

bollywood

From silver screen to political podium

In southern India, cinema is a powerful weapon of Dravidian politics, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Cinema and politics in India are as tightly conjoined as Siamese twins. More so in the south of the country. It does not, therefore, come as much of a surprise that Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi, now 86 and in the thick of a family squabble over succession, should find time to pen film scripts and stories. After writing the screenplay for *Ponner Sankar* and *Penn Singam* (both on the floors), he is writing the plot and the script of *Ilaigan*.

Karunanidhi is merely completing a story that began decades ago, when the Dravidian movement spearheaded by him and others like C N Annadurai and M G Ramachandran fought the cause of Tamils and their language.

The Dravidian manifesto included another significant agenda: that to better the lives of low-caste Hindus, dominated for centuries by the Brahmins. And cinema with its wide appeal and reach became a powerful weapon of Dravidian politics, whose founders saw more than mere entertainment in the medium.

It needed a genius like Annadurai to realise this. He had two remarkable men to help him. Karunanidhi was a brilliant writer and orator, whose movie scripts enslaved men and women.

The 1952 *Parasakthi*, where Karunanidhi's words were delivered dramatically by Sivaji Ganesan, is a case in point. But it was not exactly Sivaji that Annadurai (who himself wrote works like *Velakkari* in 1949) depended on to spread his radical political beliefs. Ramachandran or MGR, as he was popularly called, was the man he chose. An extremely charismatic actor, MGR became the face of Dravidian ideology. The trio was cinematic in every sense of the term: while MGR enthralled thousands on the screen, the other two used the pen and podium to further their doctrine.

Across Tamil Nadu's border in Andhra Pradesh, N T Rama Rao's charisma matched MGR's. In the three decades that Rama Rao ruled the Telugu film industry, he enjoyed unwavering public adulation that came largely because of the parts he played. Often he was the mythological hero vanquishing evil.

At other times, he was the undisputed Samaritan fighting for the poor and against social injustice. Ultimately, cinema helped him to form his Telugu Desam Party, and transported him from the green room to State Assembly in the 1980s.

Telugu megastar Chiranjeevi has also been dabbling in politics, establishing his Praja Rajyam Party in 2008. He won confidence and votes by lacing his screen roles and dialogues with catchy social messages.

Undoubtedly cinema has been an awesome tool that even men like Raj Kapoor, arguably one of India's greatest showmen, used. He



peppered his early movies with Nehruvian ideals.

Others like Mehboob Khan and Bimal Roy made films that bordered on the political. Bollywood stars, such as Vinod Khanna, Rajesh Khanna, Govinda, Shatrughan Sinha, Amitabh Bachchan and Shabana Azmi among many others, have also been in and out of the political arena. However, these actors and directors never became a major political force, possibly because they never had a definitive public agenda.

The Dravidian movie men had, and they knew how to manipulate the masses through the screen. This trend is still alive in Tamil Nadu.

Actor Vijay, for instance, is titled "Ilayathalapathy" (Young Group Leader), and with his 50th film, *Sura*, set to push him to the skies, he is beginning to show signs of political ambition. He told the media the other day that, "I am preparing myself to enter politics...My people's movement is getting ready for the challenges ahead."

Like many of his predecessors, Vijay is known to use punch lines from his movies for sheer public effect. "Once I take a decision, I will not retract my steps even if I want to. This is not a (cinema) dialogue, this is the truth", he averred borrowing lines from one of his films, *Pokkiri*.

With elections to the Tamil Nadu Assembly due next year, S P Rajkumar's *Sura* could not have come in handier.

Like MGR who made a movie messiah of himself for the masses, Vijay will portray a humble, down-to-sea fisherman, in *Sura*. But beneath that simple veneer is a *Sura* or shark. As Vijay quips in the film, "I am not a dove that prefers harmony. I am a shark".

Sounds portentous than peaceful.



* M G Ramachandran (above) and N T Rama Rao (below) were among the southern Indian matinee idols who later became successful political leaders. Young Tamil actor Vijay (top) seems to be aiming for a similar career path with his latest release *Sura*.



(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and international cinema for over three decades.)

The Kerala conundrum

Malayalam director T V Chandran, well known for his cinema of "politics and feminism" is anxiously waiting to shoot his next film whose title in English will read *Octopus*. The man, who won a National Award for Direction in 1994 for *Ponthan Mada* (starring Mammootty), sounded beaten by the ongoing strike in the Kerala movie industry. Much like European cinema that has been fighting through a quota system to keep Hollywood at bay, Malayalam producers are urging something as restrictive to reign in the moneyed, daring and political-power driven Tamil cinema. Although both the Tamil and the Kerala industry each churn out approximately the same number of films every year — 120 — the average Keralite viewer seems smitten by the likes of Tamil actors Rajnikanth, Vijay and Sathyaraj and their onscreen daredevilry.

To check this, the Malayalam producers have now called cut to the cameras, demanding that a Tamil or a Telugu or a Kannada movie open in Kerala two weeks after its release on home turf. The Kerala distributors and exhibitors are understandably peeved at the massive loss of profits a step like this can cause. But with pirated disks selling at every corner shop, who is going to walk into a theatre that screens a two-week old movie?



A Kapur come to judge

Shekhar Kapur (above) as part of the top international jury at the Cannes Film Festival this May is one of the several Indians to have been so honoured since 2000. But Kapur's selection may well be Cannes' tacit acknowledgement of a certain depth in Indian cinema. Till now, Indian jurors like Mira Nair, Arundhati Roy, Aishwarya Rai, Nandita Das and Sharmila Tagore have carried with and in them an undeniably strong quotient of glamour. After all, Rai has been a beauty queen and Tagore, despite her current chairmanship of the Censor Board of Film Certification and roles in serious movies, still carries that image of a bikini-clad babe water-skiing in *An Evening in Paris*.

Kapur — who has helmed two films on Elizabeth and is now to set make a biopic on famed English explorer George Herbert Leigh Mallory — is shorn of any such allure. Though Cannes' choice of Kapur must be lauded, the festival still needs to look at some of the giants of Indian cinema, such as Girish Kasaravalli, Shyam Benegal, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Mani Ratnam, to play the Riviera's judges.