



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.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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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

சமர்ப்பணம்

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!!!

Translation

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.