POPULAR CINEMA and POLITICS in SOUTH INDIA

Reimagining MGR and Rajinikanth

S. RAJANAYAGAM

ROUTLEDGE

Popular Cinema and Politics in South India

The research methodologies of Dr Rajanayagam are exemplary for those who want to do in-depth research in the issues concerning the influences of cinema and its impacts on political, social, economic and cultural planes.

— **S. Raguram**
Eastern University, Sri Lanka

This book uses a media-inclusive approach to provide a comprehensive and brilliant semiotic, psychoanalytical, and feminist analysis of image-politicking of two dramatis personae of Thamizh film: MGR and Rajinikanth. Apart from deconstructing the most significant films of these two heroes, the book also uses several secondary sources such as fanzines, news articles, gossip magazines, published research on films, interviews with fans, and case studies of fan clubs to provide a multi-disciplinary, multi-site, multi-layer analysis.

— **Srividya Ramasubramanian**
Texas A&M University, USA

The book delves into the cultural-literary roots of significant patterns observed in films; particularly, the psycho-cultural mapping of body and cultural tetrad are new to Thamizh/Indian film studies. I recommend this book especially to the media scholars and critics to derive inspiration and interest in the area of media and politics.

— **Bernd Trocholepczy**,
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universitaet,
Frankfurt am Main, Germany

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Reimagining MGR and Rajinikanth

S. Rajanayagam

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON NEW YORK NEW DELHI

First published 2015 in India
by Routledge
912 Tolstoy House, 15–17 Tolstoy Marg, Connaught Place, New Delhi 110 001

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset by
Glyph Graphics Private Limited
23 Khosla Complex
Vasundhara Enclave
Delhi 110 096

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-138-82203-0

to

my parents
Salethammal
Salethu Pillai

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Abbreviations

AIADMK/ADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam
Anna	C. N. Annadurai
BJP	Bharathiya Janata Party
CM	Chief Minister
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(M)/CPM	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DMDK	Daesiya Murpoakku Dravida Kazhakam
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam
EVR/Periyar	E V Ramasamy Naickar
INC/CONG.	Indian National Congress
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Thamizh Eezham
MDMK	Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam
MGR	M G Ramachandran
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
PM	Prime Minister
PMK	Paattaali Makkal Katchi
PS	People Studies
RK	Rajinikanth/Rajini
VCK	Viduthalai Chiruthaikal Katchi

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mother and father who till their death showed incomparable love and concern for me; my sister Kulanthai Therese who has made sure that I don't miss my mother; other sisters, brothers, nephews, nieces, and their partners, grand-children, and all in the families for their understanding and support; Chitraa for her gentle and caring accompaniment, Venky for his encouragement; Josephine Joseph for her guidance and concern; A. Victor, Selvanayagam, and Rajarathinam for their emotional support.

My thanks are due to the members of People Studies' survey teams, especially Adaikalaraj and family, Henry Jerome, Karthik and John Victor Xavier; my 'students' during the last quarter century from whom I have learnt profound insights into media and life; the fans of MGR, Rajinikanth and other stars whom I have interviewed.

I am grateful to scholars David Raj, V. S. Albert, Pragasan, Raju, Donald D'Silva, Uma Vangal, Deepa Viswam, Stephen Joe, P. Subramaniam, S. Innacimuthu, Stephen Martin for their feedback on the manuscript; Miranda Alophonso, Leo Paul, and Rex Angelo for corrections.

I am greatly indebted to academicians of international repute Richard Reuben, Bernd Trocholepczy, Selvaraj Velayutham, Srividya Ramasubramanian and Raguram Sivasubramaniam for their valuable endorsements.

My special thanks to the editorial team at Routledge, New Delhi, for their stimulating queries and admirable guidance.

Note on Transliteration

In the transliteration of 'Tamil' words I have opted for their spoken form and avoided the use of diacritical marks. Even the otherwise anglicised words like 'Tamil' are also not exempted; thus, for example, it is 'Thamizh', not 'Tamil', unless it occurs in a quoted text or refers to the official/statutory usage (as in 'the Government of Tamil Nadu'). The short/long, soft/hard sounds are differentiated by doubling the corresponding letter (as in anpu/**aa**ru, satam/sa**tt**am).

Introduction

Popular as Political

The 'popular' cinema[1] in India, labelled variously as 'commercial', '*masala*',[2] 'entertainment', 'conventional', 'dominant' or 'mainstream' cinema, has been severely criticised by the 'new wave', 'alternative', 'off-beat', 'parallel', or 'art' film-makers, some of whom are considered great auteurs, for its staple ingredients.[3] Not only these 'elite', 'highbrow' filmmakers but also film critics and media scholars have been treating popular cinema with condescension and contempt.[4]

While granting that the popular cinema in India as elsewhere lacks realism, creativity, and indepth analysis of social issues, and gives rise to the *phenomenon of star*,[5] it indeed has its own distinct identity and a 'power' of its own. What is peculiar to Indian popular cinema is the 'politicisability'[6] of the screen-constructed popular image of the star. While many studies are available on the subject of popular cinema, approaching it from varied inter-related perspectives including the semiotic,[7] the psychoanalytic[8] and the feminist[9] perspectives, studies from a political perspective are comparatively fewer and highly cine-deterministic by exaggerating the 'power' of cinema and assigning a passive role to the viewers, particularly the fans, who are, according to these studies, mesmerised by the screen-constructed star-images and are vulnerable to be exploited by the stars.

Cinemas and Politics: The Pan-Indian Scenario

The connection between popular cinema and direct politics caught the imagination of film critics and media scholars, and became an esoteric, 'notorious' subject of study, when the mass(ive) hero M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) of Thamizh Nadu demonstrated the power of

popular cinema by an inventive 'synonymisation' of cinema and politics through the agency of fan clubs. He floated his own political party the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (AIADMK/ADMK) in 1972 and eventually captured power in the State in 1977. The 'MGR phenomenon' soon had its Telugu incarnation in the neighbouring State of Andhra Pradesh in the person of N. T. Rama Rao (NTR). The political success of NTR is even more astounding than MGR's. His Telugu Desam Party (TDP) came to power in 1983 within nine months after its formation; what is surprising is that even before the party could get any formal recognition from the Election Commission, the TDP candidates contested as independents. The MGR phenomenon has become an established tradition, albeit with a reduced and scattered impact, thanks to the involvement of prominent stars in Thamizh Nadu such as 'nadikar thilakam' Sivaji, 'super star' Rajinikanth (Rajini/Rajni/RK), and now 'puratchi kalaignar' Vijayakanth whose party Daesiya Murpoakku Dravida Kazhakam (DMDK) presently enjoys 29 MLAs (securing 7.9 per cent votes in 2011 elections[10]); and in Andhra Pradesh 'mega star' Chiranjeevi's Praja Rajyam Party[11] has won 18 assembly seats (with 18 per cent vote share in 2009 elections).

While MGR and NTR succeeded, at least initially, in synonymising cinema and politics, the neighbouring south Indian states of Karnataka and Kerala witnessed an entirely different dynamics of politicising popular screen image. In Karnataka, Rajkumar emerged as a key political figure in the 1980s by spearheading a movement to make Kannada the medium of primary education in the state, which immediately dissipated into an uncontrollable anti-Thamizh riot. In Kerala, one of the most literate States of India, Prem Nazir, a Guinness record-holder for acting in the largest number of films (over 700!), enjoying a massive fan following, tried his hands in politics but was unsuccessful. However, both Rajkumar and Prem Nazir remained till their death as supremos in cinema *and* as potential threats to other political parties in their respective States.

Politicising popular screen image is not exclusive to the south Indian States. The political stage in the Hindi belt, for example, witnessed the 'pan-Indian' hero Amitabh Bachchan in the electoral fray in 1984 as an Indian National Congress (INC) candidate thanks to his friend Rajiv Gandhi. When the Bofors scandal stormed the nation, Bachchan quit

politics temporarily and when he came out of the limbo after a decade he had changed his allegiance to Samajwadi Party of which his wife Jaya Bachchan is a sitting Rajya Sabha MP. Not only the Bachchans, dozens of Hindi stars have been active in politics as MPs, nominated or elected. Some notable examples are: Sunil Dutt (INC MP elected for five terms from Mumbai North-West; also minister in the Union cabinet in 2004) and his wife Nargis (nominated to Rajya Sabha by Indira Gandhi), Shatrughan Sinha (BJP MP in both houses of parliament; also Union minister in BJP government during 2003–04), Raj Babbar (initially Samajwadi Party MP; then INC MP from Firozabad after defeating the daugher-in-law of his former party's chief Mulayam Singh Yadav!), Vinod Khanna (BJP MP from Gurdaspur), Vyjayanthimala Bali (initially INC MP; after finishing the term, joined the BJP because the INC refused her MP ticket), and Dharmendra (BJP MP from Bikaner in Rajasthan) and his wife Hema Malini (BJP Rajya Sabha MP).

In a striking contrast to the south Indian counterparts, the north Indian Hindi star-politicians have not been able to achieve anything substantial in Indian (Hindi) politics primarily because the Hindi films do not have the geo-cultural specificities which the south Indian films possess, uphold and nurture. While the governments in the centre (irrespective of the party ruling) have been persistent in promoting and 'imposing' Hindi as *the* national language, and to a great extent they have even succeeded in it, there are not many specific traits definable as 'Hindi culture' in India, except may be in the States of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh; and in all other states, remarkably even in the States where Hindi is very prevalent — it has been and is still a Bhojpuri, Maithili, Haryanvi, Gujarathi, Sindhi, Rajasthani, Marathi, Bengali, Odisha, or a tribal, and not Hindi, culture. As we go from the Hindi heartland towards the south, the individual cultural identities become more and more pronounced. Hindi is a meta-language superimposed on other originary cultures with unique and individualised ethnic, linguistic, national identities, and with clear geo-political markers.[12] As a consequence, the Hindi films and politics create a 'fictitious' and 'base-less' meta-culture subsuming and transcending specific cultures, and politically synonymising Hindi with 'India that is Bharat'. Such a notional unitary meta-culture (a political-legal construction) in an otherwise loosely knit federation of diverse national cultures (a cultural–psychological existentiality) has been immensely helpful to Hindi films

to have a market (wherever Hindi is spoken or understood) many times huger than that available to any south Indian language films.[13]

A comparative look into the annual output of feature films would further augment this point. Of the overall total output, according to the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC),[14] the Hindi films constitute hardly one-fifth, closely followed by Telugu and Thamizh; and, if we add Kannada and Malayalam, the four south Indian languages alone would constitute more than 50 per cent of the national total. Marathi[15] and Bengali come next in order with an average of around 100 films a year. The pattern is consistent as Table 1.0 demonstrates. The Hindi film industry, evidently, has not been representative of India neither in terms of film output nor in terms of cumulative film-business turnover, though it might have an edge over others because of, as noted earlier, some sort of pan-Indian market it enjoys. Any attempt towards 'Bollywoodisation' of Indian cinemas is therefore unjustifiable and deliberately political.[16]

Table 1.0
CBFC Data on Annual Output of Feature Films

	2009	*2010*	*2011*
Total	**1288**	**1274**	**1255**
Hindi	235	215	206
Telugu	218	181	192
Tamil	190	202	185
Kannada	177	143	138
Malayalam	94	105	95
Bengali	84	110	122
Marathi	99	116	107

Source: All tables provided by the author.

This politics apart, when it comes to stars entering politics, the very business advantage the Hindi films have become a severe handicap because the Hindi film stars do not culturally belong anywhere. To succeed in politics the 'leader' should be perceived to *represent* a people and they in turn should be able to *identify* themselves with and *own* the 'leader' as 'our man' (or 'didi' or 'ammaa' for that matter!), which is possible for the south Indian stars, thanks to the distinct Thamizh, Malayalam, Kannada or Telugu identity in films.[17] Because of this, the Hindi stars with political ambitions, though with a widespread fan following, have not been able to successfully float their own party; instead

they have been forced to join some existing 'national' party or other at the most as a value addition to that party. In effect, it is only the star's popularity — the *familiarity* of his/her face to the public — that is used by the party and *not* the screen-constructed image of the star. That explains why even an 'all-time favourite' hero[18] like Bachchan could not shine in politics: he could not outshine Rajiv Gandhi in charisma; nor was his fan-base extensive enough to outdo the INC cadre-base.[19] Moreover, once elected an MP, his 'subservient' position[20] in the party and governance did not correspond on the one hand to the stature of the all-powerful, invincible super-hero, and on the other hand to the image of the angry young action-hero who constantly confronted, challenged and often deposed the establishment. Such a hero certainly cannot, and should not, be a part of the establishment, that too accused of scams. Probably Bachchan himself felt the discomfort, and announced he was quitting politics.

There are a few interesting studies in star politiking, particularly comparing Hindi film icon Bachchan and the star-CMs MGR and NTR. But they have been very cine-centric, as for example, Vachani who notes, 'Bachchan's lack of credibility as state functionary was a failure of the Outsider archetype to make the transition from cinema to politics (that is, from 'outside' to 'inside' society)'.[21] But the 'failure', it may be underscored, is not in the 'transition'; it concerns what he promises in *real* politiking and the credibility and believability of such promises. If only Bachchan was in a position, let us say, to offer a new or alternative government under his leadership, then probably the 'outsider archetype' would not have been the root cause for his 'lack of credibility as state functionary'. If that were to have happened, he should have been in the place of Rajiv Gandhi in the INC or he should not have contested in one constituency as a candidate of 'somebody else's party', even if it is his friend's. Das Gupta is more cine-deterministic than Vachani when he concludes: 'The fundamental difference between the two star-Chief Ministers and other star-politicians of India lies in the fact that in the case of the former, the films themselves created the politics and the politicians; the latter are merely film stars who decided to move into politics or were persuaded to do so as vote catchers'.[22] He categorically asserts: 'The Indian actor-Chief Ministers became political leaders *because* they were the superstars of their cinema'.[23] Though not so emphatic, similar cine-centric bias is found in other studies[24] on popular culture and politics. It may be noted that media 'scholars' and 'critics' have been

too quick to construe a 'cause-and-effect link' between film and politics in Thamizh Nadu because of two reasons. First, they have been carried away by the superficial data on the prevalence of cinema in Thamizh Nadu. Though the number of theatres has been on the decline over the years (for example, from 1633 in 2006–07 to 1033 in 2014–15), Thamizh Nadu still enjoys a high number and, interestingly, the film output has not significantly changed. According to the Government of Thamizh Nadu data,[25] in 2014–15, the number of permanent cinema theatres is 996 (in 2006–07, 1293), semi-permanent 20 (in 2006–07, 109), touring 14 (in 2006–07, 221), and open-air 3 (in 2006–07, 10). While granting that the number of theatres is certainly an index of the popularity — even inevitability — of cinema as a mass entertainment in Thamizh Nadu, these data alone do not suffice to construe a 'symbiotic' relationship between cinema and politics. Second, it is significant that invariably all these studies, barring an exception or two, have been done *after* the action hero MGR had become the chief minister or at least after the 'Puratchi Nadikar' (Revolutionary Actor) had turned into the 'Puratchi Thalaivar' (Revolutionary Leader)[26] and had come to occupy the centre stage in Thamizh Nadu politics; as a result, these studies are so excessively obsessed with the *actor face* of MGR that they fail to recognise his other concomitant faces and to identify factors other than cinema operative in electoral politics.

The present study, while acknowledging the powerful role of cinema in influencing and moulding popular culture, makes a definitive departure from the aforementioned studies by problematising the very 'cause-and-effect', 'symbiotic' 'nexus' between film and politics, which other studies tend to assume, either explicitly or implicitly. Focusing on Thamizh Nadu, and subjecting the films of MGR and RK to a multi-disciplinary analysis, this study unveils the cultural and political ramifications of popular screen-constructed images, and the intricate cumulative effect of 'on-screen' and 'trans-screen' factors on the *seemingly pro-image* voting behaviour vis-à-vis the election results. In the process, this study on the one hand succeeds in deconstructing several scholarly myths and establishing that cinema has had and can have only a *limited* role at the most as a *surrogate propaganda* tool; on the other, it revisits the entire political history of post-Independent Thamizh Nadu through cinema (as) lens, and presents a refreshing psycho-political map of contemporary Thamizh Nadu.

***

Cinema and Politics: The Thamizh Scenario

When cinema started talking Thamizh during the mid-1930s, it was largely confined to a few urban centres, and it was speaking the lingo of puranic-nationalistic ideology. The INC in general indulged in an 'image-aversive' politics. As cinema started spreading its fantasy wings over hitherto unknown rural areas, thanks primarily to rural electrification project initiated by the passionate leaders of the burgeoning democracy, it was speaking yet another lingo – the *lingo of the Dravida Kazhakam* (DK) spearheaded by E. V. Ramasamy Naickar (EVR or Periyar), with his secular-rationalist ideology. The DMK, the political offshoot of the DK headed by C. N. Annadurai (Anna) with a committed band of youngsters including M. Karunanidhi, quickly grasped the political potential of the popular cinema. Propagating through an agitational strategy an opportunistic mix of the rationalism of EVR, linguistic chauvinism and the secessionist demand for a separate statehood, the DMK was soon promoting its own party film star in the person of MGR, and ushered in the saga of screen image-dependent politics. With his assiduously built Good Samaritan image and subaltern lingo MGR continued to march through the royal road laid for him by the DMK, and inaugurated the magnificent saga of apparently image-reigning politics with a nebulous populist ideology which he christened as 'Anna-ism'.

Almost coinciding with MGR's retirement from cinema RK 'invaded' the filmdom like a thunderbolt. With his initial deviant image and anger-filled sub-cultural lingo — the exact opposite of MGR on many counts — RK soon emerged as the 'super star'. Having played a prophetic role for a while through an image-intervening politics with an ambiguous spiritualistic ideology, he is now at the pinnacle of his acting career as a 'global hero'[27] who is paid — as the grapevine goes — the highest in India.

While so many stars have dabbled in image-politiking in Thamizh Nadu, I have been particularly attracted by MGR and RK because, though their screen-constructed images are poles apart (starting from their skin complexion to type of on-screen roles assumed), they have been able to wield immense political power through a devout fan following. This is the question that daunted me and eventually led to this study: How come they both clicked with the popular psyche? What are

the dimensions of the cultural mutations that have paved the way for this paradigm shift in the Thamizh psyche that seems to have undergone a metamorphosis from approving and accepting as saviour MGR's 'Mr Perfect' image to approving RK's 'Anti-Hero' image?

The journey into the dynamics of image-politiking triggers off a series of interlocked questions which need to be addressed. First of all, one of the most intriguing facts is that both MGR and RK are 'outsiders'. There are equally creative and talented artistes of Thamizh origin. Sivaji, for example, is more versatile an actor than MGR, and Kamal Haasan than RK. Ironically, only MGR and to a certain extent RK have been successful in politics, while a seasoned Thamizh artiste like Sivaji, in spite of being widely recognised, has met with political debacle. Why? Does the 'outsider' image help them transcend the insurmountably rampant caste barriers?

Second, the exit of MGR from filmdom, interestingly, coincides more or less with the entry of RK. If it is assumed that the latter starts from where MGR left, how is it that the MGR fan clubs continue to be active, even while RK fan clubs seem to have sweeping influence over Thamizh politics? Does this imply that RK has not replaced MGR, but fills a cultural vacuum created by some other factors?

Third, it is perplexing that, contrary to their 'all-powerful' political image, both MGR and RK have met with disappointing election results. MGR who won in 1977 assembly elections, for example, drew a blank in 1980 parliamentary elections, but returned to power with a thumping majority in the assembly elections in the same year. Similarly, RK who seemed to work miracles in 1996 parliamentary elections through a brief television interview had to cut a sorry figure in 2004 elections. Does this mean that, when it comes to voting, there are other more decisive factors than the size of the fan following?

Fourth, hero-worship is not specific to cine stars. When Karunanidhi was arrested first by MGR government and later by the Jayalalithaa government, so many party-men self-immolated in favour of Karunanidhi. When Vaiko (formerly, Vai Gopalasamy) was dismissed from the DMK, some of his followers self-immolated. When M. K. Azhagiri (son of Karunanidhi) was once dismissed from the DMK because of feud in the first families, there were followers ready to burn themselves! How do we understand this phenomenon? Is it a part of the Thamizh 'cultural script' itself? Does this have its roots in the masochistic religious

rituals? Is 'hero-worshipping' cine stars any different from performing the same to political 'stars'?

Fifth, there was a mushrooming of unauthorised RK fan clubs foreshadowing the 1996 elections. Clashes between rival RK fan clubs were not uncommon. Some of his fans even dared to defy the order of their 'deity' by contesting in elections. Similarly, foreshadowing the 2009 elections, RK fans displayed an attitude of defiance by announcing they would float a party in RK's name. While forming clubs, therefore, the fans may have their own agenda that is different from that of their star. What exactly is their ulterior motive? How far are these clubs genuinely committed to their star? What is their strategic location in the process of politicising the screen image? What are the salient psycho-social characteristics of the fan phenomenon, particularly the way the fans negotiate meaning against the backdrop of image politiking?

Unraveling these critical queries is like opening up a Pandora's box, and the study, therefore, is exploratory. Differing from other scholarly studies on contemporary 'historizing' which are either media-deterministic or media-negligent in the context of Thamizh Nadu, I have adopted a more authentic media-inclusive perspective. Being multi-disciplinary, the study draws theoretical insights from a wide range of disciplines: from subaltern history to counter-cultural movements, from semiotics to stylistics, from post-modernism to neo-Marxism, from deconstruction to popular religion, from gyno-criticism to socio-linguistics, from psychoanalysis to aesthetics. Consequently, the topic of image-politiking is approached from different — even diametrically opposed — angles, with different analytical tools. In actual application, these tools are innovatively 'composited' and employed simultaneously so that the interpretation of the data is coherent and the result, valid and reliable.

Since it is of paramount importance, in the process of deconstructing the screen image, to trace back syntagmatically to identify the constituent elements of such image, the selection of films becomes very crucial. From his first appearance on the screen in 1936 MGR has to his credit an amazing repertoire of 133 Thamizh films (136 including films in other languages). More impressive is the repertoire of RK. From 1975 till date RK has acted in around 165 films (including *Koachadaiyaan*) of which over 100 are in Thamizh (excluding 'guest' appearances). Though it would be ideal to access all the films for the study, I have

made, for obvious practical reasons, a chronological selection spanning the entire film career at the rate of at least one film a year, and when MGR or RK happens to be at crossroads (political or personal), I have considered more than one in order to understand the fuller ramifications of such a situation. Also, I have made it a point to view all their 'silver jubilee' films (i.e., films that ran continuously for 25 weeks at least in one theatre — 11 for MGR during the period covered, and 15 for RK), and in the case of RK, I have further made sure all the 15 films of his choice (screened as a part of *Rajini-25* celebrations) were viewed. Besides these films, some 'also-runs' (neither spectacular hits nor miserable flops) are also included so that our probe into the dynamics of *image sustenance* could be more complete. In so far as they are relevant to the study of MGR and RK, some select films of other actors including Sivaji and Kamal are also referred to in the study.

Besides the aforementioned films which serve as the primary sources for this study, the secondary sources include the official and unofficial *fanzines, e-zines and popular biographies* of MGR, RK and other artistes referred to in this study; *news items and gossips* related to these artistes published in the mainstream popular magazines and newspapers; journals, books and other publications devoted to film and media studies. Given the extensive and multi-directional nature of the study, as the supplementary sources I have resorted to case studies of select fan clubs and depth interviews with office-bearers of select fan clubs, hardcore fans and professionals from the Thamizh cinema industry who have been closely associated with the artistes under study. With these, I have made a generous use of the findings of the series of field studies I have undertaken for People Studies, a multi-disciplinary research institute.[28]

***

An Overview

The book is divided into three major parts. It starts with one of the oft-overlooked areas, viz., the narrative structure, and proceeds through the dominant themes to the politicising dynamics.

Structurally, an MGR or RK starrer, like any typical Indian masala film, is a spectacular *assemblage* of 'nava rasas' and a synthesis of dominant and subaltern cultures. Moreover, interval, an apparently commercial

or convenience device, radically transforms the narrative into a 'double climax' structure, having a very limited number of narrative scenarios, though. MGR and RK creatively combine all these ingredients into a unique 'masala mix', a *pre-set formula*, with a hero-centric arrangement of the *dramatis personae*. The image formation is an evolutionary process, involving snowball dynamics, making their films stereotypical, redundant and serial-episodic.

Stunts, double roles, comedy, song-and-dance, punch dialogues, mini-narratives, dramatic entry, and end clips are some of the narrative devices which MGR and RK employ to the extent that they suit their political agendas.

The second part revolves around 'body' as the critical *locus standi* and pivotal focal point. The ideological core of the politiking of MGR and RK rests on the most obvious, concretely visible feature of their respective physical (male) bodies — the fair or dark complexion. Their universe is *phallo-centric*, and there is a remarkable agreement between them in the portrayal of the female body. However, there are significant differences as well: When a woman dares to be unconforming to the patriarchal norms, MGR shifts the locus from gender to social, as a question of rich-versus-poor, whereas RK resorts to 'precipitation' technique and is bent on defeating the woman. Likewise, in the cultural mapping of body, MGR pays almost exclusive attention to the *valorous* man, whereas RK often goes beyond the valorous to emphasise the *virile* man. In the context of mother fixation, MGR and RK tend to exhibit, in conformity with their respective 'affable darling' and 'enfant terrible' images, 'castration anxiety' and 'exposure anxiety' respectively.

Construction of the 'social body' consists of the phenomenon of 'double bodied migrantcy', i.e., the simultaneous process of subalternising and elitising through 'spasmodic liminal spurts' in a universified multi-verse. Concerning wealth, MGR and RK as a rule become rich or retain their wealth, and they never challenge the overall socio-economic structure. If they remain poor, *they choose* to be so, for greater moral or political gains.

Certain epistemological privilege marks their attitude towards justice, which varies according to their role as 'victims' or 'custodians' or both. While MGR emerges as the embodiment and the custodian of the moral values of the middle class, RK by and large embodies the subaltern morality. The essentially political struggle between the powerless and the powerful is switched to the moral terrain and presented

as 'MGR/RK versus the villain' through the process of 'metaphorical symbolisation' and 'metonymical iconisation'.

The third part on the *politicising dynamics* starts with delineating the psycho-social nuances of theatrical viewing, which is a modernised re-creation of the *thiruvizhaa* drama, fun and free-play. Hero-worship, the distinguishing mark of fan-centred politiking has its historical antecedent in the cultural practice of *nadukal* worship.

In the fantasy–politics *interface* there operate at least eight politically loaded motifs (*octa-motifs*) — the *thaaikulam*, the *fan-bond*, the *subaltern*, the *Thamizhness*, the *orphan*, the *renouncer*, the *donor*, and the *god* — which contribute to constituting the politiking formula.

The degree of success of the image politiking of MGR and RK largely depends on how they image politics through *tactexting* (tactical texting). The metaleptical *blurring-and-blending* of the public, private and screen realms transforms the image politics into real politics of real MGR/RK. Every film, in turn, becomes a political statement. While MGR treats films and corresponding contemporary political events as co-texts, RK treats politics mainly as *a context* to his films, and turns his political limelight into a profitable business.

A crucial difference between MGR and RK which many studies have ignored concerns the 'twin centre' politiking. MGR maintains a *revolving* twin centre (in the centre of the DMK and of the *mandram*); in the case of RK's fans, it is a *satellite* twin centre (as fans, RK; as party members, somebody else). In terms of *cinelation* (cinema + simulation) MGR's 'politician-cum-actor' model of politiking exemplifies *isomorphic* cinelation, whereas RK's 'star-intervening-politics' model is an example of *isolated* cinelation.

An analysis of the 'trans-image' voting behaviour of the people manifests that the voters in the context of Thamizh Nadu have been consistently 'image discriminative' and the success of MGR lies precisely in his intuitive awareness that the voters, when it comes to exercising their franchise, are image discriminative, and consistently choose the better, given the limited political options available within the ambit of the first-past-the-post electoral system.

Of the five successive chief ministers who have had the so-called 'cine-background' (Anna, Karunanidhi, MGR, Janaki, and Jayalalithaa), for example, Anna the very founder-leader of DMK was personally defeated in 1962. Karunanidhi's DMK had been voted out of power

half a dozen times (1977, 1980, 1984, 1991, 2001, and 2011). MGR's ADMK had been routed in a parliamentary election (1980). Even in the assembly elections (1980 and 1984), it was, enigmatically, the victim, not the saviour, MGR who was voted to power. In the case of Janaki, her political presence was too brief to notice, and she vanished immediately after the rout in 1989. Jayalalithaa had been personally defeated and the ADMK under her leadership has suffered heavy electoral losses many times both for parliament and assembly. Regarding actors who floated their own parties, actors like Sivaji and T. Rajendar had been personally defeated; Vijayakanth could not take his party beyond a single assembly seat until he aligned with the ADMK. Similar is the story of Sarath Kumar. Concerning other actors, only when s/he was fielded as an official candidate of parties like the ADMK or the DMK, had s/he any chance of winning.

Notes

1. A terminological clarification regarding the terms 'film', 'cinema' and 'movie' is called for at the outset. While the word 'film' in general encompasses the social dimension, the word 'cinema' is confined to the aesthetic dimension. The word 'movie' refers to the economic aspects. The differentiation could be elucidated albeit naively thus: '"movies", like popcorn, are to be consumed; "cinema"(at least in American parlance) is high art, redolent of aesthetics; "film" is the most general term with the fewest connotations' (see Monaco 1981: 195). It is obvious that these three terms are inter-related and often there is a considerable overlapping. Sometimes, a fourth word 'talkie' is also used, but its use is mainly in the context of distinguishing it from the 'silent' films. In popular parlance, at least in Thamizh Nadu (Tamil Nadu/TN), the word 'picture' also is used as a synonym of 'film'. The term 'cinema theatre' or simply 'theatre' stands for the place where a film is exhibited. In the present study, 'film' is also employed to denote the individual work. When the context of discussion does not require this subtle differentiation, both 'film' and 'cinema' are interchangeably used.
2. '*Masala*' is a well-ground mix of various condiments like chilly, pepper, turmeric, coriander, cardamom, and other spices. It means, figuratively, the admixture of a variety of elements which 'spice up' the narrative. Its

Western equivalent is 'kitsch'. From the point of view of film business (distribution and exhibition) in TN, the audiences are differentiated taste-wise and geographical location-wise into (*a*) rural, lowbrow C-centres, (*b*) urban, highbrow A-centres and (*c*) the mid-way B-centres; and the *masala* films are associated with the C-centres. It must be quickly added, however, that the audience tastes and preferences have gone beyond these conventional differentiations, and have become very unpredictable, making the film-making business a high-risk gamble.

3. See, for example, Ray (1976: 90–91).
4. These distinctions, however, are becoming obsolete today even in academic circles. Though some filmmakers and critics continue to deride the 'popular' films with a certain royal distain, and often tinged with overt contempt, the 'popular' films have emerged as truly 'political' films. Moreover, invariably all the box-office hits are the 'popular' ones. No wonder, most of the former 'new wave' filmmakers have eventually settled for a low to medium budget 'middle' or 'realist' cinema — the commercial(ly viable) cinema masquerading as 'new wave'. Conversely, we could identify most, if not all, of the 'commercial' elements in the few 'middle cinema' films which were successful at the box-office.
5. While the star-phenomenon implies fan-following and box-office returns, it inevitably makes the stars become 'super auteurs' exerting an overwhelming influence over every aspect of filmmaking, including, not infrequently, 'directing' the directors. MGR and RK are such super auteurs; hence the films they act are referred to in this work as *their* films.
6. The century-old Indian cinema ('cinemas', to be meaningful to the cultural diversities) has produced some significant, explicitly political films both before and after Independence. However, in a state — democratic or otherwise — where films are censored and certified by the government through authorised bodies such as the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in India to ensure that the contents are culturally appropriate and politically correct, any film *merely allowed* to be screened has to be necessarily political. Being 'politically correct' implies being an ideological state apparatus, and therefore it cannot be apolitical. While in a broad sense this being so, we use the term 'politicisability' to mean the link with direct political involvement.
7. For example, Metz (1974) and Barthes (1981). For an approach to popular culture from a postmodern perspective, see Collins (1989).
8. Metz (1982) and Denzin (1995).
9. Mulvey (1989), Mayne (1990) and Josephine (1991).
10. Interestingly, the DMDK's performance was apparently better when it had gone on its own. The vote share in 2006 was 8.38 per cent, at par with the INC's, and it went up to 10.3 per cent in the 2009 parliamentary elections.

But it fell down to 7.88 per cent when it contested in 2011 elections in alliance with the ADMK. The low per cent may also be because of the limited number of seats (41) allotted to the DMDK, the number which the ADMK deemed appropriate to the DMDK's strength. More on the intricacies of vote sharing, later.

11. When the Telugu mega star Chiranjeevi launched his Praja Rajyam party in a mammoth gathering in Thiruppathi in August 2008, he proclaimed that his party would be an alternative to the INC and the TDP, and the media on their part projected him as another NTR. In the 2009 elections, while his nascent party emerged as the third strongest in the State, he himself met with a baffling response — of the two constituencies he contested, the 'mega star' could win only one (he won Thiruppathi but lost Palakollu). After running the party for about 30 months, he did a volte-face in February 2011 and merged it with the INC for good.
12. Besides Hindi, there is Urdu, a close associate of and a competitor to Hindi. Urdu is the predominant language of the Muslim community in India, even in the south.
13. The 'pan-Indian' market the Hindi films enjoy is something similar to Hollywood films being released all over the world, wherever English is spoken or understood.
14. The CBFC data are available online at its official website: http://cbfcindia.gov.in/html/uniquepage.aspx?unique_page_id=30 (accessed 12 September 2014). See the annual reports for 2010 and 2011.
15. Paradoxically, Mumbai, the capital of Hindi cinema (named Bollywood after Bombay) is also the home for the aggressive, 'ethno-centric' ('maraathi manoos') politics of the Senas of Thackeray cousins against people from the Hindi-belt settled in Maharashtra (particularly targeting the migrants from UP and Bihar); and Marathi films nationally ranking fifth or sixth in terms of total annual film output have to compete with the Hindi films in their own home State.
16. As a recent media example for how subtly Bollywoodisation is perpetrated we could cite the presentation of the top five responses to the question, 'In the history of Indian cinema, who is the greatest actor of all time?' according to an opinion poll commissioned by NDTV. As the segment began after the commercial break, the anchor (Prannoy Roy) quizzed the panelists, 'to try and tell me who... what turned out to be the top five greatest actors of all time — we asked this across the country — we didn't prompt anybody…' To this, the spontaneous answer of a panelist was, 'Rajinikanth, MGR...' The anchor interrupted at this point and prompted, 'All India', as if to say that Rajinikanth and MGR were not to be in the 'all India' list. Interestingly, even after this 'correction' by the anchor one more panelist still included Rajinikanth in the list. However, according

to the survey, all the five actors were from the Hindi cinema, to which all the panelists expressed surprise, 'So all from Hindi cinema…?!' Making his comment on the list, the anchor concluded, 'If you take the southern States it woudn't be these, of course — but if you take the whole country, the dominance of Bollywood…' What is significant is the contrast made here: *the southern States versus the whole country*. If the response in 'the southern States' would be different, what is presented as the finding in fact represents the opinions of 'the northern States' only. Therefore, presenting this as the preference of 'the whole country' indeed amounts to uncritically (or deliberately) endorsing Bollywoodisation. (The opinion poll telecast on 27 August 2012 was part of the mid-term poll commissioned by NDTV with a sample size, the channel claimed, of almost 30,000 respondents, covering 125 out of the 543 Lok Sabha seats in the 18 big states. The findings were telecast on NDTV 24×7 from 27 to 31 August 2012 in a special show anchored by Prannoy Roy. Visit also: http//:www.ndtv.com/ [accessed 2 November 2014]).

In the academic circles there have been serious attempts in the recent years to correct the distorted historiography of the cinemas of India. See Velayutham (2008).

17. As this identification/representation process goes down to the grassroots, there come into play other more sensitive factors than race and ethnicity at the level of concrete electoral praxis; the foremost among such divisive-unifying factors is one's caste identity.
18. According to the opinion poll by NDTV mentioned above, the 'top 5 great actors of all time' are: Amitabh Bachchan, Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, and Dilip Kumar (in the descending order of popularity).
19. Bachchan was elected in 1984 in the tremendous sympathy wave and it is very difficult to assess the extent of impact of Bachchan's popularity on the elections; the situation then was calamitously tragic after the murder of Indira Gandhi leading to an outrageous butchering of the Sikhs in thousands.
20. The political clout and the consequent extra dose of media attention Bachchan had were because of his close association with Rajiv Gandhi.
21. Vachani (1999: 221).
22. Das Gupta (1991: 234) betrays an attitude of carelessness and a tendency to blow up the figures. For example, he says on page 201 that MGR had acted in 292 films; it is 'more than 250' on page 200; the sentence structure on page 199 implies 262 — whereas MGR had acted only in 136 films, including his non-Thamizh films. The same mistake one finds also in Thoraval (2000: 322), who probably borrowed the figures from Das Gupta.

23. Das Gupta (1991: 199, emphasis added).
24. See, for example: Hardgrave and Neidhart (1975), Ramasamy (1979), Sivathamby (1981), Samuel (1983), David (1983), Pandian (1992), Dicky (1993a and b), Baskaran (1996), Azhagesan (1999), Rajadurai and Geetha (2000), and Velayutham (2008).
25. For details, see the *Policy Notes 2006–07* and *2014–15* of Information and Publicity, Government of Tamil Nadu, available at the official website: http://www.tn.gov.in/ (accessed 12 September 2014).
26. The title 'Puratchi Nadikar' was given to MGR by his erstwhile friend-turned-arch-enemy Karunanidhi when *Naadoadi Mannan* became a super-hit. The title 'Puratchi Thalaivar' was conferred on him by his lieutenant and the ADMK's first organising secretary K. A. Krishnaswamy on 17 October 1972 when MGR launched his new party. The changeover from 'nadikar' to 'thalaivar' marks the finality of MGR's political transfiguration, while retaining 'puratchi' symbolises the continuity of the Dravidian rhetorics. The legacy of MGR's 'puratchi' survives to this day in 'Puratchi Thalaivi', one of the prefixes to Jayalalithaa. In fact, the word is appropriated by any actor with political inclinations, such as 'puratchi kalaignar' Vijayakanth and 'puratchi thalapathi' Vishal, a young actor.
27. It is really surprising that *Outlook*, in its 4 June 2012 issue, with the special coverage, 'Cinema Century — 100 years of the world's most mesmerising moviedom', featured in its cover of all the people Rajinikanth, seated in a rotating chair, with the caption: 'Global hero Rajnikanth'. It is unusual for an English magazine to have a non-Bollywood star, particularly in a 'cinema century' special. Probably, this is another indication that a growing number of people tend to perceive the Indian cinema as no more a monopoly of the Hindi cinema. It may also be mentioned that RK's 'global popularity' thanks to unprecedented publicity to his *Enthiran* so overwhelmed the Bollywood super star Shah Rukh Khan that he was keen on roping in RK for his blockbuster *Ra.One*. He also later dedicated a song publicised as '*lungi* dance' in his *Chennai Express* to 'thalaivaa' RK, exhorting his fans 'not to miss' the film.
28. The references to the field studies in this book (denoted by the term *PS Study*) concern the series of macro-level studies planned and executed by me under the banner of People Studies, Chennai, supported initially by Culture and Communication, Chennai. A unique feature of these studies is the innovative social-psychological approach blending qualitative with quantitative aspects. The findings, released to the press after each study, are now available in a single volume. See Rajanayagam (2013).

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Part I: Politics of Narrative