



CINEMATIC ROUTE: M K Karunanidhi, M G Ramachandran, Moon Moon Sen

India's polls paved with film stars

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Cinema in India is extraordinarily popular. Also because it is extraordinarily inexpensive, at least in most of India. In cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Kolkata, it could be relatively costly, but in many other places, including Chennai, tickets are priced most nominally.

In Chennai, a government ruling has fixed the upper ceiling at Rs 120 a ticket, and, apart from this, every theatre, however plush it may be, has to reserve its first/front row for tickets at Rs 10 each.

So, films are certainly the cheapest form of entertainment, with most Indian movies transporting viewers to hours of sheer fantasy. Beautiful women, handsome men, gorgeous costumes, emotionally gripping storylines with villains and comedians thrown in, magical locales and, of course, long lectures on morality are so alluring that audiences lose themselves among the screen characters and situations. Logic and rationale be damned. Who cares about these?

It follows, then, that film stars are venerated and worshipped in India. Nowhere else, really no. This star appeal is particularly apparent in Tamil Nadu. If a temple was built for actress Kushboo, giant wooden cutouts of Tamil superstars are anointed with milk and honey and garlanded with fresh flowers on the day their pictures open in cinemas.

Sometimes, fan clubs organise processions, replete with bands playing the favourite numbers from the stars' movies.

It was this craze for cinema actors that got men like C N Annadurai, M K Karunanidhi and M G Ramachandran (all former chief ministers of Tamil Nadu) to use the medium

as a platform for their political parties – Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).

While Annadurai and Karunanidhi wrote film stories and scripts, cleverly weaving into them their political ideology and message, handsome Ramachandran (popularly called MGR) acted them out.

The present Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa – who herself was once a popular star having paired with MGR in many, many movies – realising the enormous potential of star power, has roped in a motley group of film and television actors to campaign for the upcoming general elections in April and May. These men and women will tour the State canvassing for Jayalalithaa's AIADMK.

Among the 20 men and women that the chief minister handpicked for this assignment, most of them come from cinema. Besides actor-turned-politicians R Ramarajan (former MP), and C R Saraswathi (Chairperson, Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Board), the list includes comedians Senthil, Gundu Kalyanam and Ponnambalam, movie director Nanjil P C Anbalagan, lyricist Muthulingam, actors Vindhya, Kuyili, and Anandraj among others.

Also figuring in the list of star campaigners is actress Nirmala, who recently joined the AIADMK.

Incidentally, both Nirmala and Jayalalithaa debuted in *Vennira Aadai* in 1965, their first foray into Tamil cinema. It was a popular hit, and Nirmala has since then been known as "Vennira Aadai" Nirmala. Like Sowcar Janaki, whose film, *Sowcar*, gave her the tag.

It is not Tamil Nadu alone that has decided to go the starry way. West Bengal has also caught on to this cinematic route, though going a step further than Tamil Nadu by

asking actors to actually contest the polls. Moon Moon Sen, daughter of the legendary actress, Suchitra Sen (who died recently), will stand for Bankura on a Trinamool Congress ticket – which is the present Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee's, party.

The reigning heartthrob of Bengal, actor Dev, will also fight the elections from his home town of Ghatal. Sen will organise folk theatre in her constituency to spread the Trinamool message. Her daughters, Riya and Raima (both actresses working in Hindi and Bengali cinema), will pep up the glam quotient by electioneering for the party. Among the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) candidates, internationally renowned magician P C Sorcar and actor George Baker will represent the Barasat and Howrah constituencies respectively. Maybe, the BJP is hoping that Sorcar – renowned for making objects and men disappear with the wave of his arm – will help opposition votes vanish!

In Odisha too, it is going to be show time during the coming elections. From superstars to television celebrities and from comedians to playback singers, members of Odia cinema have moved into different party folds. The three main political parties – Biju Janata Dal, Congress and BJP – all seem to be in a fierce competition to recruit actors. And not just for canvassing, but contesting too.

The 2014 elections will be star spangled all right. But the question that every voting Indian citizen must ask: can showmen perform off the screen? Can helmers, actors, singers and magicians firmly hold the reins of the nation and steer it in fair and foul weather?

Honesty, I have been my grave doubts. A Moon Moon Sen or a Gul Panag (who has joined the Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party) or a Kiron Kher (now with the BJP) or for that matter, any other cinema/television celebrity may have exceptional performing abilities. Sen, whom I had known closely from my Kolkata days, is well read, well-meaning and intelligent. But how good is she in the art of statecraft, which is truly Machiavellian in India with its pulls and pressures of caste, religion, language and rich-poor divide.

Not a joke to rule India. It is no movie set, really.

Aayirathil Oruvan

Now that India's election dates to Parliament have been announced – from early April to mid-May – a strict code of conduct is in place. Politicians and their parties have to abide by this code, formulated by the Election Commission.

But what happens if someone is both a film star and a politician? Or, what if someone

had been a popular actress once upon time, and who is now a leading politician? It may help in the political fortunes of a candidate.

Officials of the Commission have made sure that public walls and spaces are stripped of the posters of politicians. But then there can be a way out of this, as one has seen in Coimbatore, the second largest city in Tamil Nadu after Chennai, and perhaps richer by far.

In Coimbatore or Kovai as it is called for convenience, the posters and banners of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa – whose AIADMK is now in power in the state – have all gone.

But they have been replaced by the posters from the hugely popular 1965 Tamil movie, *Aayirathil Oruvan* (One in a Thousand), starring Jayalalithaa and M G Ramachandran (a former Tamil Nadu chief minister).

Why have the movie posters appeared now? In what seems like a perfect timing, *Aayirathil Oruvan* has been digitally restored and re-mastered, and the brand new prints are now being screened in theatres across Tamil Nadu. The film may well run for weeks.

When it first opened in the mid-1960s, it proved to be a great hit, and had some of the leading actors of the day, like Nambiar (who was as great a screen villain as Pran in Hindi cinema was), comedian Nagesh (as witty as Mehmood), R S Manohar and Madhavi, besides the lead – Jayalalithaa and MGR.

Directed by the legendary B R Panthulu (who made classics like *Kappalotiya Tamizhan* and *Karnan*), *Aayirathil Oruvan* ran for 100 days in Chennai and other Tamil Nadu centres, and helped the helmer clear the debts he had accumulated earlier. What is more, the movie firmed up the lead pair, and they went on to act together in 28 other films – a relationship that eventually led to a political understanding. Jayalalithaa became MGR's successor in the AIADMK.

The plot of *Aayirathil Oruvan* is an exciting mix of piracy, adventure on high seas and romance with some lilted numbers thrown in.

With the songs from the *Aayirathil Oruvan* playing and the posters from the movie showing a young Jayalalithaa and MGR splashed across, the implication cannot be missed.

Even if these film posters are removed, one presumes that the movie itself cannot be taken off the theatres. And *Aayirathil Oruvan* with its powerful message may well move the electoral masses.

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