan – Neelaambari rivalry. Padayappan says to Neelaambari, 'An angry woman and a greedy man will never live in peace.' The film ends as Padayappan delivers this one-liner after Neelaambari shoots herself to death,

indicating that the anger of a woman destroys only herself. It has to be seen in comparison with the characterisation of Padayappan, whose anger does well to the people by destroying the evil forces, while Neelaambari's anger results in her death. Rajini's characterisation is thus admired by his fans, not just in *Padayappa*, but whenever his characters subjugate angry women by teaching them a lesson and bringing them to 'normalcy'. For instance in films like *The Groom* (*Maappillai*, dir. Rajasekar 1989) and *The King (Mannan* 1992); the characterisation of Rajini's roles is to teach 'shrewd women' a lesson, and to reinforce his masculine dominance, when he saves them when they are in trouble. Rajini's film exercises control over women by taming the shrewd women, teaching them life-changing lessons through his extraordinary heroism and superhuman powers.

The politics of sentiment and superstitions

The roots of the 'politics of sentiment' can be traced back to the ballads and proverbs (refer to Chapter Two) in Tamil society, for instance, the Tamil proverb, 'there is no temple other than one's mother' (*Thaayir chirandha koyilumillai)*. MGR's films, which are known for their 'mother sentiment', cinematically expanded this proverb almost in all his films. As in MGR's films, Rajini's films carry themes of this mother sentiment within their broader 'politics of sentiment'. As defined earlier, the 'politics of sentiment' is the manipulation of cultural sentiments of filmmakers to construct and strengthen the cinematic charisma of stars towards the actors' political ascendancy. One of the most popular 'politics of sentiment' in Tamil cinema is the manipulation of affection

between mother-son, brother-sister relationships, and patriarchal signs of monogamy such as the 'sacred thread.' In a Tamil film, the hero will generally have at least three women around him, namely his, mother, sister, and lover(s). The hero's relationship with the first two women is based on affection while the relationship with the third one is all about flirting, romance and sexual desire. The primary task of a Tamil hero is to defend the women when they are in danger and protect these women from falling in disgrace. In addition, Tamil cinema has the tendency to consecrate mothers by depicting them as an embodiment of sacrifice and sanctifying them as equally sacred as a goddess. The hero always treats his sister as an extension of his mother and it is his responsibility to marry her with the right groom, for instance, in *Padayappa* Rajini's character takes up the responsibility of marrying his younger sister.

As mentioned, Tamil heroes obey their mothers without question. In *Padayappa*, Padayappan agrees to marry Neelaambari, even though he is in love with Vasundhara, simply because his mother asks him to. However, his mother learns the mind of Padayappan shortly afterwards and marries him to Vasundhara. Padayappan does not say a word against his mother nor speak out his intention to marry Vasundhara, depicting himself as an ideal Tamil son. In *The King (Mannan 1992)*, Rajini's character marries a rich lady against his will just because his mother likes her and wants him to marry her. The song, 'there is no living being that does not call mother' (*Amma enru alaikaadha uyirillaiye*) from *Mannan* is all about mother sentiment and is one of the most popular film songs to date. Besides this mother sentiment, a sister sentiment is very popular in Rajinikanth's films, for instance *Bairavi* (dir. M Baskar 1978), *A Thorn and A Flower* (*Mullum Malarum*, dir. J Mahendran 1978), and *I Am Not A Saint* (*Naan Magaan Alla*, dir. SP

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Muthuraman 1984) all deal with stories sentimentalising sibling relationship. These films have one or more songs delineating the affection between protagonist brother and his sister. In addition, the titles of these films are important to acknowledge as well. While *Bairavi* is the name of the sister of the protagonist Rajini, *Mullum Malarum* is a poetic connotation of an angry brother and soft-spoken sister.

Another example of the 'politics of sentiment' in *Padayappa* is the act of feeding a loved one with one's own hands. In Tamil culture, this gesture is a manifestation of extreme affection and love. A mother feeds her children with her hands; a brother feeds his sister with his hands and a husband feeds his wife with his hands. In *Padayappa* Rajini's character feeds his younger sister while she is heartbroken after her marriage is called off. In yet another scene, villain Suryaprakash (Nassar) feeds his younger sister Neelaambari as she is depressed over her failed attempt to marry Padayappan, a sign that the young sister is not forsaken but has a brother who will take care of her. Similarly in *The King* (1992*)* Rajini's character feeds his paralysed mother with tears in his eyes as sign of his extreme affection and devotion to his mother. Since this practice is highly culturally specific, perhaps particular to Tamil society and it happens in the daily lives of Tamils, these scenes bring the film closer to the audience by making them emotionally involved.

Moreover, *Padayappa* uses the 'politics of sentiment' through existing values over one's pride. Traditional Tamil society believes that it is better to die rather than to live in disgrace after losing one's pride. This value is strongly rooted and present even now in rural Tamil Nadu. As *Padayappa* is based on a rural social structure, it echoes the sentiment of pride as well. Neelaambari's

father's costume and hair style represent him as a typically old-fashioned rural rich man, yet he hangs himself after losing face. Another aspect of the 'politics of sentiment' is that of being respectful to elders no matter what happens. Respecting elders may be a universal cultural value, however in Tamil cinema, respect to elders goes to the extent of devotion making it part of the 'politics of sentiment'. It is not customary for Tamils to pay respect for deceased family members and ancestors by performing rituals, but in *Padayappa* this common practice is manipulated when Padayappan marries Vasundhara and performs his marital rituals in front of the portrait of his dead father. His father is shown as if he is giving consent for both parties to marry. The personification of the portrait of his father reinforces the Tamil belief in life after death.

Furthermore, *Padayappa* superimposes many superstitions such as practice of certain rituals in auspicious times. In Hindu tradition, for example, there is a particular time in the day that is auspicious, and important events such as marriage and house warming ceremony must take place only during these auspicious hours. In the film, Padayappan asks his friend to hand over his love letter to Vasundhara only at an auspicious time. This scene can be seen as the decpiction of two important meanings: It reiterates Rajini's much-publicised personal belief in auspicious times by associating him with orthodox Hindu superstitions. Secondly, it identifies him with the Hindu fundamentalist political party, Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP), which advocates caste, religious, and ritual-based ideologies. The BJP Party makes important political announcements only during auspicious hours. This argument can further be substantiated with another scene from *Padayappa* when Padayappan recounts the physical features of his prospective girl friend or wife; he uses a few Sanskrit words such as *Sathvigam*, *Prachothagam*, and

Bhayanakam. His friends, just like the ordinary Tamil audience, do not understand what these terms mean. Padayappan bullies his friends for not knowing the meaning of these Sanskrit terms, asserting further that Sanskrit is the language of god.

Let us problematise this in the broader socio-political context. According to the Hindu *Varnashramadharma* Sanskrit is the language of God and only Brahmins can speak this language as they are the ones who can communicate directly with gods by performing rituals in Sanskrit. According to Dravidian ideology, Brahmins use this language to maintain their religious, ritual, and caste authority over the other castes. In *Padayappa,* by bringing in Sanskrit and equating the same with divinity, Rajini imbues his fans and followers with the religiously fundamental caste-based hierarchy. One also needs to remember that Rajini's real life wife, Latha, belongs to *Ayyangar* caste, arguably the purest of all Brahmins. She also runs the school *The Ashram*, which is an expensive and elitist school known for its religious pedagogical structure. Looking at this broad socio-cultural context, through the character of Padayappan, what Rajini emphasises are the Hindu-North Indian cultural hegemony and caste hierarchy by demonstrating the Sanskrit and Brahminical dominance, which is also the bedrock of the BJP's ideology.

In terms of exhibiting superstitious beliefs, one more worth mentioning is the depiction of snake worship. Rajini's opening scene in *Padayappa* begins with the veneration of the snake god. Neelaambari orders the execution of the snake which Vasundhara worships. As Neelaambari's servants are about to eliminate the snake, Padayappan emerges out of nowhere taking the six-foot long snake in his bare hands and kisses the back of the snake (see Figure 15). There is even one

further scene in which the snake saves the life of Vasundhara. Such scenes display the bravery and extraordinariness of Padayappan as well as the exploitation of the age-old superstitions (see later in this Chapter) in Tamil society. In an interview on a Tamil television channel 'Sun TV' in 2011, Rajini mentioned his snake sentiments and said that he was happy that his fans appreciated this aspect of his film.

Besides reinforcing superstitious beliefs such as auspicious times, *Padayappa* augments another tribal practice: omen reading. At a crucial turning point of the film, as Padayappan goes to sign a document, his family and friends encounter three bad omens. Padayappan's mother reads the bad omen as sign language from his father to stop them from proceeding further with the documentation. Moreover, Padayappan's friend, Alagesan (actor Senthil), asserts, 'the omen is not good' (*Saguname sari illaye*). Prevalence of such superstitious sentiments can also be seen in conjunction with audience foreknowledge, and the folkloric customs, thereby, connecting the daily lives of Tamils to their cinematic engagement with the characterisation of Rajini's charisma.

Charisma of Rajinikanth

As noted earlier in this chapter, Rajini's charisma revolves mainly around his 'style', such as his distinctive demeanours, strange ornaments, unkempt hair, weird Tamil accent, stylised smoking and alcohol consumption. Although he has had an almost gossip-free illustrious career, his personal life has been noted for a few controversies, such as his nervous breakdown in the 1980s and his first daughter's romantic involvement with another young actor Simbu. Rajini,

however, withstood these tumultuous controversies. According to his biographer Sreekanth (2008), Rajini had a nervous breakdown in the early 1980s due to his 18 hour per-day work schedule and stress factor. Furthermore there were gossips circulating about his mental health, including his addiction to marijuana. It was claimed that Rajini pretended to have the nervous breakdown until he could make a truce with MGR, as the former was dating one of the latter's ex-girlfriends. However the authenticity of these rumours remains unverified.

Rajini's private life was in the limelight again in 2004 when Tamil media reported the romantic affair of his first daughter, Aishwarya, in a series of related online leaks. It was reported that Aishwarya was dating the upcoming actor Dhanush after dumping another actor Simbu, who retaliated against Aishwarya, by posting their private audio and video clips online. This scandal involving conservative Rajini's daughter Aishwarya must be seen in the cultural context of Tamil society, where a sexual relationship before marriage is still unacceptable because it brings shame to the parents. Rajini, however, went into damage control by making a public announcement that his daughter was, indeed, in love with the actor Dhanush and he intended to arrange a wedding ceremony for the couple. Interestingly, Rajini's character in *Padayappa* does the same when his daughter falls in love with Neelaambari's nephew. By doing so, Rajini maintained his on-screen image as an understanding father in his real-life persona as well.

As far as the screen facade and real persona of Rajini is concerned, he maintains two different images: a romantic action star and a responsible father as well as a grandfather embracing the ageing process gracefully. At the age of 62 Rajini is still a superstar, capable of performing superhuman tasks, simultaneously romancing with glamour queens such as Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, who is half his

age. With the commercial success of his films, it is clear that his fans accept his film roles and romances, which are not commensurate with his age. For instance, *The Robot (Endhiran* 2011*)* is a sci-fi action film in which he plays dual roles: an extraordinary scientist, who invents a human android; and a superhuman robot. His upcoming epic blockbuster epic film, *Kochadaiyan* (directed by his other daughter Soundarya Ashwin) is an action packed spectacle as well. In comparison, Bollywood actors such as Amitabh Bachchan and Hollywood actors such as Sean Connery, now tend to play roles that suit their age, rather than romancing with girls half their age, which is one of the notable features of Tamil cinema. MGR himself was also a romantic action star actor even in his early sixties. One needs to remember here that Jayalalitha was only 16 when she paired with the 48 year-old MGR in *One Man in a Thousand* (1965).

Figure 13. Reel Rajini and real Rajini

Off-screen, however, Rajini seems to be comfortable to go out showing his bald head, without colouring his grey hair and beard. In his personal life, therefore, Rajini is a self-effacing person. The much published real persona of Rajini is that he is simple, spiritual, affectionate father, uncorrupted family man, gossip-free faithful husband, humanist thinker, and a hard worker. As mentioned,

he clearly distinguishes between some of his on-and his more relaxed off-screen personae, while many of the extraordinary humanist qualities of his on-screen image blend with his real persona. For instance, Rajini is morally upright in his films and in real life he has "officially" been monogamous for more than 30 years and continues to be so to date. In *Padayappa*, through *speech of character*, Rajini (Padayappan) emphasises his moral integrity and sexual discipline in the song, 'You spun around me' (*Suthi Suthi Vandheega*):

> Numerous women attempted to court me;
> Yet, you (wife) are the one, who wrapped me in your waist.

The sexual discipline of being faithful to one's spouse is an important moral value of Tamils, even when faced with seductions and temptations. Here, although emphasising that many women tried to court him, Padayappan maintains his moral uprightness for his true love. In comparison to the flamboyant private life of the notorious womaniser MGR, Rajini's monogamous relationship makes him a morally upright man, the nucleus of a patriarchal society.

As happens in the case of other celebrities, even though Rajini prefers to lead a quiet private life, the media never fails to chase after his spiritual pilgrimages and his leisure time with old buddies. Like Michael Jackson, Rajini often visits shopping malls, cinema halls, and temples by disguising his face. However, his efforts to conceal his identity are in vain most of the time. His personal life is acclaimed by his colleagues, media and the public as simple and humble, which is in sharp contrast to MGR's off-screen life. Pandian observes:

> MGR always took care, during his public appearances, to project an image of eternal youth. His ever-present wig and fur cap concealed his balding head which is a traditional index of ageing and lack of virility. His dark glasses made the wrinkles around his

eyes invisible and he always presented himself before the public, heavily made-up (1992, p. 109).

As we can see from the aforementioned quotation, Rajini presents himself instead as a person to whom ordinary people can relate. Whenever speculations about Rajini's possible entry to politics became widespread especially in 1996, 2005, and most recently in 2010, the Tamil media highlighted his simplicity, spirituality, and frankness as signs of his moral uprightness, which is seen as a stark contrast to current Tamil politicians.

Smoking, drinking, and Rajinikanth

Famously, his (Rajini) roles have remained the same — the hard-drinking, hard-smoking, street-smart anti-hero who plays an impossible 20-something in his film.

Singh 2007

As we can see from the aforementioned popular imagination, the audience foreknowledge of Rajinikanth's films found in the Tamil audience is his reputation for smoking and drinking. While problematising many other issues affecting the poor, women, youth and elderly, what appears strange is the normalisation of smoking and alcohol consumption in Rajini's films.

In South Indian cinema in general and Tamil cinema in particular, smoking is synonymous with Rajini. His style includes stylised cigar and cigarette smoking and occasional alcohol consumption. With reference to smoking as an integral part of the Rajini style, it would be pertinent to refer to a scene from *Padayappa*. After Padayappan has punished the culprits responsible for manufacturing illicit liquor, the scene ends as he smokes a cheroot stylistically, and walks towards the

audience as the shot fades into slow motion, while the smoke from his cheroot hovers around his face.

While problematising smoking and drinking, Tamil society associates smoking and drinking with bad characters and evil doings in a way that is not usually found in the West. That is the reason Tamil heroes are generally non-smokers and non-drinkers, while villainous elements are portrayed with these 'bad habits'. MGR, for instance, never smoked in his films and there are only a handful of films that show MGR drunk, for instance, in *The Temple I Lived In (Kudiyriundha Koyil*, dir. K Shenkar 1968) people around him make MGR drink alcohol by deceiving him. What is important to note here is that MGR consumed alcohol not out of choice but by deception. MGR maintained a clean on-screen 'image' by not consuming alcohol or smoking. In contrary, it is very rare in Rajini's films, for smoking and drinking not to be a part of his characterisation. One can even argue that smoking and drinking are the *objective correlatives*, where these aspects form the character's environment for Rajini.
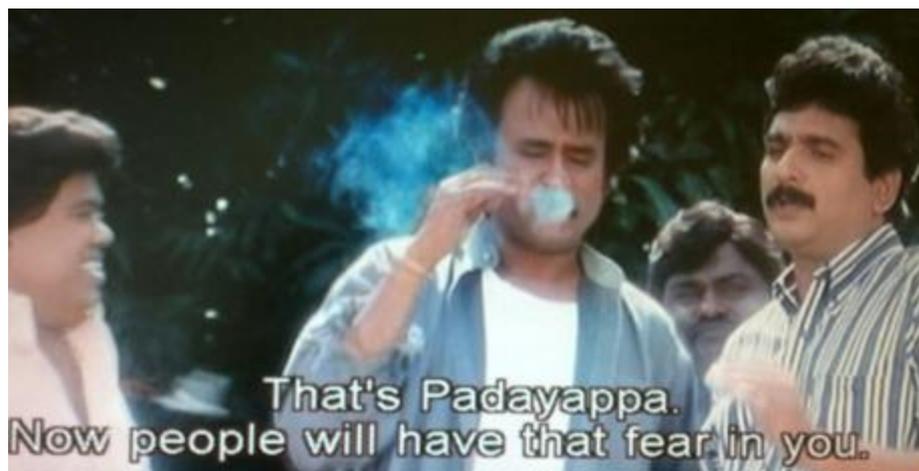
Figure 14. Rajini smokes after beating criminals
in Padayappa

Rajini makes smoking and drinking appear masculine, stylish, and a normal activity. He is popular for his drunken soliloquies, such as in *Padayappa,* where Rajini sings along to the song 'Getting a Kick' (kick-u *erudhe)* after drinking alcohol. The lyrics begin with the lines that he is getting wisdom as he drinks. This song is packed with lyrics on social discourse underscoring the different phases of human life. In addition to associating smoking as masculine and a normal activity, Rajini's films connect smoking and drinking as signs of maturity and enlightenment. In later part of *Padayappa,* the cheroot serves as motif of the rich, old, and wise Rajini. At the end of a every important scene, Rajini smokes a cheroot as the background score shoots up thunderously. Such scenes fade in with slow-motion shots of Rajini walking towards the audience as smoke from the cigar goes up from his mouth. The smoking Rajini is always shown in the foreground as the background is blurred.

Rajini's smoking and drinking image began from his very first film, *The Rare Melody* (1975). In *Leader of Generosity (Dharmathin Thalaivan,* dir. SP Muthuraman 1988) Rajini utters, 'Non-alcoholics suffer from many diseases whereas drinkers will have only one disease— death.' Rajini continued to smoke in films until 2010 when he had to stop it due to the opposition from the casteist political party, Working People Party, (*Paattaali Makkal Katchi*, PMK). Political parties opposed Rajini's films by saying that his films encouraged smoking and drinking habits among vulnerable youth who falsely equated those habits as signs of wisdom, truthfulness, innocence, and heroism, without cautioning about them the harm of cigarettes and alcohol. The political opposition and Rajini's decision to stop smoking in films are further evidence of the influential role of films in Tamil society. Rajini admitted in an interview to a Tamil private television

channel 'Sun TV' in 2011 that he still smokes in his private life. This again makes Rajini different from MGR. Whereas MGR maintained a smoke and alcohol-free personal life, Rajini openly behaves in the opposite manner. As quoted in the beginning of this section, audience foreknowledge of Rajinikanth's films create expectation that revolve around his stylised smoking and familiarity with the odd mannerisms associated with smoking and drinking. Even though, Rajini has stopped smoking on-screen, the older materials are available in YouTube and the popularity of those clips illustrates the impact of the Rajini style.

Rajini's films as source of hope

Men can live without justice, and generally must, but they cannot live without hope.
Hobsbawm as cited in Pandian 1992, p. 142

In *Padayappa,* Rajini returns to his hometown after finishing his education in the city. He learns through his friends that after he left the village anti-social elements fearlessly turned up, resulting in illicit liquor and prostitution now being widespread. Furious Padayappan rises against these anti-social elements and punishes the evil-doers. There are no police, no judiciary, and no government. This scene is a representation of lawlessness in Indian society. As the Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy (2011b) argues, the justice and legal system are inaccessible to the poor and *adivaasi* (tribals), who constitute the majority of the Indian populace. In that context, having been discriminated against and denied justice by the governing system, what the poor in India want is a saviour who has superhuman power. Rajini is right there to fill the shoes with his extra-ordinary traits. In *Padayappa,* Padayappan's superhuman potentials are projected right

from the opening scene in which he saves the 'snake god' by beating up a group of miscreants, who were trying to kill the snake. With this act, Padayappan impresses the love of his life, Vasundhara. Then he sings and dances as the masses gravitate around him.

As the scene unfolds, Padayappan inserts his unprotected arm inside the termite-mound (which is worshipped as the temple) to pick up the 'snake-god' so that he can save it from being killed as Neelaambari had ordered. The background score escalates thunderously as villagers watch the action in fear. Padayappan takes the snake-god out with his empty hand and kisses the back of the head of the hissing snake (see Figure 15). The crowd rejoices in the moment, as their god is now safe. The music intensifies victoriously. With black trousers, white jacket, shoes, and sunglasses, he salutes the crowd in characteristic 'Rajini style,' by raising his hands with a flourishing swing past his chest.

As in all Rajini's films, Padayappan breaks out in a song and dance as a thematic introduction. The lyrics of the song, 'Walk like a lion,' (*Singa nadai pottu)* describe the greatness of Padayappan: he is good as well as great; he is man with child-like heart; he can win a war with his single fist (refer to the appendix for the full lyrics with translation). If one looks at the celebratory account of these lyrics through Dyer's *speech of others*, it can be argued that the entire scene does not simply glorify Padayappan (Rajini) but also responds to the expectations and foreknowledge of the audiences as well. The lyrics of the song announce the arrival of the great man, who is capable of saving even 'God.' The connotation is that since he is capable of performing such an extraordinary miracle, saving the poor from their miseries is not too big a deal for him.

Figure 15. Rajini kisses the Cobra in
Padayappa

An analysis of this song and its accompanying visual features tells us a great deal of other aspects of culture such as landscape. The agricultural field, for instance, represents rural Tamil Nadu; nonetheless, the costumes of the protagonists set them apart from their rural counterparts. As the song opens with an aerial shot, it provides a bird's eye view of the location of a verdant landscape. The large and lush terrain symbolises many things. As mentioned in the previous chapters, agriculture is the backbone of Tamils' economy and more than seventy percent of the population lives in the countryside, where agriculture is the main source of income. The entire story of *Padayappa* happens in a rural village. Looking at the *mise-en-scène* of the opening of the song offers a lot of connotative meanings with which Tamil rural people can identify, and can trigger nostalgic memories for urban people, as well. Frequent aerial shots show Padayappan dancing on the banks of a water stream. A bullock cart is present beside him, making it an *objective correlative* and making the *mise-en-scène* more authentic with rural and agricultural landscape. Padayappan dances with a group of co-actors whirling around him, holding traditional Tamil drums in their arms (the drum is locally known as the *parai*, and is considered to be the mother of all Tamil musical instruments). The sumptuous green landscape outlined with

coconut trees, a river, dirt road, and rocky hills make the location more authentic to the country side of Tamil Nadu by representing the real rural structure. The song features barefooted people dressed in their traditional outfits such as *dhoti*, *saree*, and 'half-*saree*', further validating the rural scene. Having seen the signs of their local landscape, it becomes easy for the rural Tamil folks to relate to, and identify with the actor and his story, making them emotionally involved.

Having created an emotional involvement with the audience, the story narrates the events as happening in a village setting that is similar to their place. As the plot unfolds, the affluent Padayappan becomes poor because of malicious relatives. However, he gains back his wealth through his own efforts, while simultaneously keeping his faith in god. In the process of his re-emergence a song 'Unfold the Triumphant Flag' (*Vetri kodi katt)* is used to show the trials and tribulations of Padayappan. As in MGR's films, Rajini's films have songs with inspiring lyrics. In *Padayappa* the song, 'Unfold the Triumphant Flag', inspires the poor by giving them hope in the system that victory is possible if they work hard, by being disciplined, and believing in god. However, it is the rich Padayappan, who becomes poor and becomes rich again not the poor Padayappan becoming rich. In other words, Padayappan hails from a feudal family and the story revolves around the feudal rivalry where the ordinary people are victims of that rivalry.

As a motivation to the poor, the song 'Unfold the Triumphant Flag' underscores the closed social mobility of the Tamil society, by which only people from the rich and feudal background can achieve economic success and social recognition. Moreover, the song reinforces the existing social hierarchy, casteist social structure, and the suppression of the poor. The song opens with a scene in

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which Padayappan prays before the Hindu god Ganesh (a symbol of good fortune) and religious rituals take place along the way. In the next shot he signs the documents for his granite quarry, indicating that any new venture should commence after praying to Lord Ganesh. In the next shot Padayappan prays to his deceased father demonstrating the Tamils' belief in life after death and the divinity of deceased ancestors. The scene ends with Padayappan getting blessings from his mother, highlighting the 'politics of sentiment'. The next shot shows people lining up for work while the subsequent shot shows tools such as hammers, spades, and soil diggers, signalling manual labour and the importance of sweating it out to become economically successful.

The next scene is an aerial shot displaying Padayappan, friends, and agricultural labourers walking on red soil. Subsequently Padayappan digs the rocky soil as his mother and sister watch him proudly. He works day and night from dawn to dusk, which is indicated by intercut time-lapse shots of the movement of the sun. The economic prosperity of Padayappan can be seen as the song unfolds, there is a montage of shots depicting the change from manual tools to mechanised instruments, from field-working Padayappan to the supervisory Padayappan, and from open ground to the construction of a factory. The lyrics strengthen this visual disposition with equally emphatic lyrics:

> There are thousands of obstacles in life; nonetheless, for Padayappan, every obstacle is a stepping stone'

On the road to Padayappan's success his mother and sister stand as a backdrop, by serving the workers with water, refreshments, and food indicating the secondary and subservient role of rural Indian women. As we can understand from here, the song underscores the success of the rich, feudal, upper caste

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Padayappan and it goes further by projecting him as philanthropist. The manifest function of the song is to inspire the poor by assuring them that economic prosperity is possible for everyone if they work hard. However, the latent meaning of the song is that the poor can only be poor, while rich will remain rich even though may they face a crisis temporarily. As we have seen in the previous chapters, *Padayappa* emphasises and reinforces that caste and class go hand in hand and through the fabrication of Padayappan's success, the feudal social structure, caste hierarchy, and the inferior status of women are emphasised strongly.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, films are a cheap past-time and the chief source of entertainment for Tamils. In many rural areas films are the only available entertainment even today. While cinema-going is a social activity for most Tamils, watching Rajinikanth's films in cinemas is a family activity. Rajinikanth's films are not just spectacles but also a source of solace amidst their ontological uncertainties and harsh social realities. Such films provide Tamils with the inspiration to live, the drive to work harder, the moral lessons they need to be aware of, the hope to believe in their future, by leaving everything in the hands of God, embracing superstitions, and accepting the feudal social structure. Rajinikanth's films often come with messages from God by asking them to put their hope in their film heroes, who make the impossible possible. By projecting Rajini as an angry man, his films offer the poor what they want— spectacle, hope, and justice. As mentioned, Rajini's dark complexion and his characterisation as a

smoker and drinker, yet a morally upright man, make the audience accept him as one of themselves. At the same time, Rajini has the passion and energy to perform superhuman tasks such as stopping oxen with his legs, saving women from moral disgrace, and driving social evils away single-handedly. Rajinikanth's films suggest, as Dickey argues, that the poor have the best attributes of life such as 'morality and strength of character' in the same way their superhuman star has, and 'their difficulties will soon resolve without effort and be replaced by abundant material wealth' (Dickey 1993, p. 176).

To sum up, *Padayappa* is a fictionalised version of the real life antagonism between Rajini and actor-politician Jayalalitha. The film was released at the time when Rajini's political entry was much anticipated. In a way, *Padayappa* is Rajinikanth's cinematic answer to Jayalalitha's political pressure to contain him. As this film gained commercial success for Rajini at that time, it became clear that his fans, followers, and the public validated Rajinikanth's heroism. Sometimes villains may come in the form of women with unconventional values. In a patriarchal society, without fail, the male hero emerges victorious by subjugating the 'shrewd' woman. While one can argue that heroes are born when villains are detrimentally active, we can construe that the superhuman qualities of a hero, such as those displayed by Rajini, make him a saviour. With the spiritual tone in both his on-and off-screen persona, Rajini gives his image a mystical sensation. I will discuss this aspect further in Chapter Seven. The next Chapter analyses another actor-politician Vijyakanth, otherwise known as the black MGR.

Chapter Five

Vijayakanth: the black MGR

I know the people's mind; I feel their poverty and hunger. Both the DMK Party and AIADMK Party have been looting the state treasure all along. The situation in Tamil Nadu is so worse that it became a 'dark continent'.

Vijayakanth 2012

By looking closely at the film *Captain Prabhakaran* (dir.Selvamani 1991), this chapter will attempt to understand the cinematic charisma of actor-politician Vijayakanth (1952). It will examine the socio-cultural context and cinematic circumstances out of which Vijayakanth emerged to become the most formidable 'fresh alternative' (*Hindustan Times*, 2006) in Tamil Nadu politics. With a career spanning more than 150 films, actor-politician Vijayakanth is the Leader of the Opposition (at the time of writing) in the Tamil Nadu State Assembly, and the founder of a political party, National Progressive Dravidian Federation (*Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kalagam,* DMDK). This party is currently the second largest in the state accruing more than 10% of the total votes at the state election in 2011 (Ramakrishnan 2011). Like MGR, Vijayakanth carefully crafted his cinematic image as an action hero. He is known for his fight scenes and lengthy 'speeches of character' that are loaded with statistics about the socio-political situation of Tamil society. In his stunt scenes in his films, he always rescues vulnerable people, especially the poor and women. Like MGR his screen persona can be characterised as the saviour of the oppressed, the spotless hero with 'superhuman qualities,' the armed rebel against atrocities, the denouncer of the institutions, and an instant justice giver.

Vijayakanth's father, Alagarsaamy Naidu (the surname 'Naidu' denotes the caste; the Telugu-speaking Naidu are one of the dominant castes in South India) was an industrialist and one of the local leaders of the Congress Party in the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Before becoming an actor Vijayakanth helped his father in both professional and political spheres. Like MGR, Vijayakanth constructed his screen image with thoughts of political ambition right from the beginning. His biographer Joseph claims that Vijayakanth has been keen on politics ever since he began acting, an attitude which was evident in early films such as *Red Jasmin* (*Sivappu Malli*, dir. Ramanarayanan 1981).

Joseph (2007) also notes that Vijayakanth always chose his film roles with an eye on politics. He further states that Vijayakanth's political aspirations are even more evident through his aggressive fan club activities (2007, p. 61). As mentioned in Chapter Two, fan clubs play a pivotal role in the political success of film stars in Tamil Nadu. Actors who have political ambitions organise fan clubs and engage in charity work through these clubs. Vijayakanth started his fan clubs in 1987 with an official motto, 'Pronounce proudly that you are a Tamil; hold your head high' (*Tamilan enru solladaa; Thalai nimirndhu nillada*). As this phrase was synonymous with the Dravidian ideologies of self-respect and reverence for the language, one can detect the political tones in Vijyakanth's fan clubs. In one of his political campaigns Vijayakanth reminded his followers:

> I am only used to giving away in charity and not taking from others. If I have done so much for many in the state, how I ignore my constituency. Give me one chance and see what I can do for you (*Hindustan Times* May 2006).

Like MGR, Vijayakanth was interested in charity activities from the age of eighteen. He launched a welfare foundation named after the late leader and the

son of Congress matriarch, Indira Gandhi, 'Sanjay Gandhi Welfare Association' to undertake charity activities. The charity work included distribution of free text books and school uniforms for school children, and providing free clothes for the poor. Vijayakanth's cinematic career, therefore, was not accidental but a shrewdly calculated move towards his wider political ambitions (Joseph 2007, p. 100). Let me draw some parallels between Vijayakanth, Rajinikanth, and MGR.

Vijayakanth, Rajinikanth, and MGR

Both Rajinikanth and Vijayakanth are dark-skinned action heroes of Tamil cinema and both stem from non-Tamil backgrounds. Vijayakanth, in the early days, was seen as an alternative to Rajinikanth; however, the latter continues to be a superstar of Tamil cinema even in the present time and is still politically influential. Unlike Rajinikanth, who hails from a working class family, Vijayakanth's family is fairly affluent. When Vijayakanth started his film career, he identified himself with the DMK Party and acted in films with political messages, such as *The Law is a Dark Room* (*Sattam Oru Iruttarai*, 1981) and *Justice Survived* (*Needhi Pilaithadhu*, 1981) both directed by the DMK Party sympathiser, SA Chandrasekaran. Rajinikanth, on the other hand, was explicitly apolitical, at least until the 1990s, and maintained his distance from politics at that time. Like Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth established his own style by using his dark complexion and cultivating his unkempt hair to project himself as one among the masses, who has the 'extraordinary' powers to fight against their injustices.

Drawing parallels between Vijayakanth and MGR, *The Hindu* (April 2006) reports that like MGR, Vijayakanth's films carry political messages. Vijayakanth

even encourages his followers to call him the 'black MGR,' (*Karuppu* MGR). (*The New Indian Express*, March 2011). MGR's loyalists resented this idea of comparing Vijayakanth with MGR, on the grounds that MGR had always been the number one hero, and most of his films were commercial hits while Vijayakanth, even at his peak, was ranked only after Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan (*Indo-Asian News Service* May 2009). Various newspaper reports, however, also stated that people began to see Vijayakanth and his DMDK Party as a fresh alternative to the two mainstream political parties (AIADMK and DMK) in Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, he captured MGR's vote base— women, *dalits* (low-castes), youth, and the burgeoning middle class. What this demonstrates is that cinematic stars continue to dominate the political landscape of Tamil Nadu. By looking at the emergence of Vijayakanth, one can strongly argue that even the alternative political force in Tamil Nadu emanates from films. Now, let us understand the cinematic charisma of Vijayakanth by unpacking his iconic film, *Captain Prabhakaran* (1991).

Captain Prabhakaran: film summary

Vijayakanth made films based on real- life events; for instance, psycho-thrillers such as *Silent Eyes* (*Oomai Viligal*, dir. R Aravindraji 1986), *The Investigation* (*Pulan Visaaranai*, dir. RK Selvamani 1990), and *The Metropolitan Patrol* (*Maangara Kaaval*, dir. M Thiyagarajan 1991). In each of these films Vijayakanth portrayed an honest police officer, which has become from that point his characteristic film role. Vijayakanth's screen role in *Captain Prabhakaran* (1991) is similar in some ways to that of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Red Heat*

(dir. Walter Hill, 1988) in which his character, police captain Ivan Danko sets a trap to arrest a drug baron.

Captain Prabhakaran is based on the real life of a much-feared sandalwood smuggler, an elephant poacher, and a killer, Veerapan, who defied three South Indian state governments for nearly four decades (1970s–2000s). *Captain Prabhakaran*, produced by Vijayakanth himself, was his 100th film. Rajaraman (Sarathkumar) and Prabhakaran (Vijayakanth) are friends and forest rangers by profession. Veerabadran (fictionalised name of Veerapan, played by Mansoor Ali Khan) kills Rajaraman because the latter tried to stop the former from smuggling sandalwood trees in the reserve forest. To avenge the murder of his friend, Prabhakaran volunteers to capture Veerabadran and successfully apprehends the criminal. Veerabadran is shot dead en route to the court. Prabhakaran subsequently executes those responsible for his death. During the trial, Prabhakaran justifies his action with fierce arguments against the deceased politician and bureaucrats, citing that they were the real reasons behind the growth of Veerabadran. The masses, meanwhile, gather to lobby for his exoneration. Convinced by Prabhakaran's arguments and pressured by the mass protests, the judge sets him free.

This summary of *Captain Prabhakaran* highlights the key aspects of Vijayakanth's charisma: his extraordinariness, his superhuman qualities, and his faithfully devoted mass followers. Other cultural aspects of his characterisation such as *speech of character and others*, mateship, and 'politics of sentiment,' are also foregrounded.

The name 'Prabhakaran', created a controversy because it was also the name of the head of the Sri Lankan Tamil separatist organisation— the

'Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam' (LTTE) — who allegedly ordered the assassination of the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991 in Tamil Nadu. The assassination was also seen as retaliation from the militant organisation for the atrocities carried out by the Indian army against the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Since the release of this film coincided with Rajiv Gandhi's death, it was closely monitored by the Indian government. However, there was no reference to LTTE anywhere in the film. As mentioned, Vijayakanth got his nickname 'Captain' following the popularity of this film. In 2010, Vijayakanth launched his own television channel 'Captain TV'.

Figure 16. LTTE Prabhakaran (left) Captain Prabhakaran (right)

The film addresses the issue of dowry, alcoholism, and poverty. An analysis of *mise-en-scène* reveals the construction and convergence of Vijayakanth's 'on- and off- screen persona'. For Vijayakanth, his target audience are the poor, the vulnerable, and the minorities, and not the elite. Like MGR, he has been able to construct his screen image as an action hero, who is the defender of the downtrodden (Wyatt 2010, p. 170).

Charisma of Vijayakanth

As we have seen in Chapter One, charismatic leaders emerge when there is a crisis in the society and people follow their charismatic leader in faithful devotion, believing that their charismatic leader possesses superhuman qualities in the form of revolutionary attributes. If we apply Max Weber's notion of charisma to *Captain Prabhakaran*, one can see that Vijayakanth emerged as a charismatic leader during a time of lawlessness and threat from a notorious criminal; the masses in *Captain Prabhakaran* follow him and demonstrate their faithful devotion through their protests. This lawlessness and chaos in the film is a fictionalisation of the real situation of Indian society. It goes without saying that the rate of poverty, crimes against women, political corruption, ruthless bureaucracy, and inaccessible democratic institutions are one of the highest in the world. In Tamil society, people see their film stars as charismatic personalities. Legendary actors such as MGR had already suggested to the Tamils that 'revolution' was possible through cinema. This became evident in the honorary title of MGR as 'revolutionary actor' (*Puratchi Nadigar*). Similarly, Vijayakanth constructed his cinematic image as a revolutionary by taking on the honorary title of 'revolutionary artist' (*Puratchi Kalaigner*). He depicted the superhuman qualities of the revolutionary cinematic persona, by providing justice to the poor and bringing social change through the violence for which he was famous.

A distinctive aspect of the cinematic charisma of Vijayakanth is violence and his taking control of the state institutions, via his *speech of character*. Vijayakanth's filmic characterisations justify his militant vigilantism on the grounds that his actions redeem the poor from their plight. His film characters

seize power in their own hands to redistribute justice, to punish the guilty, and to eliminate criminals. Weber (1947) views the state as the entity that upholds the claim to legitimate use of physical force to implement order. Vijayakanth's cinematic image revolves around legitimising his violence by grabbing power from the state because it continues to fail the poor. In *Captain Prabhakaran*, he justifies violence with the words, 'I need to become a beast to destroy the beast.' The metaphor refers to the corrupt politicians and bureaucrats.

The screen image of Vijayakanth began with the film, *The Law is a Dark Room* (1981). A film about the misuse of the legal system by the rich and the consequent sufferings of the poor, Vijayakanth's screen image was an angry young man, who rose up against the systemic atrocities on the poor. To counter the problems generated by a complex democratic institution, society requires a charismatic personality that can overpower the labyrinthine legal system and problematic political institutions. Vijayakanth's films promise the poor such a personality, who is both 'one of their own' and apart from them. This specific construction of Vijayakanth's image along those lines is also evident in films such as J*ustice Based on Caste* (S*aadhikoru Needhi,* dir. S Shankaran 1981), *Red Jasmine* (1981), *Justice Survived* (1981)*, Red Eyes (Sivantha Kangal,* dir. Ramanaranyanan 1982), *The Law Laughs (Sattam Sirikinradhu*, dir. TR Ramanna 1982)*, Justice is in My Hands (Theerpu En kaiyil,* dir. JVP Sundar 1984), and *I am the Judge for Myself*, (*Enakku Naane Needhibadhi,* dir. SA Chandrasekaran 1984). These titles suggest Vijayakanth's position as someone extraordinary who has the potential to take the law in his own hands and dispense justice with violence.

The early career of Vijayakanth began while MGR was the Chief Minister of the state. Vijayakanth did not attack MGR in his films; rather his films targeted officials and other cabinet ministers in MGR's government. As we have noted in Chapter Two, MGR was not concerned that his officials and ministers were targeted by political and media campaigns, as long as his own image was spared. However, Vijayakanth manipulated 'audience foreknowledge' of MGR, his film titles, his characterisation, and his charisma. Many of Vijayakanth's film titles were borrowed MGR's own nicknames or song titles from his films such as *The Epic Hero* (*Kaaviya Thalaivan*, dir. KS Gopalakrishnan 1992), *My Breath Rests in Three Alphabets*, (*Moonreluthil En Moochirukkum,* dir. K Khaza 1991) and *The Golden Boy* (*Ponmana Selvan,* dir. P Vasu 1989), *The Mighty Man of Madurai (Madurai Sooran,* dir. MR Vijayachandar 1984). All can be seen as conscious attempts to communicate with MGR fans. As these titles relate to MGR, one way or the other, many people developed nostalgic associations with their leader through Vijayakanth. As mentioned in Chapter Two, these associations linked people with their hopes, ideals, and aspirations. For Andrew Wyatt:

> Vijayakanth is a distinctive and well-known figure in Tamil Nadu. He conforms to the many of the expectations held about leaders in the state. Vijayakanth has, in part, achieved this by linking himself to the style developed by MGR. In the preclude to his party political career, Vijayakanth became well known for playing heroic figures which echoed MGR's image as defender of the poor and vulnerable. Vijayakanth continues to the tradition of generosity for which MGR was renowned (2011, p. 171).

The unique feature of Vijayakanth's charisma rests in taking law in his own hands. He justifies his violence by his monologues which refer to the plight of the poor. In *Captain Prabhakaran*, he argues with the District Collector and Police Officer by saying, 'Nobody needs to give me power but I took it on my

own. I did that to save fairness and justice and I will do anything for the same.' He then challenges the Police Officer by saying that he is ready to face legality with legality and violence with violence. In this context, by countering the government-appointed police official, Prabhakaran challenges the government itself, the utmost source of power. He rebels against the government by being part of the government as a Forest Officer. In another film, *Dharma* (dir. Kayar, 1998) he invokes his power in the poor by saying that he remains in the hearts of the countless poor. This makes the audience believe in the same system that brings them despair. In other words, people are made to believe that through Vijayakanth's films there is a superhuman hero who exists in the same system. In this way, his films provide hope and suppress the desire to retaliate against the system. It is important to keep people's faith in the system, as Vijayakanth suggested, in the film *Dharma* (see next Chapter).

As mentioned earlier, Vijayakanth's screen persona, like Rajinikanth, is that of an angry young man with dark skin and unkempt hair. Vijayakanth's films tend to praise his dark complexion through lyrics. For instance, the song, *Black Moon* (*Karuppu Nilaa*) in the film, *My Beloved Brother-in-law* (*En Aasai Machaan*, dir. R Sundarrajan 1994) praises his dark complexion as being as pure as the white moon. This needs to be contextualised within the prevalent cultural preference for fair skin. By asserting that black is as good as white, one can argue that Vijayakanth's films try to legitimise his less-advantageous skin colour.

Just like the films of MGR and Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth's films have the elements of hero worship. The arrival of his character is often dramatic and heralded by loud music. In most of his films, establishing shots of Vijayakanth begin with stunt scenes that provide the audience with an understanding that their

hero will emerge victorious. In *Captain Prabhakaran*, Vijayakanth's first entrance is an action scene in which he single-handedly saves a young and vulnerable woman from being raped by a group of policemen. This is studied in detail in the succeeding sections.

Violence, weaponry, and instant justice

Figure 17. Vijayakanth with weapons in various films

The *sine qua non* of Vijayakanth's charisma is bloody revenge through brutal fights and the use of sophisticated weaponry such as AK-47 rifles. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger in films such as *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron 1984), Vijayakanth exhibits his mastery over such weapons in *Captain Prabhakaran*. His bloodthirsty violence often follows the excesses of police officers, who have attempted to rape vulnerable women. Vijayakanth saves these women, after attacking governmental representatives. *Speech of character* follows the rescue. The narrative structure of Vijayakanth's films revolves around this tension between the anti-heroic or antagonistic violent act, and the heroic violent act, violence, and rescue. The opening scene (offering a grand build-up for Vijayakanth) of *Captain Prabhakaran* reinforces this trajectory.

A well-dressed young woman arrives in Chennai from a remote town around midnight along with her mother. She wears a yellow *saree* (traditional dress of the Tamil women) and blouse while her mother wears a grey *saree* with a matching blouse. The colour yellow is auspicious and a symbol of virginity in Tamil society, whereas grey is a sign of calm and abandonment. In Tamil society, only widows can wear white, saffron, and grey clothes. Unmarried and married girls do not wear white, saffron, and grey *saree*. The young woman Lalitha has a long braided hair, a signifier of her domestic subservience. Both Lalitha and her mother are on their way to their destination riding a cycle rickshaw.

A police constable, who is on patrol, stops them and questions them. He alleges that the young woman and her mother are prostitutes. The rickshaw puller tries to convince the constable that they are not prostitutes but people he has picked up from the bus station. The constable takes them to the police station where a police inspector tries to rape Lalitha. In the background, a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi hangs on the wall. Gandhi's portrait implies a free India, but this is ironically undercut by the action taking place. In a desperate attempt to save herself from being raped by the police officers inside the police station, Lalitha kicks the inspector and runs out of the police station. She pleads for help from the nearby people but none of them are ready to take her, fearing that the police might incriminate them. As Lalitha runs for her safety, the camera moves from dolly shot to pedestal shot to tracking shots. The cloudy sky starts to rain; policemen chase Lalitha to get her back in the police station; a barefooted Lalitha runs down the road without any idea where she is headed.

She stumbles and falls. Cars pass by and ignore the pleading woman. Apathy to helpless victims, it seems, is one of the features of anonymous urban

life. A visibly tired Lalitha gives up hope as the policeman captures her. Suddenly, a heavily armed vehicle arrives and headlamps flash yellow lights onto the two figures. A dolly shot focuses on the vehicle from the front and a tilt shot transforms into a pan shot around the wheels of the jeep. The headlights are full beam; pair of yellow lights turn on from the top of the jeep; the camera pans from right to left. Then the camera moves inside the vehicle as the driver changes the gear; the driver's ring indicates his marital status; background music builds up; a long shot exposes the brightly lit vehicle amidst the dark landscape as the policeman (mid-shot) is startled by the jeep. Lalitha pushes aside the policeman and runs towards the vehicle shouting for help. She runs towards the vehicle as it approaches her slowly. The jeep stops and she falls in front of the vehicle. As a man steps out of the vehicle, the young woman rolls over with her face toward his feet. We are about to be introduced to the the 'revolutionary artist,' Vijayakanth.

A pedestal shot moves from bottom to top, showing the man, clad in white pants and suit with an aura around his white cloth. As the camera moves further up, Vijayakanth as Prabhakaran is introduced with loud music and in close-up. The close-up shot is juxtaposed with the smiling policeman. The camera detours from a long shot to a high angle, Prabhakaran (Vijayakanth) lifts up the young woman, who calls him *anna* (elder brother). Prabhakaran asks her in return 'Lalitha, how come you are here?' The camera goes to a close-up shot, from a high angle as Prabhakaran talks to Lalitha. The young woman answers, 'We were on our way to visit your house. These police men...' The next shot shows the smiling policeman in close-up, approaching them followed by a mid-shot of Prabhakaran and the young woman, who is now sobbing on the former's shoulders.

An infuriated Prabhakaran stares angrily at the policeman. A mid-shot shows him and the policeman moving towards each other, indicating a physical confrontation is to ensue. As the stunt progresses, Prabhakaran knocks out the policeman with a single kick and walks towards the police station along with the young woman. A police inspector is informed that Prabhakaran is on the way to the police station. The inspector orders Prabhakaran to be beaten and put in the station lock up.

As the fight progresses, the lock-up rooms are shown in the background. Inside a lock-up room, bare-chested men watch the fight. The second part of the stunt begins with a 'leg kick' from Prabhakaran. It is important to note the differences in terms of fighting styles of different actors. While MGR is known for the traditional fights such as stick fights, Rajinikanth mixes his fights while uttering speech (one-liners) and comic mannerisms. For instance, In *Manidhan* (*Human Being*, dir. SP Muthuraman 1987), Rajinikanth engages in fights as he blurts out a one-liner, 'I am going to beat you without touching my foot on earth.' Sarathkumar's fights often use wooden sticks and bullocks. For Vijayakanth, as he claims in his biography, his speciality lies in leg fights. His stunts are often dominated by 'kicking out' his opponents (Joseph 2007, p. 64). This contains cultural significances as well. By kicking out his opponent, the person does not just prove his prowess, but also suggests that his opponents are not his equals and do not pose a challenge to him. These leg fights require the audiences to develop their emotions in tandem with the narrative. Kicking out means that the person is not considered being equal in terms of strength; he does not deserve any respect; and the one who kicks has out-powered his opponent. At one point, as the stunt goes on, some policemen attempt to rape Lalitha but Prabhakaran rescues her.

Lalitha and her mother, who has also arrested in the police station, look up with a sigh of relief after Prabhakaran beats up all the policemen. The inspector mumbles, 'Don't think that you can easily get away after beating up policemen inside the police station.' Prabhakaran replies 'I won't go away anywhere. This is my address and you come and see me there.' In the next shot, Prabhakaran protectively hugs the young woman and her mother and takes them out of the police station. Calm and melodious flute music concludes the scene. Prabhakaran looks at them, adjusts his suit, and places his hands inside the pockets and begins his lengthy monologue, *speech of character*, to the gathering (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Prabhakaran's speech of character
after saving Lalitha

This lengthy description of the key scene in the film is necessary, for it underlines in several interlocking stages the importance of Vijayakanth's role as someone who takes the law in his own hands to punish the perpetrators of crime and unjust acts even though they are policemen. This is one of the distinctive aspects of Vijayakanth's charisma. In India, the abuse of power is not uncommon and it mainly affects both the rural and urban poor. By using force and violence to

bring justice and redeem the vulnerable, the screen persona of Vijayakanth is synonymous with the state by displaying his prowess to do what the state institutions failed to do. In other words, through his vigilantism, Vijayakanth personalises violence and makes his violence legitimate by institutionalising his charisma. The contention is that his charisma as developed through the action hero persona becomes acceptable to the audience due to the existing real-life systemic failures and of individuals who occupy powerful positions.

Social discourse

Vijayakanth's social discourses through *speech of character* and *others* can be read as political campaigns. His monologues often last up to twenty minutes in his films. Throughout, he attacks politicians, police officers, judiciary, bureaucrats, money lenders, and corporate hospitals. The highpoint of this extended social discourse occurs at the climax of *Captain Prabhakaran.*

As defined in previous chapters, social discourse is a statement or conversation from the protagonist that underlines existing socio-cultural problems, political issues, and economic crises. Vijayakanth's social discourses are distinctive in the sense that he explicitly refers to contemporary domestic and national events. They are loaded with statistical details such as the number of rapes and the percentage of poverty and they frequently cite legal points. As we have seen in the police station scene in *Captain Prabhakaran,* Vijayakanth establishes and sustains his superhuman potentials by embodying social institutions which allow him to question the decay in the system.

The social discourse of Vijayakanth often refers to the law of the land. By doing so, he brings forth another daily problem of the poor— the ruthless legal system filled with red tape and anti-poor procedures. Many of the Indian legal codes were enacted during British rule and the Indian judiciary is often criticised as being outdated, inhuman, and unequal. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Vijayakanth's early films were often about the legal entanglements of ordinary families. By winning his arguments in the court of law, Vijayakanth exhibits his mastery over the law of the land. In *Captain Prabhakaran* he asks the official for a marriage registration. Prabhakaran registers his marriage secretly as the bride's politician father refuses his consent. His wife is the daughter of the state minister. As the registrar of marriage notes down the names of the parents, he is shocked to realise that the girl is the daughter of the state minister; therefore, he hesitates to register the marriage. Vijayakanth reacts angrily at his hesitation. He shouts, 'The law does not ask me to tell the bride about her father's political status.' Thus, unlike in the west, Indian marriages are more ritualistic than legalistic. In a conservative Indian society, marriages are still arranged by parents on the basis of caste and class. Prabhakaran defies the conservative marriage conventions by opting for a legal marriage and he cites the legal provisions to the officer who is supposed to discharge his duties without fear and favour. The construction of Vijayakanth's charisma is reinforced in this scene— he is someone versed in the legal system of the country.

At one point, Prabhakaran defies the police officer who tries to arrest him. The conversation between the two strengthens the nature of Vijayakanth's screen persona. Prabhakaran justifies his defiance, despite the fact that he is also a public servant, by referring to the corruption existing in the system. The officer has

visited Prabhakaran's residence to arrest him for his violent clash with the policemen. Prabhakaran steps down from the staircase, clad in Tamil traditional dress, white *dhoti* and shirt. His pet, a white Pomeranian, precedes him (having a pet inside the house is a status symbol). As he emerges from the house, the police officer gets out of his jeep. The inspector is also in the scene. As the camera goes for a close-up shot of Vijayakanth, has 'ash and saffron powder' (*viboodhi* and *Kum Kum)*, a Hindu sign, on his forehead; as an endorsement that it is ritualistic for Tamils to take a bath every morning and perform religious duties. In the following exchanges between Prabhakaran and the police officer, we can detect the former's fearless bravery (extraordinariness), which needs to be seen in the context of Tamil society where police officers are one of the most powerful persons:

> Prabhakaran: What do you want?
> Police Officer: We have come here to arrest you.
> Praba: What for? (As camera focuses the policemen, the inspector is seen with broken hand that is supported by the bandage)
> PO: We don't have to tell you why!
> Praba: If so, neither you can arrest me.
> PO: Why?
> Praba: I don't have to tell you why and what for either! You have become a police officer after studying Indian Police Service (IPS). I have become a Forest Officer, having studied Indian Forest Service (IFS). You and I are in the same rank.
> PO: You are telling that you have done IFS. But you have acted like a rowdy and beaten up in our policemen in the police station itself.
> Praba: He didn't act as a Police Man. So I didn't behave like an Officer.
> PO: For that matter... (Prabhakaran interrupts him)
> Praba: I will see you in the court. You leave now. (Vijayakanth moves inside the house angrily and camera takes a pan shot from the right and the Police Officer stands as his head down with a look of humiliation.

Here, Vijayakanth's defiant screen image becomes clear through Prabhakaran's social discourse. He argues against, ignores, humiliates, and defies the police officer, who represents a key state institution. As mentioned, such an action would normally be impossible in the life of an ordinary Tamil. However, the audience welcomes such a discourse from Vijayakanth's films because Prabhakaran expresses their disappointments and discontentment with police excesses and systemic failures. The poor and downtrodden find his discourses appealing because they are able to relate to the issues. Vijayakanth speaks for them in their own language and he follows his words with actions. Vijayakanth's films dispense an instant vigilantism justice: he takes the law into his own hands and is hostile and violent to the offenders.

Prabhakaran's social discourse continues in the next scene after the verbal confrontation with the police officer. This time he justifies his violence in a court of law. Citing Gandhi, Prabhakaran argues:

> Your Honour! It is the duty of the Police Station to maintain law and order. If they fail to do so, then that is not a Police Station and those who are in there are neither Policemen. Gandhi said, 'the country will be considered to be truly independent only when a young woman is able to walk alone on the street without fear.' This police station does not just guarantee women's freedom but also fails to protect their rights. In this country, women are more scared of Police than they are afraid of thieves or rowdies. Are these people real police men, Your Honour?

In these three examples, Prabhakaran has engaged in a violent battle with policemen, defied a high-ranking police officer, and defended his violence against the police by justifying his violence with the quotes from the non-violent. Through the surface, this may seem paradoxical; this is in fact for many the reality of Indian society that violence and brutal killings have become a part of everyday

lives. Vijayakanth's films represent the common man's loss of faith in the system intended to protect them. Hence, through his social discourse, Vijayakanth shines a light on the existing flaws and failures of democratic institutions. He does that by means of violence and by building a screen persona as a saviour of the poor and vulnerable. His actions are revolutionary, reactionary, instantaneous, and violent.

Conservative values and reflection of reality

Although Vijayakanth shows revolutionary attributes in his screen persona, he maintains a conservative outlook in regard to the treatment of women. He enforces conservative values such as chastity through paternalistic and patriarchal discourses. In *Captain Prabhakaran*, he saves a young woman when her chastity is under attack. Prabhakaran later argues further in court stating that Indian women are vulnerable throughout the sub-continent. He cites the incidents in the other states and questions the inadequacy of the system:

> Don't you know the incidents where a woman constable was raped by a fellow policeman? Didn't such an incident happen in this country? Didn't the news come in the media? Haven't you read that news? Your Honour, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, two people went inside the convent and raped nuns over there. The police didn't take any action; Doctors didn't give a true report! The police took action against those rowdies by arresting them only after the intervention of the Prime Minister of the country. I am asking every one of you- Will the Prime Minister come to rescue those who have been affected? Is that feasible? Those who treat women as mother, sisters, and goddesses can rescue them from their troubles. I saved a woman, as I have always treated women as my mother, sisters and goddesses. This is the country that names everything after woman, such as, mother land, mother tongue and mother earth. With that attitude and with the intention to imbue every citizen of the country with this knowledge that they should treat women as mothers, sisters, and goddesses, I beat the police, who tried to rape a woman.

Here, Prabhakaran does not argue for the equality of women but the need to protect the chastity of women. By doing so, he represents the patriarchal Tamil society and the importance of keeping the value of chastity, and thereby maintaining the inferior status of women. Such chastity is the most precious possession that women have and must protect at any cost. Since a woman cannot defend herself and she needs shelter from a man who can shield her chastity to stay pure; a woman is always in danger if she goes out of her house. Even a police station is not a safe place for a woman, who is an object of desire that tempts policemen. The police enjoy undisputed authority in dealing with breaches of the law of the land. In their acting against a woman, the police cannot be questioned even when they engage in atrocities. Cities are dangerous places especially for women, since nobody will help strangers even when they are in grave dangers. Society needs a saviour, who can rescue people with the might of his hand. Indeed, the police station scene was a cinematic version of the actual events that happened in Tamil Nadu during the 1990s widely reported in the media. *Captain Prabhakaran* provides a commentary on the prevailing social situations, yet another aspect of Vijayakanth's films. His films link to real events, incidents, and crimes at that time.

Unlike other Tamil heroes, Vijayakanth's characters do not just deal with Tamil questions but also with national issues. However, he deals with national issues through 'Tamil-ness.' For instance, in *The Metropolitan Patrol* (*Maanagara Kaaval*, dir. Thyagarajan 1991) he acts as a senior police officer who assumes the responsibility of protecting the Prime Minister from a series of assassination attempts. The film deals with the Kashmir dispute and 'Pakistan sponsored terrorism,' a famous cliché` of the national Indian politicians. In the

film, *Rajadurai* (dir. Anspaugh, 1993), Vijayakanth captures terrorists trained in Pakistan. All the while, he does this through Tamil-style heroism. As a Tamil police official, Vijayakanth tackles the terror threat single-handedly.

The difference in the characterisation between Vijayakanth and MGR is worthy of comparison. Whereas MGR's characterisation never campaigned for Indian nationalism, Vijayakanth's characterisation always argued for Indian nationalism, but through Tamil-ness. Vijayakanth represents the changing perspective of young Tamils after the demise of MGR. Today's youth in contemporary Tamil Nadu were born after the Dravidian movement (which was at its peak of popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s). Vijayakanth, with his early political background as Congress Party man, is more of a nationalist and more patriotic in his screen image. What is more, while MGR fights for democracy, Vijayakanth engages in vigilantism for the plight of the poor within a democratic setting, arguing that democracy has failed to deliver services for the masses.

At the close of *Captain Prabhakaran*, Prabhakaran assassinates a police officer, a district collector, and a member of the legislative assembly, all representatives from the four pillars of democracy. Vijayakanth thus capitalises on the prevailing public angst by exercising violence against officialdom. In this context, it would be pertinent to look into the court scene in *Captain Prabhakaran* in which Prabhakaran justifies and makes his assassination legitimate with the public support.

Prabhakaran enters into the court premises with police escorts. Contrary to a previous scene in which Prabhakaran wore his camouflage pants and a sleeveless top with blood on his face, he now wears a clean white shirt and with a

calm and composed look. The scene depicts a typical example of the kind of court confrontation that takes place in many of Vijayakanth's films. He eschews legal aid or the assistance from an attorney. In Tamil Nadu, the working classes are often exploited by the elites by a corrupt legal system, which delay judicial proceedings. In this scene, a common man being aware of the laws and having mastery over judicial proceedings would be a matter of prestige and revolutionary role-playing easily detectable by the audience.

The judicial proceedings are conducted by five judges, behind whose heads hangs a portrait of Gandhi. Prabhakaran defends himself:

> In all my life, I have never undermined people, who have lower status than me, or envied of those who are above me. To stop crimes from taking place, it is not enough to eliminate criminals but it is also necessary to eradicate those who sponsor and support them. That is why I shot the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), the District Superintendent of Police (DSP), and the District Collector, who were collectively responsible in the growth of Veerabadran.

This *speech of character* is important for two reasons. Firstly, Prabhakaran refers to his own personality, which can be seen to parallel Vijayakanth's real life competitors such as Rajinikanth. By saying that he has never undermined anyone, he sends a message to his fans that he treats everyone equally. Secondly, the next section of dialogue shows the intense defence of his assassination. He argues that only through the elimination of bad elements in the system can the existing social problems be eradicated. Furthermore, he points to the innocence of the brigand Veerabadran by saying that he was not a criminal, but the politicians and bureaucrats made him a criminal in order to make money for them. Talking about Veerabadran, Prabhakaran continues:

Veerabadran would have needed money only if he had wanted to send his children to an elite school in a luxurious car; he would have needed money if his wife had wanted to wear expensive clothes thrice a day with exotic ornaments and fashionable jewelleries; he would have needed money, if he had wanted to lead a lavish life in an air-conditioned extravagant building; he would have needed money, if he had wanted to see his family members or relatives in government jobs as those jobs are available only to those who can afford large sum of cash as bribe to politicians and officials; on top of all, he would have needed money, if he were a politician to run his party. On the contrary, he leads a nomadic life in the forest with constant fear of being caught at any time, with no freedom or peace. This fellow was not even able to live an ordinary marital life like many of us. Henceforth, why on earth was he after money? The MLA needed money, The District Collector needed money, and The Police Officer needed money apart from their salaries. Therefore, they wanted someone like Veerabadran to make money for them. Veerabadran was created, aided, abetted by these corrupt people only to make more money through improper and illegal means.

Prabhakaran's defence argument echoes the people's views about the real-life forest brigand Veerapan, upon whose life *Captain Prabhakaran* is based. After killing Veerapan, critics emphasised the need to track down the guilty parties by putting forwarding the same arguments as Prabhakaran. Once again, we can see how the construction of Vijayakanth's screen image is bolstered through the solving of real life problems and attacking the negligence of a system which ignores the masses.

The politics of sentiment

As defined, the 'politics of sentiment' is the cinematic appeal through which film-makers exploit the emotions and sentiments of the audience or masses; for example, the sentiments revolving around the sacred thread of wedlock. In *Captain Prabhakaran*, the 'politics of sentiment' operate through existing cultural

sentiments such as mother, religion and charity. At his mother's deathbed, Prabhakaran recalls the incident in which he was adopted: he approached an oncoming couple for food who adopted him. While the adoptive father wanted him to convert to Islam, the adoptive mother Fatima allowed him to be a Hindu by saying that there is no need to be partial on the basis of caste or religion. This scene can be seen as paralleling Vijayakanth's real persona, in which he himself claims himself that he keeps portraits of Hindu gods, Islam, and Jesus Christ at his home (Joseph 2007, p. 78). What this demonstrates is that Vijayakanth's intention to appeal to the major religions in Tamil Nadu, which is important for the electoral politics. This aspect of his persona sets him apart from the rest of the actor-politicians.

As mentioned, the 'politics of sentiment' through the mother operates on two grounds: religion and charity. The scene also provides a celebratory account of poverty and the orphanage. As the scene proceeds, Prabhakaran performs funeral rituals for his adoptive mother by cladding himself as a Muslim. The portrayal of the funeral rituals of mother is another popular *modus operandi* for the 'politics of sentiment'. In scenes such as these, audiences relate to their own real life tragedies. Besides involving audiences in the film, such 'politics of sentiment' serves as the justification for the next stage of violence; the revenge for the loss of the mother. In *Captain Prabhakaran*, the murder of Prabhakaran's mother is strategically placed just before the denouement.

In *Captain Prabhakaran*, the 'politics of sentiment' begins with the opening of the film itself. The credit list in this film reads as follows: 'Tamil fans, mothers, sisters, the directors, technicians and journalists'. By doing so, Vijayakanth gives priority and significance to those involved in the film of his

own production. Credits of gratitude are not new to Tamil cinema, but who is named assumes enormous significance in terms of the target audience. Fan clubs are pivotal in the elevation of film actors into politician status. By acknowledging his fans first in the opening of the film itself, which no other star actor does, Vijayakanth establishes an affectionate link with his fans.

In addition, mother sentiments are another popular source of attraction and potential area for vote catchment in Tamil society. Hence, it is important to woo the female audience, not just for the commercial success of the film but also for the captivation of their hearts, that will in turn ensure the political success of an actor. Once the actor is able to establish his 'image' among the female audience, the connection is said to be long-lasting and trustworthy in terms of the transformation of fame into votes.

Having a good relationship with media is another important prerequisite for any aspiring politician. Throughout his film career Vijayakanth has been able to maintain a non-controversial rapport with the media. The recognition of media people in his film reinforces this relationship. As Wyatt (2010) argues, Vijayakanth has a media profile and an intimacy with ordinary people that most aspiring politicians do not have. This is the same formula which made MGR an unconquerable hero and invincible politician in Tamil Nadu.

Landscape

Although *Captain Prabhakaran* projects Vijayakanth as a city man, his heroic adventure is narrated in terms of his mission in the country side. He proves his extraordinariness by eliminating the much-feared forest brigand, Veerabadran.

Until Prabhakaran's arrival, his fellow officers found it impossible to capture him. The extraordinary danger of his task is portrayed through the cruelty of Veerabadran, the hostile outback, and vulnerability of the rural poor. The villagers' poverty is compounded by corrupt and opportunistic officials. By projecting the prowess of the urban- based forest officer Prabhakaran, it shows his ability to save and protect the rural poor.

Figure 19. The establishing shot and romance
narrated through the landscape

In *Captain Prabhakaran,* a city man Rajaraman (Sarathkumar) has pre-marital sex with a tribal woman, Banu (Ramya Krishnan), near a river bank. After this, Rajaram wears a formal shirt and trousers, while Banu wears a decorated skirt, jacket, and bangles. Rajaraman's attire indicates that he is an urban man, while Banu's costume and ornaments indicate that she is a tribal girl. The melancholic melody that underscores this scene reflects the exploitation of traditional innocence and purity by modernity. This paralleling of women with country life is intentional in suggesting important and latent meanings.

This romance between an innocent rural girl and an educated urban man in *Captain Prabhakaran* touches on such taboos as pre-marital sex and the emphasis on chastity. As stated previously, losing chastity represents an irreparable damage and sin for any woman in Tamil Nadu. After making love, Banu sobs in guilt for

breaching the Tamil custom of not having sexual relations before marriage. Rajaram assures her that he is not a cheat, and will not abandon the girl after having sex. The conversation between Rajaraman and Banu, through the use of metaphors, such as cheating, other 'urban guys', and abandonment, underlines the vulnerability of rural women and the stereotypical image towards urban men. The surface meaning is thus the importance of chastity for women; the latent meaning is the vulnerability of rural land and people due to the ever-growing process of urbanisation.

By portraying the loss of chastity of Banu, the scene underscores the loss of pure, serene and peaceful life of the countryside. Scenes such as these allow the audiences to develop an emotional involvement with the story. Women are more vulnerable and need to be protected just like the forest resources in rural and tribal regions. The scene also underlines the patriarchal and paternalistic value system of Tamil society. A woman is always vulnerable and often attracts unhealthy elements that come mainly in the form of modernisation and urbanisation. It is she who bears the responsibility for losing of her chastity, not the perpetrator. Most importantly, the events provide the groundwork for the arrival of the long-expected hero, Vijayakanth, who validates the problems through his social discourses and offers a solution to the problems through his superhuman qualities.

Another popular theme in Tamil films is the linking of romance with landscape. Romantic songs intertwine with picturesque landscape. We have already discussed in such songs as 'What is the use of fertile field?' from MGR's *Nadodi Mannan* (1958) and 'Circling around' from Rajinikanth's *Padayappa (*1999), and *Kotta Paakum* from *Naattamai* (1997), in Chapters Two, Four, and Six respectively. In *Captain Prabhakaran* the love-making scene takes place on

the banks of a river with a gentle flute melody as the background score. Invariably landscape is the site for the emotional development of the audience through a bombardment of images that are characteristic of the rural environment. To contrast the collective way of life in a rural social structure with the anonymous urban social structure, Tamil films often bring traditional festivities and games into the narrative. In *Captain Prabhakaran* the song, 'Affectionate Paandiyaru,' portrays the harmonious co-existence of the rural folk with Mother Nature. This song also features a rural deity, colourful decorations, dance, and music that allow the spectators to relate the song and visual images to their individual daily experience. In the background, the mountainous landscape situates the song to the cultural setting of the rural social life. As the villagers watch the dancing festival, houses with thatched roofs can also be seen. Such thatched roofs demonstrate two things: the continued existence of tribal life and all its accompanying poverty and vulnerability.

*Figure 20. Rural festival, thatched roofs, the
deity, and hilly landscape*

While portraying the plight of the villagers in terms of their innocence, helplessness, and uncertain life without basic amenities, *Captain Prabhakaran*

depicts the officials and politicians in the city as responsible for the misery of the villagers. In the end, the film shows Veerabadran engaging in unlawful activities not for himself but for the politicians and bureaucrats in the city. The film features the innocence, beauty, and problems of the country life from the outset. The establishing shot is landscape. A long shot embraces the lush dense mountain range with mysterious music in the background. The landscape, it appears, contains a multitude of meanings: nature, beauty, prosperity, love, life, despair, and death as well as decay in the case of the film. The beautiful mountainous landscape also provides refuge to a cruel brigand.

Captain Prabhakaran also uses landscape in the form of binary opposition between country life and city life. Serene, pure, and peaceful rural life is compared with the rapid, mechanical, and restless urban life. The conversation between Rajaram and his sister Lalitha, comparing and contrasting the rural and urban lives, concludes by praising rural life. This supports the good rural life versus bad city life dichotomy associated with the landscape. One needs to remember here that, unlike Australia, where the majority of the population lives in urban areas, in India the majority of the population live in rural areas (and the potential consumers of Tamil cinema live in these rural areas). In regard to the duality of the Australian landscape and its portrayal in film narrative, Turner (1986, p. 25) notes, 'It has become customary to talk about the representation of the Australian context as divisible into two separate and opposing terms these appear variously as the country versus the city, rural versus urban, nature versus society.' If one relates Turner's observation of the Australian landscape to Tamil cinema it provides an interesting parallel as Tamil cinema has traditionally tended to portray the city as a hostile and antagonistic place in comparison with the

country. As natural resources are available in abundance in rural areas, so are opportunities for greed and exploitation. The rich control India's natural resources. The helpless situation of the rural populace is parodied through 'politics of sentiment', as rural women are used, and abused, by opportunistic urban men as mentioned at the beginning of this section.

As previously discussed, landscape is very much a part of Tamil film narratives. Even a cursory glance at representational narratives of the Tamils— be they an ancient epic or the latest poem— makes it easy to understand the significance of landscape in the daily lives of Tamil people. Films, being the most popular cultural representation, follow the representational focus of literary tradition. In Tamil films, however, the binary pattern of outback versus city is more prominent. As mentioned, the rural is pure, pristine, normal, and natural as opposed to the artificial, unnatural, impure, and polluted conditions of urban life. *Captain Prabhakaran* follows the convention by contextualising the rural landscape in its narration. More significantly, the narration through the rural landscape prepares the audiences for the arrival of their star— Prabhakaran, who not only eliminates the almost invincible corrupt elements but also protects the traditional pattern of their life style.

Conclusion

In Tamil Cinema, a film's genre is established through the actor's creation of his image. It is only a matter of time for an actor to establish his 'image' through formulaic characterisation, which creates the distinctive charisma of an actor. Vijayakanth is no exception to this. What sets him apart from other action

stars is his discourse (*speech of character*) that highlights the deplorable plight of the common man when dealing with bureaucratic red tape, corruption, and violence against women. Vijayakanth's films are distinctive in the sense that his characters bring instant justice to the people by taking law into their own hands and being hostile and violent against the guilty and corrupt.

The Vijayakanth genre is action- packed films filled with stylised violence that is justified in the pursuit of instant justice. Having restored normalcy, he addresses the public by highlighting the existing social problems, pointing out the causes of the problems, and suggesting solutions. His characters redistribute justice based on 'repressive law.' The term advocated by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim as cited by Robert K. Merton (1934, p. 320). The ideology of Vijayakanth's characters is that there is only one way to stop crime: severe physical punishment, including elimination of the culprits. Throughout *Captain Prabhakaran*, Vijayakanth's character shows defiance to state authorities (including the judiciary) by arguing the country's legal system has never punished corrupt politicians and dishonest bureaucrats and has failed to protect the masses. This explains the charisma of Vijayakanth.

Tamils enjoy such action films as they bring immediate but imaginary solutions to long-lasting and deeply-rooted social problems. More importantly action films produce the heroes, whom people hope for to redeem their troubles. Tamil films can be read not simply as what Hollywood calls 'harmless entertainment', but given the context in which they are consumed, they function as statements of the political appeals of the major star politicians. This trend started with the success of MGR, was followed by Rajinikanth, and then emulated by Vijayakanth. However, the difference between Vijayakanth and his

contemporaries rests in the fact that the other heroes play out their action by blending their roles with romance and comedy, while Vijayakanth's roles are more serious and violently assertive. This unique aspect of Vijayakanth's characterisation is juxtaposed with other aspects such as landscape, the 'politics of sentiment', and speeches of character.

Like MGR, Vijayakanth chooses films to suit his political interests and screenplay which project him as a brave and benevolent leader, who can destroy elements of evil and restore social order in society. He presents himself as an all-encompassing institution, replete with the combined powers of police, judge, and executioner. Blood and violence play out in his actions. In the next chapter, we shall explore the final actor in our analysis: the case of Sarathkumar and his charisma as 'rural Rambo.'

Chapter Six

Sarathkumar: a rural Rambo

A multifaceted personality Sarathkumar has a keen interest in grassroots democracy with limitless passion to develop the full potential of youth on a strong moral foundation. He insists that our youth should achieve excellence built on values of hard work. His talks are laced with progressive ideas and he considers politics as an extended way of social service. He is a true follower of the two great leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Kamaraj.

Asian Tribune January 2010

Actor-politician Sarathkumar has been (at the time of writing) the president of the influential 'South Indian Film Artists Association' since 2005. He took over this position from Vijayakanth. Sarathkumar has also been the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) in Tamil Nadu since 2011, and a former Member of the Indian Parliament (MP 2002–2006). He is the founding president of a political party, the 'All India Egalitarian People Party' (*Akila Indhiya Samathuva Makkal Katchi*, also known as AISMK).

While launching his political party, Sarathkumar made a vow that he would bring 'Kamaraj rule' back in Tamil Nadu (*The Hindu*, October 2009). Any discussion on Sarathkumar, therefore, cannot be complete without talking about his Nadar caste and its iconic leader Kamaraj. Let us briefly look at these two, and come back to the biographical details of Sarathkumar before proceeding further. To begin with, people belonging to the Nadar caste were once devalued as inferior, therefore, 'untouchables'. These people were discriminated against and humiliated in various ways; for instance, Nadar women were not allowed to cover their breasts (Hardgrave 1970, p. 101).

Of all five actors analysed in this thesis, the distinctiveness of Sarathkumar lies in his caste, ethnicity, and film genre. He was born into the Nadar caste, which occupies the lowest position in the caste hierarchy in comparison with upper caste Brahmin. Notwithstanding, it is one of the very few castes in India which has witnessed vertical mobility in the caste hierarchy, because of its social cohesion, economic excellence and political solidarity, as represented through their caste loyalty. It is mainly due to their leader, K Kamaraj, who was a contemporary of Mahatma Gandhi. In regard to the Nadar community, Hardgrave writes:

> Considered by high caste Hindus in the early 19th century to be among the most defiling and degraded of all castes the Nadars suffered severe social disabilities and were one of the most economically depressed communities in South India. In their response to the social and economic changes during the last century, however, the Nadars have today become one of the most economically and politically successful communities in South India. In the fields of trade and education, they are unexcelled, and in politics, the power of Kamaraj extends across the whole India (1970, p. 99).

Being born in an untouchable caste, the illiterate Kamaraj rose to the prominence in the nationalist Congress Party after independence. He served as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1954–1963; his tenure has been considered to be the golden era of Tamil Nadu; he announced various welfare schemes in the state. More importantly, he was hailed for his simplicity, integrity, and corrupt-free government. He was also known as the kingmaker of the national politics in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

Although Sarathkumar was born into the socially and ritually low Nadar caste, he has had the support of fellow Nadars from the beginning of his film career. In addition, unlike other star actors such as MGR, Rajinikanth, and

Vijayakanth, Sarathkumar's mother tongue is Tamil. The 57-year old actor, like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, is a body-builder which makes him unique among his contemporaries in Tamil cinema. A graduate of mathematics and a journalist by profession, Sarathkumar was born in 1954 in New Delhi. Young Sarathkumar was an ardent fan of MGR. Sarathkumar claims that it was MGR's charisma that attracted him to the film industry (*Asian Tribune*, 2010). He started his career as catalogue distributor and then as a reporter for Tamil newspaper, *Dinakaran*, in Bangalore. He began his cinematic career in 1988 in the Tamil film, *In the Blink of an Eye* (*Kan Simittum Neram*, dir. Kannadasan 1988). Having started by playing relatively insignificant roles, Sarathkumar consolidated his position in the South Indian film industry playing villain roles and further established his charisma as a 'Rural Rambo' by projecting his muscular body across his rural-based characters. He entered politics in 1996. At first, he joined the DMK party, which made him the Member of Parliament (Upper House) in 2002. He left the DMK party in 2006 to join the AIADMK party; however, he quit the AIADMK in the same year. He floated a new political party in 2007 'with a vow to cleanse politics and involve people in the administration' (*The Hindu*, September 2007). He launched a magazine, *Media Voice*, in 2011.

Figure 21. Sarathkumar

The film *The Village Headman* (*Naattamai,* dir. KS Ravikumar 1994) which was a great commercial success for Sarathkumar raised him to star status. In his early films, such as *The Investigation* (*Pulan Visaaranai*, dir. RK Selamani 1988) and *Captain Prabhakaran* (dir. RK Selvamani 1991), Sarathkumar was seen as an urban hero. However, it was through country based-roles from *Kings Cheran and Pandiyan* (*Cheran Pandiyan*, dir. KS Ravikumar 1990) and *Big Gounder's Daughter (Periya Gounder Ponnu*, dir. Erode Soundar 1992) that he established his charisma as a 'Rural Rambo'. If one applies Weberian theory, Sarathkumar's charisma revolves around his superhuman qualities and revolutionary attributes, presented through his screen persona in the cinematic narratives based on the rural social structure. Sarathkumar established his charisma by projecting himself as a man of extraordinary integrity and revolutionary vision in terms of ideals such as, egalitarian justice, both of which is witnessed in *Naattaamai.* To add further, Sarathkumar uses country-based film roles as his 'action spaces' (McCann 2004). The action space is, 'a space that embodies sites of conflict, both narrative and emotional, and becomes an important structuring metaphor in the differentiation of people and places in the cinema' (McCann 2004, p. 376). Sarathkumar conforms to the feudal system and confronts the elements that threaten the caste hierarchy by representing himself as 'Rural Rambo' through country-based 'action spaces'.

Through rural-based stories, Sarathkumar promises the poor an egalitarian society, headed by himself to deliver instant justice with impeccable integrity. If one pays close attention to his roles, it is clear that the themes of his films revolve around the dominant caste of Tamil society. In the films such as *Cheran Paandiyan* (1990), *Big Gounder's Daughter* (*Gounder Veetu Ponnu, 1992),* and

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The Sun Dynasty (*Surya Vamsam* dir. Vikraman 1997), Sarathkumar is not just a village head but also belongs to the dominant caste 'Gounder,' a wealthy and dominant caste in the relatively rich region of Tamil Nadu. Through his charisma as a 'Rural Rambo,' what Sarathkumar does is to represent the feudal agricultural society as the best social, economic, judicial, and political alternative.

The popularity of Sarathkumar's films underlines two factors. Firstly, there is disappointment and frustration of the poor over the burgeoning gap between the rich and poor, the mechanisation of agriculture, and the modernisation that took place after British colonisation. Secondly, people are confronted by the prevalence of the caste-based hierarchy that is all part of the daily social intercourse in the Indian society. As the poor in India get increasingly alienated, due to uneven economic growth, the alarming rate of consumerism, and inaccessible democratic institutions, they seek solace in rural-based Sarathkumar's films. Such films glorify the earlier feudal institutions that guaranteed food, shelter, and instant justice. This chapter examines the film *Naattamai* (*The Village Headman*, dir. KS Ravikumar 1994) to understand performative elements such as the 'politics of sentiment', social discourse, charisma, and landscape in Sarathkumar's films.

Naattamai: **film summary**

In *Naattamai* (*The Village Headman*, 1994) Sarathkumar plays dual roles, Shanmugam (elder brother) and Pasupathi (younger brother). Shanmugam is the village headman. He is respected and revered by the villagers for his integrity and charity. He is a head of the joint family, in which he lives with his wife and two

younger brothers. Sociologically, a joint family is a form of 'coresidentiality' where the head of the family lives with his wife, children, grandchildren and brothers (Ahuja, 1997 pp. 27-28). Like Shanmugam, his father was also hailed for his honesty and benevolence but he was murdered by his brother-in-law, Kaathavarayan as the former delivered a judgement penalising the latter's son, Raasavelu. Shanmugam inherits the village headman position after the death of his father. The excommunicated Raasavelu fabricates a story in which Pasupathi is falsely accused of rape charge. Shanmugam ostracises Pasupathi and his pregnant wife. In the end Shanmugam's paternal aunt (Manorama) reveals that it was her son who schemed against the innocent Pasupathi. Having learnt that he incriminated an innocent, Shanmugam feels guilty and dies of heart attack. Pasupathi inherits the position of Naattamai (The Village Headman) and continues to follow what his brother, father, and forefathers did— to rule the village honestly and benevolently with patriarchal values and paternalistic care.
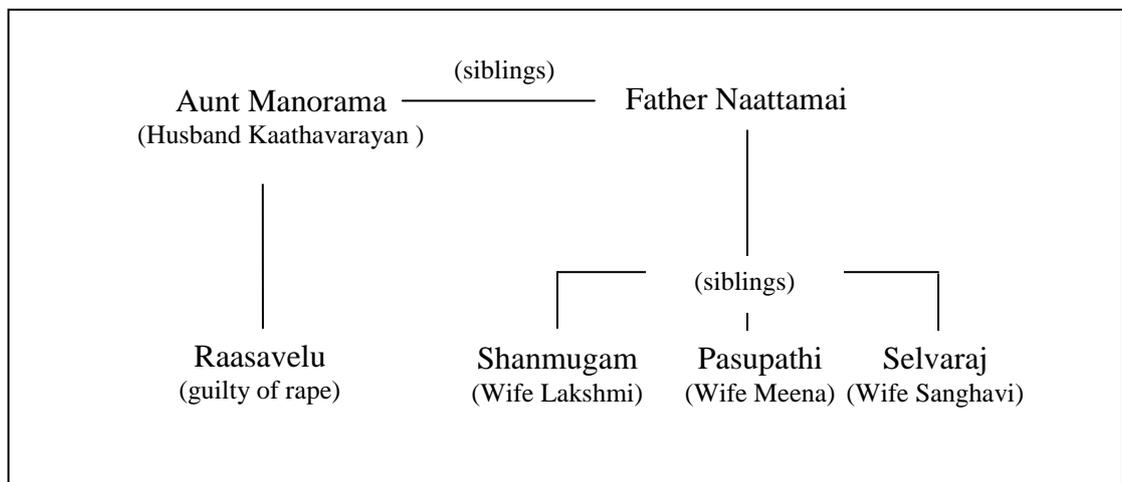

Figure 22. Naattamai's family tree

Problematising *Naattamai*

The popularity of Sarathkumar's films such as *The Village Headman* (*Naattamai,* 1994) and *The Sun Dynasty* (1997) are not exceptional but a part of a series of ongoing similar film narratives based on the system of the village headman. Like the feudal system in Western Europe, the position of the village headman is hereditary. Today the village headman system continues to be practiced mainly in the region of Western Tamil Nadu among the Gounder caste. The system is based on land ownership and dominant caste structure. The village headman provides employment, does charity work, administers village affairs, and adjudicates disputes. His judgement is final and beyond any judicial review. In other words, Naattamai is not just a village head but an all-encompassing legal and social institution incorporating executive, legislative, and judicial powers. Having understood the powers of the village headman, the British established a similar and equally discriminatory *jamindari* system that was based upon the hereditary *naattamai* system. Even though the Congress government after independence legally abolished the *jamindari* system, it continues to exist in rural India, where village headmen are still an influential in matters of economy, justice distribution, and politics of the village. What is important to acknowledge with the success of the films such as *Naattamai* is the way an outmoded system is celebrated in popular narratives. By studying this film, one can understand the cultural context, economic circumstances, and political milieu of Tamil society. This chapter, therefore, attempts to address these concerns by examining the reasons for the popularity of such films and the charisma of Sarathkumar through

name, *speech of character*, *speech of others*, gestures, *objective correlatives*, *mise-en-scène,* landscape, social discourse, and the 'politics of sentiment'.

Landscape and characterisation

Let us look at the use of landscape in the film *Naattamai* through the title song, 'our Naattamai' (*Namma Naattamai).* Songs and lyrics, which are all part of Tamil cinematic narratives, can be seen as *speech of others*. The establishing shot of this title song scene is an extreme long shot where Shanmugam travels through the standing villagers in his landau. In the background we can see a picturesque mountain, which situates the film in the rural agricultural landscape. The song, 'Our Naattamai,' based upon the ballad tradition is an *objective correlative*. The lyrics are:

> The harvest will multiply if our naattamai sets his foot on the soil
> We will get rain in abundance, if he snaps his fingers.

*Figure 23. Namma Naattamai song in the
backdrop of agricultural landscape*

As we can see, the lyrics mention harvest, by underscoring the importance of agricultural landscape to rural Tamils, while simultaneously celebrating the magical power of their headman who with a touch of his foot can make the harvest multiply. The emotional development of Tamil narratives revolves around landscape which provides the audience with foreknowledge of their daily lives. As McCann (2004) uses the term 'action space' to analyse the architectural specificity of French films, so landscape is the 'action space' for Tamil films. The opening of the film, the charisma of the hero, romance, stunts, and superhuman spectacles all take place in the backdrop of a lush landscape, in contrast to some of the claustrophobic Tamil films. McCann argues:

> Broadly speaking, this is a space that embodies sites of conflict both narrative and emotional, and becomes an important structuring metaphor in the differentiation of people and places in the cinema (2004, p. 376).

Rural landscape is the structuring metaphor in Sarathkumar's films. As mentioned, more than 70% of India lives in rural areas; and the state of Tamil Nadu is no exception. To be successful, a Tamil film must relate its narrative to the rural audience by speaking through their language. Landscape is something through which Tamil films talk to the rural audiences repeatedly. The panoramic view of an agricultural field not only converses with a rural population but also takes the urban audience in a nostalgic journey. Since the majority of urban dwellers share an immediate link with the rural space, the presentation of landscape in films ensures an emotional involvement from them well. A rural landscape serves as a site of conflict between tradition and modernity; between the past and the future. Broadly speaking, more than 60% of the population in India is still dependent on agriculture.

By situating the agricultural landscape as an *objective correlative*, Tamil cinematic narratives use songs, especially title songs, to introduce the hero, glorify his deeds, and describe his charity, bravery, and beauty. The lyrics makes intertextual references with mythological, historical and ballad heroes as well. In *Naattamai*, the opening verse of the title song highlights this:

> He is Dharman in adjudicating disputes
> When there is famine, he is Karnan
> His flag is hailing for generations
> The heart of our King is spotless white
> If someone sheds tears, he becomes a child
> He is a high caste man whom the world celebrates
> His family maintained self-esteem and valour
> When there is injustice he becomes a warrior
> Forefathers also agreed upon
> He is always victorious

The opening line in the lyrics equates the Naattamai (Shanmugam) with a mythological figure, King Dharman, who is one of the central characters in the Indian epic, *Mahabharatham*. King Dharman is extremely righteous and ethical; he upholds justice at any cost; his name is synonymous with right action, right conduct and the deliverance of impartial and impeccable justice. With such a mythological character as an intertextual reference, the film presents Shanmugam's integrity by imprinting him as superhuman with flawless *extraordinariness*.

In the next line, the lyrics link Shanmugam to another mythological figure from the same epic, *Maharabharatham* – Karnan – who is an illegitimate son of the sun god. Since his birth was controversial, Karnan faced discrimination but excelled as the greatest warrior by learning fighting skills on his own; his generosity is unparalleled in the Indian mythological tradition and he keeps his generosity even at the cost of his own life. By equating Shanmugam with such a

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great mythological figure as Karnan, the lyrics connect the personality of the former with the divine qualities of Karnan, which is, of course, another sign of extraordinariness. These mythological figures are in the *audience foreknowledge*. As such it is easy for them to relate Sarathkumar's charisma to their foreknowledge of those mythological figures.

Having drawn parallels with mythological figures such as Dharman and Karnan, the next line of the lyrics talks about his glorious dynasty. It is not just Shanmugam but his forefathers who are known for their charity, bravery, and broad-mindedness. The film positions Sarathkumar in a significant space of his charisma, where he protects and helps the masses regardless of class, caste, and gender. This is what Tamil audiences require from their star actors. What this demonstrates is that while Shanmugam's caste and class status distance him from the masses, yet, in his films he represents the subaltern without being born as subaltern. Sarathkumar constructs his charisma in the similar way MGR, Rajini, and Vijayakanth have done, but draws his narratives from the poverty-ridden traditional rural spaces. Elsewhere in the same lyrics, his caste supremacy is also reiterated. As mentioned, the Naattamai system is hereditary and caste based. Only a rich person of the dominant caste can become Naattamai. Throughout this film, *Naattamai* these caste and class factors are reiterated and glorified and these early lyrics set the platform for advocating such ideologies.

As mentioned, the target audience for *Naattamai* was rural people and the primary occupation of the rural people was, and is, agriculture. Agriculture in Tamil Nadu is monsoonal and the monsoon season in India is erratic. The lyrics give hope to prosperity by projecting the Naattamai as reason for a good harvest. By doing so, the film validates the feudal system and thereby caste hierarchy and

the hero (Sarathkumar) projects his charisma as do-gooder, who also has the magical power to bless people with agricultural prosperity.

Charisma of Sarathkumar

As noted previously in regard to the charisma of the other film stars, Sarathkumar constructs his charisma via his cinematic characterisation as superhuman with extraordinary qualities that can redeem people from their daily problems. The title song of the film *Naattamai* contains abundant examples of cultural relevance.

In the course of the title song 'Our Naattamai,' Sarathkumar waves his hands to the masses that are flanked on both sides of the road waiting to see him. This particular gesture relates to the real-life situation where a political leader waves at the public gathering. Interestingly, the white dress of Sarathkumar is the costume colour of almost all Tamil politicians. In the song, women carry agricultural produce on their head, highlighting the class and gender differences in the background of Shanmugam. In the politics of Tamil Nadu, it is important to secure the support of the rural women, whose votes determine the success of a candidate in a constituency. The commercial success of a Tamil film depends upon rural women audience. Keeping this in mind, film-makers make sure that they incorporate aspects that can represent and attract the rural women.

In the next shot, the camera pans towards the left in extreme long shot, showing the lush green paddy field and coconut trees. Both paddy fields and coconut trees are the signs of Shanmugam's wealth. Throughout the song, medium close up shots of Shanmugam, agricultural labourers and extreme long

shots of the agricultural field are shown intermittently in order to underline who owns these rich and fertile fields. On his way to distribute justice, Shanmugam travels through his agricultural land and people pay their respect. By keeping this song precede the justice scene; the cinematic trajectory of *Naattamai* informs the audiences about the extraordinariness of Naattamai (Shanmugam) and his affluent background.

The justice deliverance scene is placed in the middle of the song, giving a break to the full song. People pay their respect to Shanmugam. A child stands among the crowd and she wishes him well. Touched by the child, Shanmugam affectionately carries her, kisses her on the cheek, and offers her his gold chain. This scene is a reminder of the kinds of gestures all agricultural workers look forward to happening at some stage in their lives. It is worth remembering that the costume of the child and her parents indicate that they are from the low (untouchable) caste background and it is only poor and low caste people who queue up in this way to pay their respects. With this gesture, Shanmugam's humanity appears to break the practice of untouchability and his generosity seemingly breaks the class barrier.

After delivering justice, the song continues. The first verse, as noted before, equates Shanmugam with mythological figures such as Dharman, Karnan, and ballad heroes. The second verse, which comes after the justice deliverance stance, equates him with god.

> There is no doubt upon the Lord; God never lies;
> There is no appeal to our Naattamai.
> He never hesitates to help as others who abundance of money;
> He does not discriminate high caste or low caste!
> There is no place of police men here;
> Whatever he says that becomes mantra.

> There is none who touched the Sky;
> It is enough if our Naattamai says so.

The lyrics in the second verse glorify the integrity of Shanmugam's ability to deliver instant justice by setting him apart from the painfully slow legal-judicial process, brushing aside even the need for the police in the village. What this demonstrates is that people depict their faithful devotion to Shanmugam because he is impartial and immediate in judgments and has the power to punish people, which are divine qualities according to Tamil culture. Since Shanmugam endows and exhibits those divine attributes he is adulated as a god in the same way the characters of MGR, Rajinikanth, and Vijayakanth are venerated. The difference, however, is that Sarathkumar's charisma emanates from the rural settings. Having placed Shanmugam on a par with god, the lyrics go further by declaring that whatever Shanmugam utters becomes a mantra and holy text to his followers.

In sanctifying the character of Shanmugam in this film, the actor who plays the role is also ascribed heavenly status by the people. The lyrics equate his heart with the colour white. As elsewhere, white in Tamil society stands for purity, cleanliness, and innocence. The lyrics are poetic reiteration of the Shanmugam's character. In the film, Shanmugam wears white clothes throughout. White also signifies the status of caste as well as class. The people from a high caste/class wear pure white silk and high quality cotton clothes while the working class wears dull white, low-quality cotton materials. The fact that Shanmugam wears gold ornaments also again reiterates his class status and keeping him above and apart from the ordinary people. As Pandian (1992) argues, it is important to project film heroes surrounded by the signs of consumerism while they are fighting for the poor. In doing so, the existing unjust system provides a safety

valve for the oppressed, without posing any danger to the system. In other words, the solutions are symbolic not structural.

Moral uprightness

Along with honesty, moral integrity is much appreciated in a Tamil hero. On screen, a Tamil protagonist's moral integrity is often tested by seductive girls. The hero shows his strength in controlling his impulses. There are two scenes where Pasupathi is tested for his moral integrity. A newly-arrived school teacher is attracted to Pasupathi's well-built body and she wants to be intimate with him. She tries to seduce him three times but each time is in vain. In the first seduction scene, the medium shot captures the well built muscles of Pasupathi that attracts the attention of the school teacher. As Pasupathi arranges the sacks of rice in the place where the school teacher resides, a close-up shot features Pasupathi's wet feet, under which the teacher places her bare foot. Pasupathi apologises for stepping on the teacher's feet and politely asks the teacher to move aside. While leaving the house, the teacher asks Pasupathi to visit her house often. Pasupathi replies to her that he will do whatever she wants only after consulting with his brother Shanmugam. In the second seduction scene, Pasupathi visits the teacher's place again to collect the rice sacks. The teacher comes out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. She attempts to hug Pasupathi. He falls down and becomes furious. The medium shot features an annoyed Pasupathi, advising the teacher not to misbehave. He also warns her that the villagers will beat her to death if she is morally corrupt. The scene ends with a close-up shot of the teacher blowing symbolic kiss as Pasupathi quickly walks away.

The teacher makes another attempt to have Pasupathi. As he enters the house, Pasupathi notices that the teacher is unconscious on the floor. The long shot captures the teacher lying on the floor, showing her cleavage. Pasupathi goes inside the house to bring her water. On his return, he is surprised to see the teacher locking the door from inside, an obvious sign of sexual invitation. The dolly shot moves along focussing the teacher hugging Pasupathi from behind. It makes Pasupathi unhappy and he controls his anger by biting his teeth. He forces the teacher away from him. Portraits of Buddha and Vivekanda, the saints who preached celibacy, hang on the wall in the background. A medium shot shows Pasupathi flicking his fingers angrily and yelling at the teacher to pack her things, as he will take this matter up with his brother, Shanmugam. Pasupathi demonstrates his moral integrity even while a beautiful girl seduces him. By doing so, he behaves according to the audience foreknowledge: just like the mythological heroes, Pasupathi is morally upright. As in the other actor-politicians' films, Sarathkumar's films construct his charisma around such extraordinary qualities. While his image as 'Rural Rambo' sets him apart from the other actor-politicians, factors such as action, integrity, moral uprightness, and benevolence elevate him to the level of a charismatic person with superhuman qualities. In this instance, his quality is maintaining moral uprightness even while being repeatedly tempted.

As far as the real persona of Sarathkumar is concerned, he is flamboyant. Like MGR, Sarathkumar is not monogamous, and has involved in many romantic affairs. Sarathkumar's relationship with actor Nagma is one of its kinds. Paradoxically, on-screen Sarathkumar advocates monogamy and life-long marriages. In practice, he divorced his first wife and married his co-star Raadhika,

who was a divorcee and a mother of a teen-age daughter at the time of the marriage. One can argue here that while the audience expect their star actors to be monogamous in real life, they accept their on-screen polygamy and extra-marital affairs as status symbol, as well as a sign of virility.

The politics of sentiment

The 'politics of sentiment' operate in Tamil films around discourses of the mother, siblings, and marriage. In *Naattamai*, 'politics of sentiment' over mother-son and sibling relationships work through binary oppositions. Shanmugam's paternal aunt, actress Manorama (strangely, the film does not mention Manorma's character name), is a signifier for the 'politics of sentiment'. The paternal aunt and maternal uncle are the most important kinship relations in any patriarchal culture, such as Tamil culture. The veteran actress Manorama is a contemporary of MGR and acted with five actor Chief Ministers in South India; she has acted in more than one thousand films. Recently, she has been acclaimed for her supporting roles (locally known as character artist) such as mother and paternal aunt.

In *Naattamai,* the 'politics of sentiment' work in interesting ways. In a flashback scene, Manorama asks her elder brother (Shanmugam's father) to pardon her son, who is accused of rape. Shanmugam's father addresses his younger sister as, Sweetie (*Kannu*). As she pleads him to pardon her son, Shamugam's father offers her vast agricultural lands and gold as he is reluctant to compromise his integrity. The sister does not show any resistance but politely nods to her brother and says that the reaction is not unexpected from her brother but still she had decided to request her brother for her satisfaction alone. Here, the

'politics of sentiment' revolves around affection, customs, and the mores of the society and comes into existence when affection is sentimentalised.

In a second scene, Manorama plays out 'politics of sentiment' in a public place. She faints on the temple floor. As her family is excommunicated, she is left alone without being offered any help. She lies at the foot of the temple stairs groaning. Pasupathi pushes a water vessel held by a temple priest, which reaches the aunt. In this context, it is taboo to breach the order of the Naattamai. At the same time, the paternal aunt is at risk of dehydration. Instead of helping his aunt directly, Pasupathi enacts a trick to save her.

In a flashback scene, while Shanmugam's father was still alive, Shanmugam's father takes his sister and her family to arrange a marriage for Shanmugam. Before deciding the marriage, Shamugam's father consults his sister and the sister conducts tests on the prospective bride before giving her decision. The scene demonstrates the importance given to the paternal relatives in the patriarchal society. Manorama symbolises gender stereotypes as well; for instance, except in the flashback scenes, she wears white *saree* without ornaments (a sign of widowhood). In Tamil society, the death of a husband brings to an end all worldly pleasures for the wife, including colourful costumes, make-up and ornaments. She becomes the sign of a bad omen, both socially and ritually.

Pasupathi offers unconditional loyalty to his elder brother, while the villain disrespects his mother both by words and deeds. To understand this further, let us look at the opening scenes where Shanmugam's villainous cousin (Raasavelu) verbally abuses his mother (Manorama). The vileness of the villain is projected through the mysterious background score and his disrespectful words. As his first utterance, Raasavelu disrespectfully yells at his mother, 'Hey old lady.' He

continues to swear and manhandle his mother, and at one point, even threatens his mother that he will beat her to death if she continues to argue with him. The saddened mother questions his impertinent behaviour with teary eyes. He retorts, 'You became a mother because I was born through you. Otherwise you would have been a barren lady facing humiliation in the society. By my birth I titled you as mother. Get lost!'

In contrast, motherless Pasupathi never makes eye contact with his elder brother (Shanmugam), speaks to him respectfully, and stands in front of Shanmugam with folded arms. Pasupathi is muscular, valiant, and talkative. He becomes shy and silent only when his elder brother is around. These demeanours signify absolute reverence to someone. At one point in the film, Shanmugam says, 'I will neither speak against by brother nor do anything without his permission.' Just as Pasupathi respects his elder brother, the youngest brother (Selvaraj) respects Pasupathi, indicating the age-based patriarchal structure of Tamil society. These demeanours of Pasupathi towards his elder brother should be seen characterisation based on patriarchal Tamil culture. However, it is debatable whether such reverence to elder members of the family still exists in the contemporary Tamil society. The film celebrates the old patriarchal hierarchy as the best system, which triggers the nostalgic feeling among Tamils.

The 'politics of sentiment' on mother is present in *Naattamai* in yet another occasion. In the opening scene, Shanmugam adjudicates a dispute between two low-caste brothers. The caste differences are obviously visible through the dressing style and gestures. As Shanmugam listens to the reasons for the siblings' dispute, it is known that they are fighting over the custody of their parents. While both of them want to keep their mother, they both want to get rid

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of their father. The dispute highlights the ongoing crisis in Tamil society regarding the old-age care. With the absence of state social benefits, aged persons depend upon their own income savings, or their children. Due to the disintegration of joint family patterns, aged parents become a burden to their adult children. It is more prevalent among the low-caste as they are already in economic difficulties. The aforementioned dispute in *Naattamai* reflects the daily struggles of parents and children from the low castes. As he adjudicates, Shanmugam offers a social discourse about the responsibility of taking care of aged parents. This scene is important for the audience in regard to their emotional connection to the narrative as they can relate such scenes to their daily lives. We can also compare this to the ill-treatment of Manorama (Shamumugam's paternal aunt) at the hands of her son. The problem with Shanmugam's cousin may not be about the custody of his mother, but his vileness towards her is unprecedented. The signification of these two scenes is that it is the low-caste that abandons their elderly parents.

A final underlying signification in regard to the charisma of Sarathkumar through 'politics of sentiment' is his concerns for the social benefits. With his social discourse, he not only brings out the ongoing crisis of familial care of the aged, but also emphasises the status quo solution by asking the brothers to take care of their parents. Ideally, as village headman he could have established a system that takes care of abandoned elders, but he reinstates the responsibility to the family members.

*Figure 24. Naattamai sits while others stand
with folded arms*

Patriarchy, caste, and feudalism

As has been argued so far, *Naattamai* highlights patriarchy, caste hierarchy, feudal social structure, traditional marriage, joint families, customs, rituals, and conservative values such as integrity, the chastity of women, and respect for elders. It is through the institution of marriage that this society strengthens and maintains its caste hierarchy. One scene shows Shanmugam informing Pasupathi about his intention to marry him to a daughter of the wealthy industrialist from the same caste. Pasupathi accepts this without any question and with all smiles. He states that he will marry any girl whom the elder brother asks him to marry. He continues that there is no need for him to see the prospective wife as his elder brother knows what is good for him and who will be suitable to him. This scene stresses the cultural aspects of Tamil marriage system, in which parents arrange grooms and brides for their children. Marriage takes place even without the bride and groom having seen each other before the actual wedding date. Individual consent from the groom and bride is not necessary but the family must decide who can marry who. In addition, Tamil marriage is endogamous, which means that people must marry within their caste and with a family of equal

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economic status. Marriage in the Hindu social system makes sure that caste and class are carried forward to succeeding generations. In the aforementioned scene, the powerful Shanmugam arranges marriage for his younger brother with a girl from wealthy, urban, and well educated family. The system of arranged marriage referred to in *Naattamai* where, in one of the flashback scenes, Shanmugam's father fixes a marriage for Shanmugam. By emphasising the same practice twice in the film, the cultural significance of arranged marriage is reinforced.

Mise-en-scène continuously foregrounds the signs of caste, class, and patriarchy. In one scene, an establishing shot shows a pair of male hands feeding a bunch of domestic pigeons on a white granite floor around a huge white pillar. Having a house with granite floor and a pillared roof are signs of abundant wealth. In the next shot, a close-up shot captures the same male hand with a big golden bangle, untying a brown calf and gently stroking its neck.

Figure 25. Golden bangle signifies high status

The golden bangle is an indication of the man's wealth and power. The golden bracelet is a motif of Shanmugam's characterisation as it is projected in a few other shots as well. Secondly, the scene highlights the domestication of cattle,

which is a part of daily lives in the agricultural Tamil society. The Gounder caste, which is known for its accumulation of gold and affinity to animal husbandry, is signified through these symbols. The camera pans left as the calf runs towards its mother to drink milk. In the background, a fenced well and a tiled house are noticeable. The next shot is a long shot panning left capturing the beautiful agricultural land spread out in front of green hills and a cloudy sky. The pastoral image depicts romantic notions of agriculture and animal husbandry, the two main predominant activities of rural Tamil Nadu. In traditional Tamil society, occupations are caste-based and hereditary, which means each and every caste has an occupation to follow; for instance, the castes that are involved in agriculture in Western Tamil Nadu are the Gounder, Chakkiliyar, and Paraiyar. The Gounder caste is dominant as they own the land; Chakkilyar and Paraiyar are agricultural labourers, who own neither land nor cattle. The economic affluence and dominance of the Gounder caste can be seen in their dress, food, and housing. By depicting the house, pigeons, cow, and the lush agricultural land, the *mise-en-scène* of *Naattamai* establishes the caste and economic supremacy of Shanmugam. He asserts his caste identity in his characterisation in this film through *objective correlatives*, *speech of character*, *speech of others*, and *mise-en-scène*. His caste identity is asserted by the other characters in the film. For instance, it is customary in Tamil society to address the village head by his caste. In this film, the villagers always address Shanmugam and his father as 'Gounder'. One needs to remember here that in the traditional Tamil society, people have caste names as their surnames.

In the next shot, the camera pans further left to focus on the white temple tower. The temple is located in the middle of the agricultural land signifying the

prime role of religion in the daily lives of Tamils. The adjudication process takes place in the temple premises, a sign that The Village Headman gets his power from god. The montage is supported by a melody from flute, a traditional Tamil musical instrument. The camera moves down further, capturing a group of people, surrounding an empty cushioned throne on a carpet. One of the men restlessly asks, 'Why do these folks make noise?' Another reply, 'They will keep quiet once the *Naattamai* is in!' The mid-long shot features a shield and sword, hanging on the wall and a man cries, 'The *Naattamai* is ready to go out, Mistress.' The long shot captures a wooden swing with a pair of roaring tiger statues in the foreground. An amplified soundtrack strengthens the importance of the man who is about to appear. A trolley shot moves closer as the doors open. A close-up shot captures a full-sized, garlanded photo of Shanmugam's father. Shanmugam piously places his hands on the foot of the photo to get the blessings from the spirit of his dead father. There is a cut to a close-up shot showing Shanmugam's hands adjusting his thick gold bangle in front of a roaring tiger statue. In all these ways, the emotional development for the hero is built up for the spectators. The hero is someone who is very wealthy and who takes time to make his appearance, while everyone waits for him.

The next shot is a long shot as Shanmugam's wife (Kushboo) climbs up the stairs with a water jug. There are couple of indoor plants in the frame, showing the minute details of the interior decoration. Lakshmi is clad in a yellow *saree*, wearing many gold bangles on her hand and jasmine flower on her neatly braided hair. She offers the water jug to Shanmugam with all smiles on her face. A mid-shot captures Shanmugam, getting into a landau carriage. He is clad in white shirt and *dhoti*. Shamnugam's white dress and landau assume significance

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here. A white landau is a symbol of wealth and power. It also signifies India's colonial past. It was the British, who introduced the landau to India as a status symbol. The President of the Indian Republic still parades aboard a landau after taking his oath. While bullock carts are used by middle class peasants, the landau is used by land lords in rural India. Throughout the film, the landau serves as one of the motifs. The authority of the village headman is not beyond any judicial review in modern India. Nonetheless, this film makes us to think about the people's displeasure over the marathon-like proceedings in regular judicial courts in India, which only favour the rich and the mighty, and is neither pro-poor nor people-friendly. Shanmugam's dress is spotless white, suggesting his integrity and cleanliness. The scene ends with the title song, 'Our harvest will multiply if our *Naattamai* sets his foot on the soil.*'* With all this build-up, Shanmugam arrives in the temple premises to settle a family dispute among the poor people.

While adjudicating disputes, Shanmugam sits in front of a temple on a velvet cushioned throne while the rest of the people stand with folded arms. The temple, velvet cushion, and people with folded arms are factors to look into in this scene. A folded arm, according to Tamil culture, is a sign of an extreme respect

Figure 26. Naattamai in a landau

and subservience. Low caste people must fold their arms while talking to the upper caste. If they have towel on their head, they should remove it and wrap it around their waist. Likewise, younger members in the family must fold their arms while talking to their parents or elders in the family. A simple signifier such as folded arms connects the audiences with cultural customs in the society. While sitting on the red velvet cushioned throne (a sign of aristocracy), Shanmugam adjudicates the village disputes from the throne, facing the temple. As he distributes justice by representing god, he sits on the throne while the poor and low caste people stand with folded arms, a sign of acceptance and obedience. The unequal social order is patterned and normalised in this scene. As the underlying theme of the film is to celebrate the feudal system, *Naattamai* exhibits a number of scenes in this regard.

As mentioned, social organisation in Tamil society is based upon the patriarchal system, where the father or the elder male member of the family assumes a central role. *Naattamai* glorifies the patriarchal set up throughout. The Naattamai and his brothers are motherless and the elder brother's wife takes care of the other brothers. It is only the paternal kinship of *Naattamai* that are depicted in the film, not even a single relative from the maternal side is shown. As mentioned, the subordinate positioning of female protagonists and other actresses in the film strengthens this assertion. In the establishing scene, Shanmugam pays respect to the portrait of his deceased father. Similarly, the film ends with a close-up shot, where Pasupathi pays respect to his deceased elder brother, as well as his father. This gesture demonstrates the values of patriarchy, where it is the deceased male members who are of higher status than the female members. The female protagonists in the film are given subordinate or supportive roles. They talk to

their male counterparts with their heads down; they follow their husband/father/brother or male members of the family. For instance, Lakshmi advises her sister-in-law not to eat before her husband. She also argues that women can never become equal to men, even though she is empowered with modern education. In the same scene, Pasupathi stops eating abruptly and runs toward his elder brother Shanmugam, when he is summoned. Pasupathi ignores his wife's suggestion to finish eating first. In the scenes where Shanmugam and his brothers meet, his younger brothers do not sit in his presence and they do not speak against him. The younger brothers talk to Shanmugam only when asked. They answer only in a word or two with folded arms and heads facing down. More importantly, the film draws a parallel through a flashback that strengthens its support for patriarchy. Shanmugam's father was killed by his brother-in-law, as the former in all honesty and humanness delivered a judgement against his rapist nephew. Like Shanmugam, his father was also shown with many ornaments and a dollar with a tiger-nail in his bare-chest. In the early days, Tamil men did not wear shirts but wore tiger-nail necklaces on their bare chests as signs of authority, valour, and wealth. They also wore silk *dhoti* and shawl. The father takes all the decisions and Shanmugam stands beside him with folded arms. In the subsequent flashback, Shanmugam's father asks for his opinion before finalising the formalities of his son's wedlock. Shanmugam replies to his father without raising his head, 'My opinion is immaterial in this marriage. If you are happy and satisfied, I will get married.' The *mise-en-scène* is supported by a mid-shot featuring Shanmugam's proud father and his relatives. As mentioned, the head of the family has an unquestionable and ultimate authority in the decision-making

process of the family, including the marriage; others are expected to follow his orders without question.

Social discourse

This section looks at the social discourse through *speech of character* as well as *speech of others* in matters relating to family, marriage, morality, parent-children relationship, and the role of women. In this regard it is important to look at the characterisation of rural Tamil women in Sarathkumar's films. The discourse between characters other than Sarathkumar also underlines the privileged position of males in general and Sarathkumar's roles in particular. The film *Naattamai* advocates that women be docile in the presence of men. The film highlights this through binary opposition: good woman versus bad woman. Lakshmi symbolises a compliant and conformist rural wife while Pasupathi's wife (Meena) represents an educated, shrewd, and rebellious young woman. At one point, Lakshmi reprimands Meena following a heated argument. The following lines from Lakshmi underpin the Tamil society's expectation of women in terms of her dress, virginity, and modernity:

> Being modern is not about showing women's belly and thighs. Women should wear her dresses in such a way that others look up to her as goddess. While walking on the streets, a good woman walks with head low and eyes on her feet. Only those women who walk on the street by gazing at her feet have led a good life. Those women who gaze at the sky while walking have fallen from grace. Man is just a man even after sleeping with ten women; however, woman is slut if she sleeps with ten men.

This takes place after Meena has insulted Shanmugam. Lakshmi then teaches her newly-wed sister-in-law about the dos and don'ts of a good woman.

This discourse is different from the social discourses of other actors. Vijayakanth's discourses, for instance, revolve around the institutional injustices, lawlessness, and presentation of statistical information on the ongoing social problems). Discourses in Sarathkumar's films, however, are about familial relationships and the rural social structure. In *Naattamai*, Shanmugam gives his social discourse to his young brother Pasupathi about the importance of training his wife in the fundamentals of family life. He says, 'your wife is a young girl and urban educated. It is our responsibility to teach her patiently about the customs of our family.' By looking at the following discourse, one can see the paternalistic and patriarchal elements in his speech as a family head:

> There is nothing spectacular if a mother or sister cries while we are in pains as they are our flesh. But a wife is someone who comes from a different family and blood yet she sheds tears for her husband. That is the speciality of this relationship. Even in this digital era the sacred thread of a woman is respected. This is not due to the husband but the wife. That is because she respects and feels responsible for the sacred thread. You can separate from your wife and send her back to her parents. By doing so, it is not her life but your life that becomes meaningless. A boy becomes man when he sticks vermilion on the woman's forehead. A wife is like fire beside the husband. You can use the fire to light a candle as well as a stove. If you misuse the fire, it will burn you and your house. The primary duty of a wife is to take care of her husband who comes back from his work exhausted. A woman's thought has the potential to convert mud into bungalow and power to reduce the bungalow into sand.

This is important because it refers to the most controversial issues of Tamil families in the context of the disintegration of the joint family system and growing economic empowerment of women. Shanmugam, through his social discourse, depends on the joint family structure, which strengthens the traditional roles of women as subservient to men.

To develop this argument, let us discuss the narrative of *Naattamai* after its title song. In the first image after the title song, long-shot shows Shanmugam walking towards the throne after saying a prayer to the deity as the public gather around the temple. Regal music supports the montage while Shanmugam sits on the throne. The *mise-en-scène* implies that Shanmugam is all prepared to adjudicate a dispute. In the next shot, the camera focuses upon the people who initiate the proceedings. A long-shot depicts the crowd quietly listening. The dispute is between the brothers regarding the care of the aging parents. Both of them want to keep their mother with them but not the father. Shanmugam informs the brothers that the one who is to keep the mother ought to send his elder child with the father. Having heard this, both of them want to keep their father with them as they are not ready to give away their child and the brothers argue together. A medium shot then shows an angry Shanmugam rising from his throne and shout at the brothers to stop their argument. The camera pans left as Shanmugam starts his discourse:

> Your kids are 10–15 years old and you do not want to leave them, citing your parental affection. Have you thought of your parents, who have taken care of you for forty years by giving you food, clothes, shelter, education, and marrying you off, too? Now, your parents are on the streets as you have already inherited their property. Have you ever thought of their pains? Your mother might have carried you in her womb for ten months and breastfeed you thereafter. It is your father, who earned the money and brought that to home. Your father's property is nothing but you two. I know very well why want to keep your mother with you. Your mother will serve as housemaid to your wife. If your mother is unable to do the household chores, you will also abandon her. You won't understand the importance of your parents while they are alive but you will realize their value once they pass away. I don't ask you to build a statute to your parents but to feed them once a day at least; I am not telling you to build a temple to your parents but do not leave them in front of the temple as beggars; I am not asking you to carry your parents in a cart but do not bury

them while they are alive. There is no education without teacher
and there is no life without parents.

As Shanmugam talks, there is a cut to a medium shot of the siblings and
they offer their apologies. Shanmugam's anger is apparent and he brushes aside
their apology and orders them to take care of their parents and not to separate
them till their death. If they fail to do so, the brothers will be ostracised. The scene
ends with a long-shot as onlookers admire Shanmugam and his judgement while
the title song resumes the glorification of his straightforwardness and a slow-
motion shot shows Shanmugam walking through the crowd, as the people salute
him. The discourse underscores the societal sanctity of the joint family and
highlights the growing trend of neglecting the aged parents.

Conservative values and superstitions

Along with the 'politics of sentiment', *Naattamai* also validates gender
stereotypes. This argument may well be analysed through the characterisation of
Shanmugam's wife, Lakhsmi (Kushboo Sundar). In her first scene Lakshmi is
clad in a traditional Tamil costume yellow *saree*. The colour yellow symbolises
sacredness as per Tamil belief. The style of wearing a *saree* sheds light on the
socio-economic and educational background of a person. Lakshmi does not just
represent a rural woman but also projects the image of an ideal housewife in a
patriarchal family— an innocent, obedient, religious, dutiful homemaker, who
considers her husband as her world as no less than god. As per the lyrics of a
famous song from the film *Outback or City* (*Pattikaada Pattinamaa* dir. P

Madavan 1972) advise a young girl who is getting married, 'Marriage is a temple in which husband is god.'

Hence, an ideal Tamil woman must consider her husband as god and worship him as one. She wakes up before the sunrise ahead of everyone in the family, finishes household chores, takes a bath, says prayers, dresses properly and wears ornaments. Then she wakes up her husband with a smile on her face. More importantly, she must always have the vermillion on her forehead, and abundant jasmine flowers adorning her braided hair. Vermillion and jasmine flowers also serve as motifs of the married women in *Naattamai*. Besides all these responsibilities, a Tamil wife affectionately waves off her husband, who goes out to discharge his duties. She gives him water in a silver cup before he leaves the house. Water has religious significance in Tamil tradition as rivers are considered the manifestations of goddesses. Since water has holy power, it wards off evil spirits. Lakshmi performs all these activities with a smile on her face. In the Tamil belief system, if a husband goes out after seeing the unfriendly face of his wife, he may never return home alive.

Figure 27. Lakshmi offers water to her husband

Lakshmi wears lavish golden jewellery, signifying the importance of gold in Tamils' day-to-day lives as a sign of caste, class, and marital status. As her husband prepares to leave, Lakshmi stands silently alongside her husband. Her husband is the most feared and respected village headman and head of the family. She is a kind-hearted, affectionate, and a considerate sibling, mother, and sister-in-law. As a wife of the eldest brother, she offers food at the banquet table to her brothers-in-law, who are playful and friendly in her presence, but silent and speechless in front of their brother, Shanmugam. She scoffs at them with motherly affection. As she is unable to control the sibling-rivalry among the two brothers-in-law, she just calls in her husband, *ennanga* (the most respected way in which a wife can address her husband because she cannot call him by his name). The next moment, quietness prevails and the brothers start eating hurriedly and with fearful respect. This reminds the audience of their own household activity, and helps them to relate themselves with the characters.

The emphasis on the conservative values and superstitions strengthens the discursive aspects of patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and subordination of women in *Naattamai*. Director KS Ravikumar, who was also the scriptwriter, is known for imbuing superstitions into his narratives. For instance, in *Padayappa* (1999), there were references to the snake god. At one point in *Naattamai*, Shanmugam's father offers him a gold necklace by saying that their dynasty is known for gold and Shanmugam should not remain without any golden ornaments. Shanmugam accepts the chain from his father but hangs it on his younger brother's neck stating that he is content to see his brother wearing it. The medium shot shows the proud father, admiringly looking at his elder son and says, 'I have confidence in you that you will take care of your younger brother well after my death.' The prophetic

utterance foreshadows for the audience of something dreadful. Since such beliefs are deep-rooted in Tamils' belief system, this particular dialogue plays with 'audience foreknowledge.' Shanmugam's father is murdered in the next scene. In the *mise-en-scène*, Lakshmi, the accountant, his younger brothers, and a housemaid are present. While the father stands keeping his arms on his waist on the left side of the frame, the rest stand with folded arms and head down. Lakshmi kneels down and receives blessings from her father-in-law, signifying the custom of touching the feet of the elder, which is a sign of paying respect to the head of the family. Tamil culture also demands that a woman touches her husband's feet every day. In this scene, Shanmugam's father prepares to leave the house and Lakshmi mentions that she will take care of the children. Shanmugam's father smiles with pride and replies that he is delighted to hear that she treats them as her children, instead of brothers-in-law.

Such scenes emphasise the domestic responsibilities of the Tamil women in the joint family. In the absence of mother-in-law, the wife of the elder brother plays a motherly role for her brothers-in-law. Country women in Tamil Nadu do not enjoy economic independence and political freedom, and assume these responsibilities that are unaccounted and unpaid for.

The next shot is a close-up shot of the father, sitting on the landau and ordering, 'Let's go Shanmugam,' as Shanmugam is the charioteer. The role of charioteer is not just strategic but also religiously significant. It is mentioned in the Hindu holy book *Bagavath Gita* that Lord Krishna has served as the charioteer. As a whole, this scene in *Naattamai* is loaded with the conservative values, subservient status of women, and patriarchal settings of Tamil society. Sarathkumar is projected as the face value of this way of life.

Naattamai underpins signs of gregariousness time and again. Shanmugam's father and Shanmugam are never seen alone in the film. They are surrounded by people all the time; one can notice the similar signs in other films such as, *Surya Vamsam* (1997). As Shanmugam's father travels through the streets, people are standing on both sides, paying respect to their headman; he acknowledges them from the landau, which is yet another motif that appears in the film repeatedly. This landau is shown *vis-à-vis* the common men and women, who either stand or walk, or work in the fields. After the demise of his father, Shanmugam also rides in the landau with people seen on both sides of the street paying their respects to him, in the same way they did to his father.

While emphasising conformity to the feudal system and patriarchy, the film subtly touches upon dowry and positively endorses it. At one point, Manorama asks Shanmugam's father to pardon her rapist son. Shanmugam's father angrily rejects her request to reprieve her son but offers her 500 kilograms of gold ornaments and 300 acres of agricultural land instead, saying he cannot compromise justice. In the beginning of the scene, an extreme long shot shows the rich and fertile agricultural field with elephants as farm animals in harvesting the rice grains. In Tamil society, it is the oxen that generally do rice harvesting. Using elephants for harvesting indicates the wealth of the land lord and the abundance of the harvest. In the background, grains of rice are gathered in a mound, a further sign of an abundant harvest and the wealth of Shanmugam's father. Two men stand behind Shanmugam's father with folded arms one of them holds an umbrella to provide shade for Shanmugam's father— a sign of status.

In *Naattamai* one can understand the cultural values of Tamils by examining the aspect of commensality (dining together) with its *objective*

*correlative*s and *mise-en-scène,* and the characterisation of Sarathkumar both as Shanmugam and Pasupathi in relation to other characters. There are a few scenes that feature commensality, demonstrating the geographic, demographic, power and gender relations exercised through food and eating places. At one point, a beggar wanders in and asks for food. As he passes through the house of Aunt Manorama, she offers him food. But the beggar refuses to take food from her house, citing the *naattamai*'s order. The beggar says that getting food from an ostracised family will get him excommunicated from the village. He goes on to say that the *naattamai*'s order applies to beggars too. As he says, there is a cut to a long shot showing an affluent bungalow, contrasting the class difference, which means the position of the village headman is not just cultural but also political as it involves the power to punish. In the next scene, a long-shot shows Shanmugam sitting on the swing, as his accountant stands behind him respectfully explaining the day-to-day accounts. Pasupathi enters the scene. Shanmugam stops the accountant and asks Pasupathi about his day. Pasupathi politely answers Shanmugam's queries with folded hands. There are intermittent cuts for close-up shots of Shanmugam and long shots, showing Pasupathi, the accountant and Lakshmi, along with the luxurious interior of the house. There is a cut to a close-up shot of Pasupathi and Lakshmi intermittently. Pasupathi gestures at his sister-in-law asking whether his brother has finished eating. This particular scene is important as it explains and endorses the rules of commensality in rural Tamil Nadu, where, except on special occasions, younger members of the family can eat only after the patriarchal head has finished eating.

In the next shot, Shanmugam asks his accountant whether he has eaten or not. The accountant replies with folded hands, 'Have I ever eaten ahead of

brothers?' The choice of words assumes significance here. The accountant does not mean his brothers but Shanmugam's brothers. The accountant defers his eating till the brothers have finished, which means his association with the family is not merely occupational but also personal and the bonding is family-oriented, the system that is known as *jajmani system*, the hierarchical interdependence of different castes. The next shot is a close-up of the dining table. Pasupathi and his younger brother play music with their plates. The camera zooms out for a long shot showing Lakshmi stopping their play and serving food with the help of maids. As the brothers keep arguing at the dining table, Lakshmi pretends to call her husband and the brothers keep quiet and quickly eat. The significance of the scene is that it is not servants (in spite of having them) but Lakshmi, who serves food and she does not eat with them. In a Tamil family, it is the duty of the mother or the eldest female member to serve food for everyone, including unmarried male members. She will eat the leftovers only after feeding everyone in the family.

In another scene that features dining behaviour, Meena eats alone. Surprised by this gesture, Lakshmi advises her that it is impolite to eat ahead of her husband. Meena replies, 'Gone are the days when the wife was expected to eat only after her husband. Even though we are soul mates, we have different stomachs. Henceforth there is nothing wrong in eating ahead of our husbands, sister. You also eat now.' Visibly shocked, Lakshmi walks away by shaking her head in disapproval. The *objective correlative*s such as the costumes and make-up of Lakshmi and Meena reveal the generational and educational differences between the two women and the challenges for the conservative traditional cultural values in the form of educational empowerment of women. The subservient status of women is reinstated through the comments from

Shanmugam's youngest brother. At one point, he makes an angry remark against Meena, 'Just because you have education and money, a woman can never become a man.' On one hand, the remark maintains the gender stereotype, while on the other hand it allows a young man to criticise an elder woman. It becomes clearer while seeing this in consonance with the way he behaves with his elder brother Pasupathi.

The film contrasts Lakshmi's conservative character with Meena's modern, educated, urbane, and outspoken attitude. At one point, there is a heated argument between Lakshmi and Meena on tradition versus modernity and education versus family values. Their animosity ends with the intervention of Shanmugam and ultimately, Meena realises her mistake and falls in the line with the expectations of being a traditional and ideal housewife. Her realisation bears witnesses to the experience of contemporary Tamil women who are caught between the inescapable emotional web of love, loyalty and family values. On one hand, her thoughts reflect the educational horizon of women that keeps expanding, while on the other hand, her independence and freedom to break the tradition are silenced by cultural customs and religious rituals.

The pattern of repetition can also be seen regarding the portrayal of a widow. In the climax, Shanmugam dies of a heart attack after knowing that he has given a false verdict upon his brother. In the last scene, a medium shot shows, Lakshmi in a white *saree* without Jasmine flowers, vermillion and ornaments, in contrast with her earlier scenes where she emerged with ornaments, flowers, and vermillion. The practice of widows wearing white *saree* and renouncing all the material and sensual pleasure is still present in the digital era. The characterisation of Lakshmi is normative, in the sense that it presents and represents women as a

responsible wife and widow through *mise-en-scène*, and *objective correlatives*. Shanmugam's death is also an intertextual reference to one of the ancient Tamil epics, *Silapathikaaram* (*Chapter of the Anklet*), written by Elangovadigal during the second century AD). In the epic, the king dies immediately after his understanding that he ordered an execution of an innocent. In *Naattamai*, Shanmugam dies on the very moment he happens to learns that his verdict was wrong.

Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter attempts to answer the question: How does a rural and ritual-based film, such as *Naattamai*, contribute to the political ambitions of its protagonist Sarathkumar? Rural-based stories are ubiquitous in Tamil cinema. Sarathkumar is now a symbol of rural machismo with the carefully crafted scripts that project him as a 'Rural Rambo'. His well-built body has helped him to have a Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger style screen image. In fact, he is the first Tamil hero who could be regarded as Stallone or Schwarzenegger. His distinctive physique, his authentic Tamil identity and his solid caste support, along with the meticulously manipulated screen persona, have all allowed his political entry appear normal, necessary, and inevitable.

The charisma of Sarathkumar as a 'Rural Rambo' accentuates a couple of significant factors. He started to construct his 'rural macho' image in the mid-1990s by lauding the pre-independence feudal hierarchy, based on the discriminatory caste system. The popularity of the genre chosen by Sarathkumar highlights the aftermath of economic liberalisation in India in 1991. Critics argue

that the globalisation in India has been nothing but a growth without equity, resulting in the widening the gap between the rich and poor. Social activists such as Arundhati Roy (2011a) argue strongly against the economic liberalisation, as it has left behind the core of the Indian economy, agriculture and the country side. This is the time when people who feel helpless look for something to hold on to and someone to look up to. Sarathkumar's films appeal to such feelings as they underline the way the past system provided food security and instant justice, and glorified agriculture- based natural lifestyle. The popularity of Sarathkumar indicates the quest of the rural people for a charismatic leader, who can be a redeemer. For them, Sarathkumar is a role model for the youth and he legitimises himself through his films by emphasising the preservation of conservative social structure while allowing the youth to follow the western glorification of a well-toned body, without posing any danger to the traditional caste hierarchy.

Sarathkumar's caste affinity helps him to keep a firm grip on politics of Tamil Nadu. As mentioned earlier, the *Nadar* caste is known for its solidarity and caste lobby. The most popular Tamil newspaper, *Dina Thanthi* is owned by a man from the same caste. The outcome of this is that Sarathkumar always gets ample coverage and decent publicity. This is something that MGR did with his money whereas Sarathkumar achieves through his caste lobby. Sarathkumar's wife, Raadhika is a former film actor and currently one of the most popular television celebrities, who thrive on the programs that spin around 'politics of sentiment'. Taken together, Sarathkumar is able to maintain his real persona as clean and non-controversial. He has everything that a Tamil political leader needs to have in order to sustain his political career. This is more commonly known as the 'triple M'— money, muscle, and men.

Having completed the analysis of five individual stars, it is time to put them together in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven

Summary and Comparison

Politics is just like show business.

Ronald Reagan cited in Street 2004

Through the cinematic charisma of star actors like MGR, Jayalalitha, Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth, and Sarathkumar, this thesis has explored over fifty years of Tamil Nadu's cultural history. These stars have not only determined the destiny of six million people in Tamil Nadu but also, occasionally, the political dynamics of India. By using Max Weber's theory of charisma and Richard Dyer's *the signs of characters in films*, what this study has demonstrated is that the phenomenon of film stars becoming politicians has both been constructed and is continuing. Furthermore, this study has argued that stars construct their cinematic charisma by projecting their extraordinariness, superhuman qualities, and revolutionary attributes in their filmic characterisation through *name*, *audience foreknowledge*, *appearance*, *objective correlatives*, *speech of character*, *speech of others*, *gesture*, *action*, *mise-en-scène,* and the 'politics of sentiment'.

Before proceeding further, I want to touch briefly upon the parallels between the Australian cinema and Tamil cinema. As mentioned in Chapter One, one of the most obvious ways in which Australian film narratives such as *Breaker Morant*, *Gallipoli*, and *The Man from Snowy River* project the Australian identity is landscape. For example, these films depict the uninterrupted horizon of the Australian Alps, a scenic splendour of the wilderness of the Australian seascape as metaphors for Australian identity for the non-indigenous audience while retaining the spiritual significance of the indigenous Australians. For Tamils, the

landscape in the form of uninterrupted fertile land bordered by the range of mountains and meandered by the rivers serve as the ontological metaphors for Tamils. Agriculture, for Tamils, is an occupation that revolves around their temporal and spiritual lives. Tamil cinema identifies and distinguishes itself from Hindi cinema by projecting its distinctive landscape just like the Australian film narratives. Another noticeable similarity between Australian and Tamil cinema is legends. For Australians it is bush legends while ballads for Tamils. Similarly, as mentioned in Chapter One, the assertion against the hegemonic force is yet another analogy. For example, the Australian film narratives feature British hegemony while Tamil cinema stands strongly against the cultural dominance of North India. The star-politicians speak to their fans by connecting their characters with myths and ballads in Tamil culture.

While MGR constructed his charisma by capitalising on the Dravidian movement, Jayalalitha took advantage of her intimacy with him by projecting herself as the MGR's obvious political heir. On the other hand, Rajini politicised his charisma in the context of Jayalalitha's debacle as the Chief Minister in 1991–1996, his animosity with Jayalalitha during that period, and the charisma vacuum that MGR's death created. Vijayakanth projected himself as a black MGR and as a fresh alternative by the opportunity that emanated from Rajinikanth's ambiguity and indecisiveness in regard to his political entry. Vijayakanth capitalised on the people's resentment towards the continuously corrupt and opportunistic governments of the DMK as well as the AIADMK Parties. Meanwhile, Sarathkumar built his charisma upon the people's nostalgia toward traditional social structures because of the recurrent failure of the modern legal and political systems.

The factors responsible for the Tamils' repeated faith in the cinematic charisma of star-politicians are numerous. The deep-rooted corruption across the state, the miseries of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment, inhumane casteism, inaccessible democratic institutions, and discriminatory cultural hegemony all combined to create an environment where film stars offered hope and leadership. The most fundamental reason for this belief in the power of cinematic actors, however, was triggered when the cultural identity of Tamils was threatened and their linguistic pride was humiliated through the imposition of Hindi language upon Tamils during the 1960s by the Congress government in Delhi, resulting in the emergence of the separatist Dravidian movement. The situation— somewhat similar to the conditions of the humiliated Germany after World War I and the subsequent rise of the charismatic dictator Adolf Hitler— created ideal conditions for the emergence of charismatic stars such as MGR. What Tamils perhaps want(ed) was a Christ–like charismatic personality to lead their state. Unfortunately, the realities of political office have seen stars inherit and become part of an immeasurably corrupt and tainted political system, believing their success bestows upon them dictator–like status with the right to authoritarian rule.

Be that as it may, Tamils elect their star actors as politicians expecting them to redeem people from the pains of their daily lives. For star politicians, however, politics is just like show business, as noted by Ronald Reagan. Before concluding one can elucidate this ongoing and ubiquitous phenomenon by looking at the profiles of the aforementioned filmic personalities from three angles: as persons, as actors, and as politicians. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to provide a summary and comparison of how cinematic celebrities have 'resonated across

different historical, political, and cultural contexts' (Redmond & Holmes 2007, p. 6).

The MGR phenomenon

MGR is probably the most studied and scrutinized actor-politician of all. As noted, scholars such as Hardgrave and MSS Pandian wrote extensively on MGR. While Pandian calls the cultural phenomenon of MGR (1986) a modern–day political myth (1991), Hardgrave (1976), Sivathamby (1981), and Dickey (1993) each maintain that MGR was the first actor in Indian cinema, and possibly in any nation's cinema, to storm into politics with sweeping power that systematically used fan clubs as a popular vote base. Pandian (1991) argues that MGR not only created an image but also blended and maintained his screen image with his real persona up until his death. Dickey (2005) argues that the myth of MGR still exists in the minds of Tamils even two decades after his death.

Right from his political entry MGR started to craft the image that culminated in his invincibility as a political leader. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the myth of MGR is cemented in the minds of the people despite his government's excesses and economic failures. With such an impeccable image and flawless persona, all aspiring actor-politicians now use MGR as a role model. For instance, Rajinikanth is often compared with and contrasted to MGR, Vijayakanth claims to be the rightful successor to MGR and is nicknamed 'black MGR' by his followers, and Sarathkumar identifies with MGR's film songs and publicly prays before MGR's statue. By such means, the oncoming star-politicians have been able to appeal to the masses and the masses understand and associate the aspiring leaders with

MGR. As we have noted, Jayalalitha's personal relationship with MGR allowed her to capture power and control the AIADMK party and MGR's followers. MGR is not just adulated but worshipped, and people build temples for him (D Karthikeyan 2011) and the masses believe that he is God, and capable of performing miracles for his devotees.

Figure 28. MGR in a political rally, circa 1980

MGR's successful formula provides a blueprint for the aspiring cinematic politicians, for instance, organising fan clubs and charity activities, associating with the untouchable, always speaking for the poor, and showing care for the elderly by hugging them publicly and then repeatedly publishing those pictures to reinforce this image. As mentioned in Chapter Two, MGR crafted his image from the film *Nadodi Mannan* (1957) and the journey culminated in winning the election as Chief Minister in 1977. He held this position until his death in 1987. In

other words, current actor-politicians have not invented new approaches for success, merely emulated MGR's earlier actions.

Jayalalitha: a problematised person or a problematic personality

Known for her superstitions, her religious sensitivities, her short-temperament, and arrogance towards the media and men, Jayalalitha began her meteoric filmic career at 16 years old in 1964 (Shankar 1998; Naqvi 2008). While trying to summarise Jayalalitha's personality traits, one newspaper report suggested:

> One has to understand the Dravidian politics of Tamil Nadu as well as the psychology of Jayalalitha. She has always been a loner. She is suspicious of everyone and does not trust easily. She has no close friends or advisors. She holds her own court and keeps up the mystique around her. She adores sycophancy and pomp and pleasure. She treats everyone as her subject. At very young age, she (fatherless child) was pushed into the film world while she wanted to succeed like success and she soon became the leading lady of MGR who took fancy to her. They had an on-again and off-again relationship of mutual affection and, when in 1982, MGR inducted her into politics as his party's Propaganda Secretary; little did he guess that she would blossom into what she is today. Jaya was always ambitious and in just a decade, she was not only his political heir but also the 'empress' to Tamil Nadu. Her role model, she claimed was Manu Needi Cholan [Tamil medieval King, known for his legal uprightness]. At the end of her five-year regime [as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu during 1991-96], people saw her as an ostentatious megalomaniac who couldn't see beyond her circle of artificial relationships (Shankar 1998).

Like Jane Fonda and Marilyn Monroe in Hollywood, Jayalalitha has been in the media limelight, often for controversies, throughout her filmic and political careers. The polemics started in her early cinematic days with her bold skin-exposure on-screen, intimate relationship with MGR, live-in relationship with

another married actor Shoban Babu (with whom she is said to have mothered a daughter), and much infamous legislation as Chief Minister. More interestingly, she is allegedly in a lesbian relationship with her close friend, Sasikala (Joseph 1996). Despite all the polemic issues, her fame has never failed to fade in Tamil Nadu. If one applies Dyer's (1998) thoughts on Monroe to Jayalalitha, the negative news have actually helped in the promotion and publicity of a star rather than diminish her fame and popularity. In the case of Jayalalitha, the women and the poor grew empathetic and felt connected with Jayalalitha in her controversies as she was seen as being surrounded by misogynistic male figures, who dominated the cinematic and political milieus.

Figure 29. A minister prostrates before
Jayalalitha

As Jayalalitha started to strengthen her political position, she intended to camouflage her image as a glamour girl. In her attempt to erase her image as seductress, she began to impose a new image as 'mother of the masses'. To begin

with, she asked, allowed, and encouraged her ministers, party members, and the public to prostrate before her, without exceptions, even for the aged senior ministers.

Culturally speaking, Tamils fall at their parents' feet, as well as before elders, spiritual leaders or teachers. Furthermore, Jayalalitha advised her party members to address her as '*amma*' (Tamil word for mother). In public gatherings and interviews, she stated that she considered herself as the mother of Tamils and treats the people as her children, a discourse that paralleled the Tamil belief that people should accept their King as father. In *Adimaip Penn*, as one can recall, Jayalalitha's virtue as mother is endorsed by MGR, before she sings a song explaining the great qualities of mother, father, teacher, and family. For MGR's fans his confirmation was nothing but words from a divinity.

The carefully crafted screen image of Jayalalitha as MGR's mistress, the mother of the masses, and the goddess of the poor helped Jayalalitha to succeed as the head of AIADMK, two years after the demise of MGR. In Max Weber's terms, Jayalalitha's charismatic authority was 'routinised' into 'rational-legal' authority (Weber in Henderson & Parsons 1947, p. 364). Since then, she has purposefully transformed her image from mistress of MGR into mother of the masses. Following the death of MGR, Jayalalitha symbolised widowhood (see Chapter Six) by wearing nothing but white *sarees* for several years and did not wear ornaments or accessories, utilising the 'politics of sentiment'. In doing so, she was seen as an emblem of sacrifice and an epitome of womanhood, which ultimately won the sympathy of the people, especially poor Tamil women. Jayalalitha echoed this situation as early as 1969 in *Adimaip Penn*. In one scene, where her forest girl character is abducted, she refuses to eat and wear ornaments,

and even offered to sacrifice her life and chastity to save MGR's life. Similarly, Dyer asserts on 'the aesthetic of realism' of stars:

> That is, despite their extravagances and extraordinariness, the stars are an aspect of realism because what is foregrounded is their person as much as the characters they play (1998, p. 16).

Jayalalitha's role in *Adimaip Penn* thrust her into the limelight with a career as a political leader. People fondly remember her role and associate it with real life, and identify Jayalalitha as someone who reflects their values. Not all the stars, who reflect the values of the masses, can become one among them. Jayalalitha's distinct feature was her fair skin, which I have termed her 'charisma of complexion'. Even though almost every actress, who collaborated with MGR in his films, was known to have been 'intimate' with him, Jayalalitha is considered the closest, fairest, and brilliant of all because of her complexion. While her conservative roles helped her to identify with the masses, Jayalalitha's fair complexion set her apart in a way which made the masses adore her. Dyer writes:

> Stars are stars because of their striking photogenic looks, acting ability, presence on camera, charm and personality, sex-appeal, attractive voice and bearing (1998, p. 16).

After becoming Chief Minister, Jayalalitha purposefully sidelined and eliminated all senior and second- level leaders in the party to avoid any future revolt against her leadership. However, what is glaring is her forceful and purposeful manipulation of her image as mother of the masses. With her iron hand and authoritarian approach, as seen in one of the dual roles in *Adimaip Penn*, Jayalalitha insisted on being addressed no longer by her name but as '*amma*', with even the Hindi speaking Delhi-based media and other English media addressing

her as '*amma*'. Jayalalitha's purposive and compulsive intention to transform her image from mistress of MGR to mother of the masses assumes significance in terms of her political endurance. Jayalalitha's image is part of the 'structured polysemy' that Dyer (1998, p. 63) sees as containing the multiple but finite meanings that star image signifies. As Redmond and Holmes argue, 'celebrities are now rarely restricted to a single medium and the commercial and cultural value of the modern star or celebrity is seen to be predicated on the inter- and cross-textual appeal' (2007, p. 6). However, as the voting population gets older and is replaced by the younger population, it is likely that her sex appeal will cease to be an alluring factor. The 62-year old Jayalalitha has been able to successfully sustain and emerge triumphant electorally because of her manoeuvrability in maintaining her image through a multiplicity of medium such as satellite television (Jaya TV, owned by Jayalalitha) and the Internet (AIADMK party websites), along with more conventional fan clubs and party cadres in order to cover the young and Internet-savvy generation.

Rajinikanth: an angry man and an all-time political influence

In May 2011, Rajinikanth was in hospital when the assembly poll results were published in Tamil Nadu. Rajinikanth deputed his two daughters to congratulate the victorious Jayalalitha at the latter's residence, indicating to his fans that he remains on good terms with Jayalalitha; a fact also endorsed by Rajini's daughters during a subsequent press interview (NDTV 2011a). Rajinikanth, who was initially hospitalised for a high fever was later admitted to Mount Elizabeth Hospital, Singapore for possible kidney transplant

(Chandramouli 2011), thus discrediting rumours that the actor was dead. Chief Minister Jayalalitha personally telephoned Rajini's wife Latha (both Jayalalitha and Latha Rajinikanth belong to the *Ayyangar* caste), and granted special permission for Rajini to pass through airport security procedures. The opposition party leader, Vijayakanth and other political leaders from other states, each personally paid a visit to Rajini in hospital. Former chief minister Karunanidhi (DMK party president), and the Congress Party President Sonya Gandhi, also expressed their concerns for Rajini's health. These events highlight not only the cult status of a cinematic personality but also reinforce the critical interaction between film stars and their importance in the political arena.

Figure 30. Rajini hailed as god

Rajinikanth's decision to send his daughters to greet Jayalalitha is significant as the animosity between the two, before the 1996 State Assembly Elections played a decisive role in the defeat of the Jayalalitha's government at that time. Ever since then, the media have given importance to Rajini's voice

during elections. The election results in 2001 went against his 'wish' since Rajinikanth had expressed his preference for the ruling DMK party government. Nonetheless, the people of Tamil Nadu re-elected Jayalalitha. In 2002, Rajinikanth oversaw the marriage of his elder daughter, Aishwarya, to another actor Dhanush. Rajinikanth used his daughter's wedding to patch up his differences with Jayalalitha by inviting her to the wedding. Over the next few years, he has distanced himself from political statements and remained apolitical. This stance, however, has recently changed and the actor's political entry has been set on the table once again (NDTV 2011c) after the release of *Endhiran*.

Rajinikanth differs from the superstars of yesteryear, including MGR, by keeping an image that is both simple and spiritual. Spiritual appeal is one of the key features of charismatic leaders and although MGR was not seen as religious in his films since *Nadodi Mannan*, Rajini has always been open in his religious stance. He is seen with signs of religious belief, such as sacred ash on the forehead and religious threads on his neck and wrists. Rajinikanth's religious affinity is not only visible in his cinematic characters world but also in his real life, where he is known for pilgrimages to the Himalayas at least once a year. In June 2002, media reports announced that he had gone to the Himalayas and met a saint whom he believed had been living for two thousand years. As Adair-Toteff (2005) mentions, 'this brings up the question of the relationship between the charismatic leader and asceticism and mysticism' (p. 195). Rajinikanth is comfortable in making public appearances without his trademark moustache, with a bald head, and simple costumes, unlike MGR who never removed his fur hat in public fearing that his bald head might expose him as aged. Traits such as these have become virtues of 'Rajini style' charisma (which I have named as 'Rajisma')

which have coalesced to create the image of a simple, humble and religious individual and resulted in the unprecedented adulation toward and reverence of a cinematic actor. For instance, one of Rajinikanth's films is called, *Annamalai* (1992), and was shot in the ancient city temple of Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu. The title of the film is also the name of the main deity. There was an uncontrollable influx of devotees to the temple soon after the release of the film. The reverence does not stop with the popularity of the temple; Rajinikanth has also been elevated to being on par with God; for example, his banners are worshipped and his followers offer special prayers on his birthday (Daniel 2010). This worshipping of Rajinikanth mirrors Weber's thoughts on Charismatic leaders where:

> People surrender themselves to such a leader because they are carried away by a belief in the manifestations that authenticate him. They turn away from established rules and submit to the unprecedented order that the leader proclaims. In this way charismatic leadership effects an 'internal' revolution of experience, in contrast to the 'external' revolution that occurs when, for example, people adapt themselves to a major change in legal rules without at the same time internalizing the ideas behind it (Bendix 1960, p. 303).

While Rajinkanth's characters and themes in his films endorse the Tamil traditional conservative social structures, such as patriarchy and docile womanhood, his 'Rajisma' promises hope and projects him as a leader of the masses. This feature should be seen in the context of actor-politicians from the previous generation, who distanced themselves with poetic monologues and stereotypical and theatrical acting styles, even though their films addressed and suggested revolutionary solutions against pressing social issues such as dowry payments, religious dogmatism, and casteism. As the 'external' revolution failed

to blossom and bring about the change in the social structure, the people welcomed the 'internal' revolution, which Rajinikanth's films have successively offered.

Vijayakanth: from 'captain' to the Leader of the Opposition

While the production and consumption of a star is mediated through media, the success of a star as a politician in Tamil Nadu is mediated through ideology and his or her ability to manoeuvre the minds of the masses by realigning himself or herself to the socio-political dynamics of the state and at the same time by emphasising and maintainting conservative social structure. The task is rather arduous. Indian sociologist Yogendra Singh (1973) in his analysis on social change in India named this process the 'modernisation of Indian tradition'. The cinema in Tamil Nadu and the political avatars of its film stars may also be conceptualised in this regard. In order to ensure their success in politics, Tamil screen stars need to modernise the traditional elements. In other words, although the MGR formula has become a structure for aspiring star-politicians, the contents of the structure have been changing continuously; for instance, in terms of the religious stance of film star politicians.

Actor Vijayakanth has experienced electoral success ever since he launched his political party in 2005 by maintaining about 10% of the total votes. Since Vijayakanth's party emerged as the second largest party in the recent assembly elections, he has entered the state assembly as the Leader of the Opposition.

Figure 31. Vijayakanth in a political rally in 2007

The success of Vijayakanth lies in his 'social discourse' coupled with his action-packed films. Even before launching his political party, Vijayakanth started to insert various discourses on socially sensitive issues such as corruption, bureaucratic arrogance and negligence of the poor in his films. Therefore, his political campaigns have echoed what he has been addressing in his films. In one of his speeches during the 2011 assembly elections, he exhorted:

> No one can buy me with money. I contested last election on my own as you [people] have asked me. This time, I am going for an alliance as you have desired for. To me, the people's word is verdict from god... Social activist Anna Hazare is on fasting in North India demanding the elimination of corruption and to bring in 'lok pal' bill in the parliament. In Tamil Nadu, the ruling party is stealing public exchequer in the disguise of 'Anna' (*Dinamalar* April 2011).

This speech is typical of Vijayakanth's campaigning, which is similar to the *speech of character* and social discourse in his films. As mentioned in Chapter Five, by means of social discourse, Vijayakanth's films draw parallels from

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burning social issues in Tamil Nadu, such as favouritism and corruption. Frequently, his social discourses also contain intertextual references to national and international events. For instance, in the speech above, he refers to the fasting strike of a social activist Anna Hazare in Delhi in 2011. References such as these are the characteristic features of Vijayakanth's films and by adapting the same discursive style where Vijayakanth carefully juxtaposes his screen image with his political persona.

Throughout his political campaigns, Vijayakanth has tried to legitimise his stature as a saviour of the subaltern and the successor of MGR. He also 'continues the tradition of generosity for which MGR was renowned' (Wyatt 2010, p. 171). Having set the precedent by storming into power from cinematic fame, MGR has become a role model for film stars who aspire to become politicians. As Pandian (1989) argues, MGR's screen image and real persona have become inseparable and MGR reinforced the screen and real persona convergence by cleverly presenting himself to the masses. In his attempt to capture the masses, Vijayakanth also legitimises his stature as a stunt man for the subaltern and as the political successor of MGR. Vijayakanth's attempt to align himself with MGR's legacy was evident for the first time when he chose to travel in the van used by MGR when he formally launched his political party in 2005. On the rear of the van, Vijayakanth's photo was printed on the chest of MGR's portrait with the phrase *Karuppu* (black) *MGR* (Sujatha 2009). Vijayakanth's attempt to portray himself as the 'black MGR' signifies that while associating his name with MGR's and underlining his colour, he appeals to his fans and to a more dependable voting populace; namely, the dark-skinned low castes.

Another notable feature of Vijayakanth's films is his religious affinity with the Hindu majority, at the same time as maintaining proximity with the Muslim minority. Media reports stated that Vijayakanth visited and worshipped at the *Kamatchi Amman* (Goddess of Power) Temple prior and after the 2011 state assembly elections (UNI 2011). His religious affinity needs to be seen in the context of the ideologically atheist Dravidian parties that have dominated the political sphere of Tamil Nadu. Vijayakanth associates with Hindus by performing their rituals and attending their religious festivals. By doing so, he made a gesture toward changing attitude among Tamils and marked the end of the Dravidian era (Geetha 1993; Pinto 1999). This particular development not only reflects the prevalent religious fervour among Tamils but also distinguishes Vijayakanth from MGR, who was never seen as religious. Another feature distinguishing Vijayakanth from MGR is his party ideology. With his nationalist Congress family background, Vijayakanth did not formulate his party ideology in terms of the Tamil Nationalist Dravidian ethos but projected his party as 'National'. For instance, during the launch of his political party, he informed his followers that the name of his party came to him the night before the launching day as a blessing from the Almighty and the term, *Desiya* (National*)* was included in the name 'to infuse a national strain in the party' (Das 2005). As noted, Vijayakanth is nationalistic in his portrayal of cinematic characters. Therefore, with the blending of religious fervour into the ideologies of cinematic politicians, as Pinto (1999) cogently argues the Dravidian ideology has lost its revolutionary character. He traces the reasons for the 'death' of the Dravidian era to the success of the non-Tamil leaderships of the Dravidian parties.

Vijayakanth represents the people in his films by presenting their problems and providing solutions to their problems through his characters, reflecting Dyer's concept that 'Stars are, like characters in stories, [the] representation of people' (1998, p. 20). In real life, people are able to associate his political speeches with the already foregrounded image of Vijayakanth's on-screen characters as their messiah. This supports Walter Benjamin's remark:

> The cult of the film star, fostered by the money of the film industry preserves not the unique aura of the person but the '**spell of the personality**,' the phony spell of a commodity (cited by Redmond & Holmes 2007, p. 27).

While the genre of Vijayakanth, as mentioned in Chapter Five, portrayed him as the stuntman for the subaltern, an armed rebel against the atrocities, the saviour of the suppressed, and a spotless critic of the system, which eventually became the 'spell of his personality' to the poor, his political persona replicated and resonated the same image thereby converging his 'reel' and 'real' image. The idea here is not to merely claim the actor Vijayakanth as a success in politics, but to show that his emergence provides a fresh alternative to the two dominant political parties in Tamil Nadu. These events confirm that cinematic interaction with politics in Tamil Nadu is more important than ever before. The interaction is stronger because the possible replacement for political leadership in Tamil Nadu comes from the cinema. It is also resilient since this cinematic interaction with politics continues to thrive within the changing socio-economic dynamics of the state.

Sarathkumar: a rural Rambo

The outcome of the assembly elections in 2011 also brought to power another aspiring film-star politician. Sarathkumar is seen as an arch-rival to Vijayakanth in politics. As far as the genre of Sarathkumar is concerned, it is one I describe as the 'Rural Rambo'. The term 'Rambo' is applied to characterise Sarathkumar's physique like Sylvester Stallone in the *Rambo* film series. As Stallone, Sarathkumar is also known for his action-packed roles. The prefix 'rural' is added to denote that his genre is rural-based narratives and his target audience are rural people.

My analysis of Sarathkumar brings us closer to Graeme Turner's analysis of Australian film narratives. In *National Fictions* (1986), Turner refers to the distinctiveness of the Australian landscape, its thematic, physical domination in films and the fundamental role the land plays in forming national character. Using the land as his focal point of analysis, Turner (1986) investigates the virtues and disappointments of the land and its uses to examine the binary of rural and urban Australia and its class differences. In Tamil cinema, Sarathkumar has found his place in such a rural genre. This notion, however, does not undervalue his urban characters. Nonetheless, the success of Sarathkumar as a film actor and his star image has grown through his rural-based films, ever since *Cheran Pandiyan* (1991). Here, he was able to gain star status with a role based on a rural theme.

*Figure 32. Sarathkumar donating food to rural
children in Ayya, 2005*

The beginning of Sarathkumar's success in the 1990s coincides with yet another milestone in the changing Indian socio-economic structure— economic liberalisation. After the economic liberalisation in 1991, Indian audiences witnessed the influx of western, materialistic, and consumerist culture. Changes in the patterns of production and consumption are now present all across India, including Tamil Nadu. As social activists such as Roy (2011a) argue, liberalisation has increased the rural–urban divide, widened the gap between the rich and the poor, and raised poverty in India substantially resulting in the socio-economic alienation of the masses. Indian agriculture has suffered the impacts of economic liberalisation in issues such as mechanisation and the onset of genetically-modified crops by multinational companies. Consequently, there has been a yearning for the past and those lost traditional social structures, which formerly offered a minimum guarantee of food, shelter, and security. Films like *Naattamai* offer the culturally shocked Tamils an opportunity to revisit their traditional social structures, where the village headman is easily accessible, where

the distribution of justice is instant, where there is harmonious and interdependent co-existence of the vertically divided caste groups.

With roles such as these, Sarathkumar assures his fans and the rural masses that he is 'the one' whom they have lost in their journey towards a globalised economy. Coupled with the devastating effects of economic liberalisation, the urbane, educated, middle class population are seen as uncharacteristic and inhumane by the villagers as urban people are surrounded by signs of mass consumption that strengthens the cultural deprivation and relative poverty of the rural masses. As Turner (1986) argues in the context of Australian cinema, 'the use of aboriginals served as a metonym for the indigenous version of nature (p. 26)', in Tamil cinema however, rural themes are used as a metonym for the traditional social structure. If we recall the establishing shot in *Naattamai*, agriculture, animal husbandry, the harvest, and modes of patriarchy are all underscored within the first few minutes of the film. This first shot speaks about the promises and hopes that a film and a character create upon the audience— the wealthy past and traditional patriarchy that had ensured food, shelter and security which rural Tamils have lost in the past two decades after liberalisation. As Turner mentions:

> While some commentators assume that the interest in the landscape is produced by the land itself, it does not matter in fact what colour the land takes on in the Australian narratives. The investigation of its possibilities— slim though they often are— is provoked not by the land's virtues but rather by disappointment in Australian society (1986, p. 28).

As well as the actors we have analysed, others such as Karthik, SV Sekar, Napoleon, Arunpandian, and Vadivel are all active in politics. Most notably, the leading young actor Vijay has already expressed his intention to enter into politics

in the near future and has asked his fan clubs to work for the success of the ADMK party in the recent elections (*Press Trust of India* 2011). Interestingly, actor Vijay even hoisted a separate flag for his fan club, following the same tradition as MGR and Vijayakanth. Critic-journalists such as Gnani argue that actors in Tamil Nadu assume a role in politics as the last resort, especially during the end of their cinematic career (YouTube 2010). Yet this statement ignores the omnipresence of film stars in Tamil Nadu politics and people's support for their success. The political successes of Vijayakanth and Sarathkumar and the political expectations of Rajinikanth prove this to be the case.

Conclusion

Actor-Politicians: Past, Present, and the Future

A society that needs heroes is unfortunate.
Bertolt Brecht, Life of Galileo, act 1, scene 11

Charisma of the star politicians discussed in the thesis is not *fait accompli*. As I have repeatedly pointed out throughout the thesis, charisma is not permanent but dynamic. Although Annadurai (1909– 1969) was the first actor to become the Chief Minister (1967 – 69) of Tamil Nadu, he was a theatre actor, more particularly, a script writer. It was MGR who became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu by using his stardom. Going by one of the interviews in 1957 and other extra-textual materials on MGR, politics was not in his mind when he entered the film industry. With this in mind, one can understand that MGR became a politician perhaps after sensing the strength of his cinematic charisma among Tamils. This is also the case with Jayalalitha, Rajinikanth, and to some extent Sarathkumar. However, Vijayakanth has shaped his acting career in such a way that helped him for his political entry. This view gets strengthened if one looks at the political background of Vijayakanth, as we have seen in Chapters Five and Seven, and his association with the filmmakers who have political links with Parties such DMK.

Cinema has been a gateway to political power in Tamil Nadu since 1967 and, if the trends discussed in the previous chapters continue, it will be so in the years to come as other actors enter politics and more political parties are founded or headed by cinematic celebrities. Actors have changed but the process of

electing politicians from the film world continues in Tamil Nadu. The most fundamental factor here is the resilience of cinematic charisma. During the era of MGR, ideas such as revolution, socialism, secularism, and Tamil nationalism dominated the Tamil Nadu film industry. Then came the Rajinikanth-Vijayakanth era— where an angry young man single-handedly took revenge against the systemic assault on family— to bring about major social changes. However, the advocacy for changes did not materialise in reality. In the 1990s, films glorifying the traditional social structure such as village headship, started to emerge, of which Sarathkumar became the key exponent. In a way, it is only individuals and genre that undergo transformation and not the cinematic gateway, which remains a recognised and proven opportunity to be exploited.

Since the late 1960s, Tamil society has undergone a number of socio-cultural, economic, and political changes. For example, there has been a move from atheism to religious fundamentalism, from rationality to superstition, from Tamil Nationalism to Indian nationalism through Tamil-ness, from radicalism to conservatism, and from non-smoking and non-drinking to smoking and drinking vices. Broadly, the situation in Tamil Nadu has traversed from progression to regression. Obviously, those changes have impacted the cinematic industry as well. The dynamic socio-political pattern, nonetheless, has not changed the formulaic nature of the cinematic gateway to political power.

Tamil society underwent great changes after the Indian government's decision to liberalise its economy in 1991. The changes, however, also benefitted the film industry by providing competition through satellite television channels and importing films from the other parts of the world. The most significant development since the 1991 economic liberalisation has been that almost all the

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political parties in Tamil Nadu own and operate their own print media and television channel. Jayalalitha is the Chief Editor of a newspaper *Namadhu MGR* (*Our MGR*) while her supporters own a television channel *Jaya TV*, and Karunanidhi's DMK party publishes a daily newspaper *Murasoli*. In addition Karunanidhi's family owns and operates two television channels, *Sun TV* and *Kalaigner TV*. Of these, *Sun TV* is the most popular television network in South India. The chairman and managing director of the Chennai-based *Sun TV*, Kalanithi Maran (grandnephew of Karunanidhi) with the net worth of US$ 4 billion (Singh & Singh 2010), has been called as 'Murdoch of Madras'. Moreover, Vijyakanth owns and operates a television channel, Captain TV, while Sarathkumar gets the support from the popular daily newspaper *Daily Thanthi*. What all this demonstrates is that the cinematic charisma of star politicians gets 'routinised' and 'rationalised' through the ownership of cross-media platforms.

*Figure 33. People queuing up to reserve tickets
for Endhiran, 2011*

The technical sophistication, feasible after the economic liberalisation, culminated in Tamils' exposure to world cinema. However, this change has not affected or even altered the cinema as a gateway to politics for the star actors in Tamil Nadu. Now, the change of focus of film stars reflect the changing demographics of Tamil society where, for instance, youngsters who have the luxury of Tamil-dubbed Hollywood films also want to see their favourite Tamil stars represented via animation and Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) as happened in *Endhiran* (produced by Maran). Present day film goers belong to the third or fourth generation since the independence of India. This younger generation are relatively docile in articulating their discourses on Tamil Nationalism or Dravidian ideology (which might surface any time via a trigger from the charismatic leader). Therefore, the resilient cinema has changed its approach too; for instance, from mythological stories to nationalist films, Tamil cinema has always been capable of taking new turns by shifting its focus either to rural-based films or to consumerist culture, with some occasional exceptions.

In the case of Tamil Nadu, politicians make films and film stars have become politicians. As we have seen throughout this thesis, allured by the cinematic charisma of the actors, the people of Tamil Nadu continue to place their hopes in stars whom they expect to be their saviours. Tamils have produced political leaders out of film stars. These political leaders ignore the reason for their election and their political ascendancy. From the short-lived regime of Annadurai (1967–69); the opportunist Karunanidhi; the dictatorial MGR; the draconian Jayalalitha; the elusive Rajinikanth; the fragile fresh alternative Vijayakanth; and the pro-status quo Sarathkumar, charismatic leaders have failed to alleviate the plight of the poor masses. Instead, what has happened in reality is,

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as noted by social activists such as Roy (2011b), the institutionalisation of corruption and nepotism pervaded. Moreover, the success of Brahminical Jayalalitha has been a hammer-blow to the Dravidian ideology, which Karunanidhi and MGR had diluted previously. In this context, it is worth quoting the words of Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) in *The Godfather III* with reference to the people of Sicily (dir. Coppola 1990):

> Throughout history terrible things have happened to these people. Terrible injustices... But they still expect good, rather than bad, will happen to them.

The injustices began at the time of the Indus valley civilisation, which belonged to the Dravidians (Marr 1971, p. 161), and continued to exist in various forms through corruption, maladministration, nepotism, and cultural hegemony. Today, the situation in Tamil Nadu is as chaotic and as restless as ever, and it remains an ideal condition for the emergence of a charismatic leader. Despite those repeated injustices, Tamils continue to put their faithful devotion in their cinematic celebrities, and expect that one day they will see one of them as their star saviour who will redeem them from all miseries. Just like Christians believe in the rebirth of Jesus, Tamils search for their saviour among film stars. Jesus, according to Weber, is a charismatic personality to Christians (Adair-Toteff 2005, p. 198). For Tamils, a cinematic celebrity who could become an effective political leader— by ending corruption, bringing about economic success, and instituting an egalitarian society— would be the most charismatic of all.

Filmography

This section has been structured like this: *Film* (*English translation*, if applicable) Year, Director, country/state. The translations of the Tamil titles are mine. The films that are titled after the names of the lead characters are not translated. Tamil directors' names are used as per Tamil tradition, while the names of non-Tamil directors are presented according to the Harvard Referencing Guide of the University of Adelaide.

16 Vayadhinilae (At The Age of 16) 1977, Bharathiraja, Tamil Nadu.

Aayirathil Oruvan (One Man in a Thousand) 1965, B Pandhulu, Tamil Nadu.

Adimaip Penn (Slave Lady) 1969, K Shanker, Tamil Nadu.

Alibabavum 40 Thirudargalum (Alibaba and 40 Thieves) 1956, TR Sundaram, Tamil Nadu.

All The Rivers Run 1983 & 1989, Amenta, P & Miller, G, Australia.

Amar Akbar Anthony 1977, Desai, M, Maharashtra, India.

Anbe Vaa (Come On Dear) 1966, AC Thirulogachandar, Tamil Nadu.

Annamalai 1992, Suresh Krishna, Tamil Nadu.

Apoorva Raagangal (The Rare Melodies) 1975, K Balachandar, Tamil Nadu.

Arasaangam (The Government) 2008, R Madhesh, Tamil Nadu.

Arunachalam 1997, Sundar C, Tamil Nadu.

Ayya (The Master) 2005, Hari, Tamil Nadu.

Baasha 1995, Suresh Krishna, Tamil Nadu.

Baba 2002, Suresh Krishna, Tamil Nadu.

Bairavi 1978, M Bhaskar, Tamil Nadu.

Balamani 1937, PV Rao, Tamil Nadu.

Breaker Morant 1980, Beresford, B, Australia.

Captain Prabhakaran 1991, RK Selvamani, Tamil Nadu.

Chakravarthi Thirumagal (The Emperor's Daughter) 1957, P Neelakantan, Tamil Nadu.

Chandhrodhayam (Moonrise) 1964, K Shankar, Tamil Nadu.

Chandramuki 2005, P Vasu, Tamil Nadu.

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith 1978, Schepisi, F, Australia.

Cheran Pandiyan (Kings Chera & Pandiyan) 1991, KS Ravikumar, Tamil Nadu.

Chinna Gounder (Little Gounder) 1992, RV Udayakumar, Tamil Nadu.

Chinnade Gombe 1964, B Pandhulu, Karnataka, India.

Commando 1985, Lester, ML, USA.

Deewaar (The Wall) 1975, Chopra, Y, Maharashtra, India.

Dakshayagnam (Daksha's Ritual) 1938, Raja Chandrasekar, Tamil Nadu.

Dharma 1998, Kayar, Tamil Nadu.

Dharmathin Thalaivan (Leader of Generosity) 1988, SP Muthuraman, Tamil Nadu.

Deiva Thai (The Divine Mother) 1964, P Madhavan, Tamil Nadu.

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (The Brave Hearted Will Take Away The Bride) 1995, Chopra, A, Maharashtra, India.

Dirty Harry 1971, Siegel, D, USA.

Dost (Friend) 1974, Guha, D, Maharashtra, India.

El Dorado 1967, Hawks, H, USA.

En Aasai Machaan (My Beloved Brother-in-Law) 1994, R Sundararajan, Tamil Nadu.

Enakku Naane Needhibadhi (I Am the Judge For Myself) 1984, SA Chandrasekaran, Tamil Nadu.

Endhiran (The Robot) 2009, S Shankar, Tamil Nadu.

First Blood 1982, Kotcheff, T, USA.

Gallipoli 1981, Weir, P, Australia.

The Godfather I, II & III 1972, 1974 & 1990, Coppola, FF, USA.

Guru 2007, Mani Ratnam, India.

Guys and Dolls 1955, Mankiewicz, JL, USA.

Harijana Singam (The Lion of Low-Caste) 1938, Bottling Mani, Tamil Nadu.

Idhayakkani (The Fruit of the Heart) 1975, A Jeganadhan, Tamil Nadu.

In Search of Anna 1978, Storm, E, Australia.

The Irishman 1978, Crombie, D, Australia.

The Jewel in the Crown 1984, O'Brien, J & Morahan, C, UK.

Julius Caesar 1953, Mankiewicz, JL, USA.

Junior 1994, Reitman, I, USA.

Ladri di biciclette (The Bicycle Thieves) 1948, De Sica, V, Italy.

La Terra Trema (The Earth Trembles) 1948, Visconti, L, Italy.

Kaaviya Thalaivan (The Epic Hero) 1992, K Gopalakrishnan, Tamil Nadu.

Kalamekam 1940, Ellis R Dungan, Tamil Nadu.

Kan Simittum Neram (In the Blink of an Eye) 1988, K Kannadasan, Tamil Nadu.

Kanni Thaai (Virgin Mother) 1965, MA Thirumugam, Tamil Nadu.

Klute 1971, Pakula, AJ, USA.

Koondukili (Caged Parrot) 1954, TR Ramanna, Tamil Nadu.

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (Something Happens) 1998, Johar, K, Maharashtra, India.

Kudiyirundha Koyil (The Temple I Lived In) 1968, K Shanker, Tamil Nadu.

Kumari Penn (The Virgin Lady) 1966, TR Ramanna, Tamil Nadu.

Maanagara Kaaval (The Metropolitan Patrol) 1991, M Thiyagarajan, Tamil Nadu.

Maappillai (The Groom) 1989, Rajasekar, Tamil Nadu.

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Appendices

Appendix One

Cinematic Celebrities and Tamil Nadu elections 2011

Friday the 13th May 2011- The day Tamil Nadu State Assembly election results were announced. The AIADMK party (*All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kalagam*), headed by Jayalalitha, swept the polls along with its allies, making Jayalalitha the Chief Minister of the State for a third term, dethroning that other cinematic politician, Karunanidhi. Invariably all the media in India celebrated her electoral success, for instance, one of the premier English television channels has featured Jayalalitha's victory, 'Tamil Nadu election results: Jayalalitha's massive comeback' (*NDTV*, May 2011). It should be remembered here that Jayalalitha was probably the first female actor-politician in the world to become the Chief Minister, when she came to power first time in 1991.

There are many interesting, yet, hitherto unprecedented developments that took place in the latest assembly elections in Tamil Nadu. It was the most tightly contested election Tamil Nadu has ever witnessed with the highest number voter turnout (76 %); predominantly more youngsters exercising their franchise. One needs to remember that voting is not compulsory in India. Thus, the assembly elections in 2011 assumed significance not just in terms of political grounds but also for cinematic reasons; too, since the election outcome produced cascading effects in the creative industry in Tamil Nadu. The Karunanidhi government is alleged to be encouraging favouritism and family monopoly over the State's entertainment industry, which was considered to be the second largest in India. In

a two-party-dominant Tamil Nadu, both sides have drawn supports from the filmic fraternity. For instance, the young and upcoming actor such as Vijay supported and asked his fan clubs to work towards the success of AIADMK, while the glamour girl, Kushboo Sundar, and comedian Vadivelu campaigned for the DMK. Vijayakanth's party, DMDK and Sarathkumar's party, AISMK went in alliance with AIADMK. Of the 234 assembly seats in Tamil Nadu, AIADMK alliance has won 202 seats while the DMK alliance got 32 seats. Interestingly, the parties headed by the actors have won 177 seats, which is about 76% of the total seats. In other words, the alliance that has the support of action heroes has captured the power by winning nearly 80% of the total seats. Moreover, first time in the history of Tamil Nadu, a non-Congress and a non-Dravidian party is sitting in the opposition and that party is headed by Vijayakanth with more than eight percent of the total votes.

Appendix Two

Film Songs

Title song from *Nadodi Mannan*

Greetings, Pure Tamil for clearly explaining the lives of Ancient Dravidians
(Senthamile vanakkam; aadhi dravidar vaalvinai seerodu vilakkum)

We greet you for pioneering the world with promulgation of five rules of grammar
(Aindhu Ilakanangal aaindhe, ulaga aranginuke mudhal nee thandhadhaalum)

People's heart is Temple as they lived in flawless ideology
(Makkalin ullame koyil enra maasatra kolgaiyile vaalndhadhaale).

Salute to Pure Tamil for teaching us that there is no other god up above the parents who gave birth to us
(Petra annai, thandhai anri melaai piridhoru dheivam illai enradhaale, sendhamilie vanakkam).

You had a justice system which has no caste or religion and you lived in our hearts and lives as one among us
(Jaadhi, samayangal illaa, nalla satta amaippinai konde, needhi neri vali kandaai; engal nenjilum, vaalvilum onraagi ninraai).

Title song from *Padayappa*

First stanza of the the song 'Walk like a lion' (*Singa nadai pottu*):
Walk like a lion; Climb up the summit; Aim for the sky thereafter!
(Singa nadai pottu sigarathil earu; Sigarathai adainthaal vaanathil earu)
My name is Padaiyappa; My walk is youthful!
(en peru Padaiyappa; Ilavatta nadaiyappa)
My army is full of young lions
(ennodu ulladhellaam ilam singa Padaiyappa)

My heart is Lord Muruga's temple; hundred armies follow my path!

(Nenjil aaru Padaiyappa; pinnaal nooru Padaiyappa)

If there is any war, ten fingers are my armoury

(yutham onnu varugaiyil pathu viral Padaiyappa)

Affectionate man with a manly moustache, yet, an innocent kid

(Paasamulla manidhanappaa; Naan meesai vecha kulandhaiyappaa)

I am always good and thankful

(enrum nalla thambi naanappaa; nanri ulla aalappaa)

It is the soil of Tamil Nadu that cradled me to grow

(Thaalaati valarthadhu Tamil Naattu mannappaa)

Title song from *Naattamai*:

Namma Naattamai paadham patta enga vellaamai velayumadi

(The harvest will multiply if our naattamai sets his foot on the soil)

Naattamai kai asanjaa maasam naalu malai pozhiyumadi

(We will get rain in abundance, if he snaps his fingers)

Namma Naattaamai paadham patta enga vellaamai velayumadi

(We will get rain in abundance, if he hails his hands)

Naattamai kai asanjaa maasam naalu malai pozhiyumadi

Panjaayaththil dharmanadi;

(He is Dharman in adjudicating disputes)

Panjam vandhaa karnanadi;

(When there is famine, he is Karnan)

Parambaraiyaa parakkudhadi ivanga kodi!!

(His flag is hailing for generations)

Em mannan ullam vellaiyadi;

(The heart of our King is spotless white)

Kanneer vittaa pillayaidi;

(If someone sheds tears, he becomes a child)

Oorengum kondaadum uyarndha kodi!!

(He is a high caste man whom the world celebrates)

Than maanam veeram kaaththa kudi;

(His family maintained self-esteem and valour)

Munnorellaam sonnaradi

(Predecessors also agreed upon)

Aakondu elundhaal veeranadi;

(when there is injustice he becomes a macho)

Vetri Vetri maaradhadi

(He never fails to triumph over)

Namma Naattaamai paadham patta enga vellaamai velayumadi

Naattamai kai asanjaa maasam naalu malai pozhiyumadi

Seidham mela aiyam illa;

(There is no doubt upon the Lord)

Dheivam sonna poyyumilla;

(God never lies)

Enga Naattamai theerppukku maatramillai!!

(There is no appeal to our Naattamai)

Velli thuttu vechurundhum, thalli thalli povadhillai;

(He never hesitates to help as others who abundance of money)

Mel enrum, keel enrum bedhamillai!

(He does not discriminate high or low)

Inge kaaki chattai thevai illai;

(There is no place of police men here)

Aiyaa sole nam vedhame!

(Whatever he says that becomes mantra)

Andha vaanaththai midhichavan yaarmillai;

There is none who touched the Sky)

Aiyaa sonna adhu podhume!

(It is enough if our Naattamai says so)

Namma Naattaamai paadham patta enga vellaamai velayumadi

(The harvest will multiply if our naattamai sets his foot on the soil)

Naattamai kai asanjaa maasam naalu malai pozhiyumadi

(We will get rain in abundance, if he snaps his fingers)

Appendix Three

Tamils in Hollywood
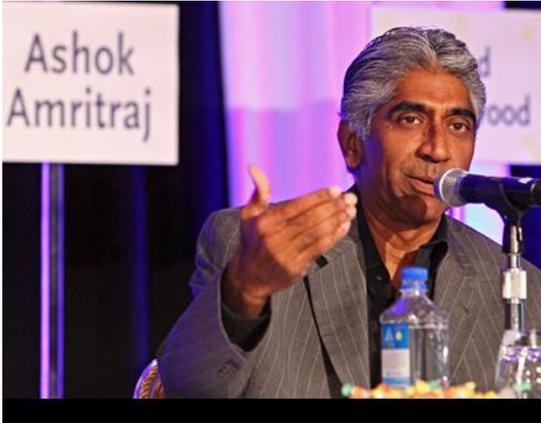
Ashok Amritraj, Producer

Manoj N Shyamalan, Director

AR Rahman, Music Composer

Sendhil Ramamurthy, Actor

Appendix Four

A wedding and a funeral

In an India that is fractured along caste lines, a marriage is never the simple establishment of a relationship between two independent, adult individuals. Instead, it can involve not only the two families, but whole communities as well. An inter-caste marriage without parental approval is, therefore, a potential trigger for violence in rural India. The caste group that is relatively higher in the social hierarchy sees any such marriage as a social affront, especially if the other caste group is Dalit. Wednesday's attack on three Dalit colonies in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu, which ended in the burning down of 268 houses, is another shocking instance of how social stigmas engendered by caste identities can provoke large-scale violence. The arson was the immediate fallout of the suicide of a caste Hindu man whose daughter had married a Dalit living in one of the colonies. Apparently unable to accept his daughter's decision to marry a Dalit, the man opted to end his life. For a bride's family, especially if it is higher in the caste ladder, the socially-sanctioned stigma associated with an inter-caste marriage is greater. Women carry a far heavier responsibility of having to protect the "family honour", which is a euphemism for the feudal notions of social status and acceptance held by the senior male members of the family. Indeed, the prevalence of such notions is an indicator of the secondary status accorded to women in these communities.

Worryingly, in rural Tamil Nadu where caste conflicts over marriages, religious rituals or access to public resources are common, the police were slow to sense the potential for trouble. A few days before the violence, the newly wedded couple had approached the police for protection fearing attacks by members of the bride's community. Other than providing assurances and holding out promises, the police seem to have taken no preventive steps. A self-styled court in the village ordered the Dalit man to send his wife back to her parents, but the woman refused to leave her husband. This should have alerted the police to the possibility of trouble. Although the suicide, the immediate trigger for the attack, could not have been predicted or prevented, the police had adequate reason to apprehend the tensions and ample time to take precautionary steps. The only reason that none in the Dalit colonies suffered any bodily harm is that all the residents had left their homes and taken shelter in another village. Social stigmas and caste inequalities cannot be wiped out overnight, but surely the law enforcers can show greater anticipation and quicker reflexes in familiar situations that give rise to tensions between caste groups.

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