



Tamil film culture and politics. Superstar actors as charismatic politicians

Michiel Baas

Compared to Bollywood, the Tamil movie industry (Kollywood) has received much less international and scholarly attention. With its detailed analysis of five movies and their respective stars, Pongiyannan's study *Film and Politics in India* (2015) provides beautiful insights into the entanglement of movies and politics in Tamil Nadu, India.

Reviewed title



Film and Politics in India: Cinematic Charisma as a Gateway to Political Power

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In 2012, the Tamil film song 'Why This Kolaveri Di' became a worldwide success and has been viewed over a 130 million times on YouTube since. The song was written by lead actor Dhanush, star of the psychological thriller simply titled '3', to which the song was integral. Literally translating as 'Why this killing rage, girl?', its meaning or relevance to the film was not much of a factor in its international popularity. Instead, it was the song's 'Tanglish' (portmanteau of Tamil and English, not unlike Hinglish which combines Hindi and English) that seemed to trigger a particular fascination abroad. It was probably the first time a Tamil song made such an impression overseas. Other than Bollywood, Tamil Nadu's movie industry Kollywood (named after Kodambakkam, a neighborhood

in Chennai that is the center of the production of its movies) enjoys much less international familiarity. Even if Dhanush, a well-known actor who has performed in over 25 movies so far, was central to a hit of epic proportions, his name is unlikely to elicit much of an 'ahh!' across India's borders. The fact that he is the son-in-law of Rajinikanth, one of India's most revered stars, is probably even less known.

Rajinikanth (often shorted as 'Rajini') is one of the five 'Tamil' actors that Dhamu Pongiyannan discusses in relation to their political aspirations in his informative and illuminating account of Tamil film and its associated politics, *Film and Politics in India* (2015). Pongiyannan's main argument is that a clear link can be drawn between the way Tamil actors star on-screen, the role depicted, the social issues touched upon, and his or her political ambitions. For this the book builds on Sara Dickey's seminal work (1993) in showing how these actors are not merely entertainers but in their portrayal also "saviours of the oppressed, protectors of the poor, messiahs

of the malnourished, and deities of the downtrodden". As such they "inform the audience, educate the spectator, address various social problems, provide them with solace, and secure them with hopes through warrior heroes" (p.12).

Bollywood vs. Kollywood

Any person who has ever seen a Tamil movie will immediately recognize the relevance of the argument made above. It is also what sets apart Tamil movies, and in broader terms 'South Indian' cinema (including the Kannadiga, Malayalam and Telugu movie industries), from Bollywood. While the latter generally revolves around story-lines high on glamour, with meticulously choreographed studio-filmed dance routines and a focus on the upper middle class and elites, the former puts 'ordinary' Indians much more central, with scenes set in market places, people's homes, and simply on the street. While Tamil movies also abound in musical scenes in which

the hero and/or heroine take center stage, they are more generally set 'out in the open', in real life, and are as such less divorced from daily reality than the ones central to Bollywood movies.

Pongiyannan argues that "the relationship between Tamil cinema and politics ... mainly revolves around the actors' potential to project their superhuman qualities and fans' faithfulness to the charisma of their favourite actors" (p.29). Two factors are crucial here. While actors set themselves apart from ordinary men by projecting themselves as exceptional and ordinary on-screen, the audience is 'encouraged' to perceive their stars as superhuman with divine powers (ibid.). In relation to this, fans have even been known to display their devotion to their particular film hero through religious practices and open worshipping. The author furthermore argues that it appears that a "fan's allegiance to cinematic stars grows stronger as the popular democratic institutions remain corrupt and continue to fail the masses" (p.33).

MGR – Nadodi Mannan (1958)

For his analysis Pongiyannan focuses on five iconic movies, each one clearly connecting with the lead actor's political ambitions and views. The author kicks off the analysis with perhaps one of Tamil cinema's most iconic movie stars, Marudur Gopalamenon Ramachandran, generally referred to as MGR. The founder of the All India Anna Dravida Progressive Federation party or *Anaithu Indhia Anna Dravida Munnetra Kalagam* (AIAMDK), he was the chief minister of Tamil Nadu for ten years, from 1977 till his death in 1987. MGR continues to be worshipped as a god by the state's poor, and temples have been built in his veneration. The movie that Pongiyannan pays special attention to here is *Nadodi Mannan* (1958), which was not only MGR's 100th movie (he would make roughly 150 during his lifetime), but also the one that propelled him into politics and secured his political superstar status. While it does not lie in the scope of this article to provide a proper synopsis of the movie, nor of any of the other discussed in this book, what stands out in this movie – which was also written, directed and produced by MGR – is the way in which corruption, nepotism and injustice are exposed by the two main characters (a double role played by MGR). Besides being the first color movie in Tamil Nadu, the film is a clear example of one that puts 'Tamil-ness' central through its layering of cultural values and moral lessons.

As in the book's subsequent chapter, which focuses on actress Jayalalitha, Pongiyannan notes the importance of MGR's fair skin as part of his appeal to fans. Yet while this may have made him stand-out as a person hailing from a well-off and upper-caste (Brahmin) background, the actor never failed to point out his humble upbringings and his early days of poverty, in order for the masses to be able to identify with him (p.46). Unlike Rajinikanth, arguably Tamil cinema's 'biggest' star 'ever' and a Marathi speaker by birth, MGR was not a native Tamil speaker, something which at some point also became a political issue (p.46). But MGR simply argued that any person who spoke Tamil was a Tamil, though himself of Malayali ancestry. He promoted himself as a pan-Tamil leader, and due to his association with the anti-Hindu Dravidian Movement also made a determined effort not to be seen as religious, thus refusing to play religious film roles (p.47).

Jayalalitha – Adimaip Penn (1969)

Pongiyannan continues his analysis by zooming in on MGR's heir-apparent and partner Jayalalitha whose 'whiteness' or 'fairness' added considerable charisma to her popular appeal. Also hailing from an upper caste (Ayyangar/Brahmin) background, like MGR Jayalalitha's popularity also crossed caste lines and had a clear unifying effect on the masses. Born in 1948, she passed away recently in 2016 and was at the time still Chief Minister (CM) of Tamil Nadu. In total she would serve six terms as CM for a total of fourteen years. According to Pongiyannan, her career can be divided into three phases, the first

of which (1965-1973) is the time she made her debut and entered into a relationship with MGR; the second (1973-1991), saw her emerge as a star while her relationship with MGR caused considerable commotion; and the third, post-1991 phase, saw her come into her own, develop her own (political) charisma and eventually become one of the state's most powerful political leaders.

Like MGR in the movie discussed earlier, Jayalalitha plays a double role in one of her most iconic movies, *Adimaip Penn* (1969). It was a notoriously provocative film, in which she was the first actress to expose her belly, uncommon in Tamil movies till then, and as a result she "became the forerunner of the cinematic sexuality of female actors in Tamil Nadu" (p.77). Yet this sexuality would continue to be coupled with notions of innocence, augmenting her appeal to the masses. Actually singing one of the main songs in the movie, rather uncommon in Indian movies since actors and actresses generally lip-sync, the movie will always be remembered for the way it endowed Jayalalitha with a particular charisma that she would expand on and make use of for decades to come. While it cannot be denied that her popularity was partly determined by her controversial relationship with MGR, and augmented by her fair complexion – which the author refers to as "charisma of complexion" (p.99) – as well as upper caste background, the movie discussed here as well as those that followed added powerful layers to what would become one of Tamil Nadu's most powerful and charismatic political leaders.

Rajinikanth – *Padayappa* (1999)

More than any other Tamil actor, Rajinikanth has left a mark across the state's borders and even abroad. Legendary for his completely over-the-top action scenes, cigar flipping trickery as well as for that one time when he actually had a one-on-one conversation with a Malaria mosquito in the movie *Endhiran* (or *Robot*, 2010), Rajinikanth's fan base is notorious for their adulation and idolization, which generally reaches feverish conditions around the time of a new movie release. With fan clubs in countries such as Japan, the actor is also far more popular abroad than any other Tamil actor. Compared to the previous actors discussed, however, his political alliances have always

remained somewhat of an enigma. Born in an impoverished Marathi family in the city of Bangalore (capital of the state of Karnataka), he is in many ways the opposite of MGR: unkempt hair, dark skin, and not particularly muscular or even handsome by conventional standards. His choice of roles is interesting in this light as well; he has never shied away from playing characters displaying 'bad behavior' such as drinking and smoking.

While his ordinary looks may make him much more a common man than other actors – arguably in itself an attempt to make Tamil Nadu cinema more representative and realistic (p.104) – his movies tend to be characterized by a particular outlandishness that has become his signature style. Yet analyzing the various characters he has portrayed over time, what stands out is that he is much more religiously inclined than the actors mentioned above. *Padayappa* (1999), one of his most iconic movies, for instance, is also one of the names of the popular Tamil Hindu deity Lord Murugan. Rajini's religious avowals associate him "with right-wing nationalist parties, such as the Bharathiya Janata Party" (p.116), currently in power in India. Furthermore, as the author argues, "The way in which *Padayappa*'s success is built on the feudal social structure, caste hierarchy, and the inferior status of women sends a strong message to the Tamil audience" (p.131). Rajini's dark complexion and characterization as a smoker and drinker, though a morally upright man, may convince the audience that he is one of them, but his films at the same time suggest that his audience "leave everything in the hands of god, embrace superstition, and accept the feudal social structure." (ibid.)

Newcomers Vijayakanth & Sarathkumar

In the final two chapters Pongiyannan moves on to relative newcomers Vijayakanth and Sarathkumar. Again the focus is on the political views of both. Vijayakanth's *Captain Prabhakaran* (1991) and Sarathkumar's *Naatamai* (translated as *The Village Headman*, 1994) are explored in greater detail. Like Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth is a dark-skinned action hero who is also somewhat perceived as an alternative to the former (p.134). At the same time the actor styles himself as a black MGR, imbuing his movies with

strong political messages and skillfully and cunningly portraying himself as a charismatic leader. Perhaps more so than in MGR's case, he is particular known for countering lawlessness and taking up arms against notorious criminals. *Captain Prabhakaran* in that sense, justifies violence, something the actor does so with the following words: "I need to become a beast to destroy the beast," (p.138) the latter referring to corrupt politicians and bureaucrats.



Screenshot of Rajinikanth in the movie *Padayappa*.

Interestingly, many of Vijayakanth's movie titles are different references to MGR's nicknames and song titles. Vijayakanth also makes a deliberate effort to communicate to MGR fans while at the same time positioning himself as an unyielding action hero who seems to channel Rajinikanth's angry young man's image (p.140). Here the author argues that: "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." (ibid.) What makes Vijayakanth particularly unique is his lengthy discourses that he inserts in movies, highlighting "the deplorable plight of the ordinary people when dealing with bureaucratic red tape, corruption and violence against women." (p.155)

Like Vijayakanth, Sarathkumar is an action hero who does not shy away from violence, but much more so than with the other actors discussed, the persona he depicts on screen can be directly linked to his own (Nadar) caste background. Born into a low-caste position, his caste has witnessed upward mobility through its iconic leader K. Kamaraj, who as the author also points out, was a contemporary of Gandhi (p.159-160). Like actors such as Stallone and Schwarzenegger, Sarathkumar is a bodybuilder and of the actors discussed in this book he is perhaps the most known for displaying and conflating a particular muscularity with strong notions of hegemonic and 'rural' masculinity. Through *Naatamai* (1994) he established his charisma "by projecting himself as a man of extraordinary integrity and revolutionary vision in terms of ideals such as, egalitarian justice ..." (p.161) He continues to do so by representing himself as a Rural Rambo, both conforming to the feudal system and confronting the elements that threaten to disrupt the caste hierarchy. Again the poor are a crucial focus in his movies, particularly informed by growing disenchantment over the divide between rich and poor, while also challenging new forms of consumerism and materiality. In particular the actor's charisma builds on his "cinematic characterization as superhuman with extraordinary qualities that can redeem people from their daily problems." (p.167)

Tamil films in perspective

Pongiyannan's analysis is revealing for the political undertones of many Tamil films and the way Tamil actors make use of their movies to propel their own political careers. In MGR and Jayalalitha's case this led to a long-lasting and determining presence on the political stage, while in the case of the other actors discussed their political influence and ambitions are less easy to pinpoint. A notable omission in Pongiyannan's study is one of Tamil Nadu's most well-known actor, Kamal Haasan (1954), an avowed atheist who has always remained rather aloof about his political ambitions, but has more recently hinted at entering Tamil Nadu's political arena himself.

With its sequential focus, moving from MGR, Jayalalitha and Rajinikanth to more recent actors, the author could have also paid more significant attention to the preferred shift from fair to darker skin tones, the changing role caste plays in the identity formation of its actors and depictions in movies, as well as the more prominent role of violence.

Differing from Bollywood, it is clear that Kollywood movies are much more politically layered, and function as political vehicles for their actors. In its keenness to contrast Tamil movies with North Indian ones, Pongiyannan has little to say about other South Indian movie industries that also have strong political connections, most notably the Telugu one. Besides that, the book makes some claims that lack a sound basis or reference, such as the one where the author argues that Tamil Nadu is the second wealthiest state in India (p.5), or where he mentions that the South Indian languages Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu all have their roots in Tamil (p.8). Both Tamil and Telugu did originate from the same proto language, but Tamil developed from Proto-South Dravidian while Telugu emerged separately from Proto-Central Dravidian. As such it has never quite been conclusive which of the two languages is older. Yet what makes Pongiyannan's study a stand-out one is the fact that it is one of the few that directly focuses on Tamil cinema and while doing so skillfully provides a comprehensive overview of the way Tamil movies relate to various issues and developments in the state.

Although Tamil as a culture and language ranks among the oldest in the world, when it comes to 'Indian culture' the focus remains rather hegemonically on North India, something which sees itself represented in the significantly higher number of publications about Bollywood each year, contrasting markedly with the much smaller number of ones on South Indian cinema. This also sees itself reflected in the international perception of Bollywood as even more prolific than Hollywood in the number of movies that hit the theatres every year, while a comparable number of movies originate from the Tamil and Telugu movie industries. The hit song 'Why This Kolaveri, Di?' did little to change the perception of Tamil movies as a niche industry while Bollywood continues to stand in the limelight and is perceived as India's premier and even 'national' movie industry. Pongiyannan's study is an important reminder that there is more to Indian cinema than Bollywood glamour and that its regional movie industries are superbly revealing for the plight of the country's underclasses, political conundrums, as well as hopes and aspirations of the 'common man'. Here's for hoping more authors will follow suit and investigate the complex and variegated Indian cinematic landscape.

Michiel Baas Asia Research Institute,
National University of Singapore.
arimba@nus.edu.sg



Screenshot of Anirudh Dhanush singing "Why This Kolaveri Di".



Movie poster for *Endhiran*.