

## KARUNANIDHI'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE FILM INDUSTRY

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### Abstract

Muthuvel Karunanidhi, the five-time Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and the icon of the Dravidian movement was one of the most respected scriptwriters in the Tamil film industry. This was mainly due to the real-life situations in his scripts, with most directly resonating with the ordeals faced by ordinary workers and labourers who were always close to his heart. He had said that his characters were generally people from humble backgrounds and lived a tough life. The stories written by Kallaignar naturally impacted ordinary men and women, and they loved Karunanidhi as a messiah to remove their worries and difficulties. Cinema is a cutting-edge drama technology. As a result, they are regarded as a mother and a kid, respectively. Tamil drama has a lengthy history, and its efforts have yielded a significant win, resulting in the current growth of the film.

**Keywords:** DMK, scriptwriters, cinema, Kallaignar, Tamil film industry

### The Beginning of Cinema in Madras

Madras was the first of the colonial port cities to be established. Compared to Bombay or Calcutta, it did not enjoy industrialization, expansion, or wealth in the nineteenth century. Madras likewise experienced the benefits of the Presidency in the South. Madras developed to the west and South, absorbing the neighbouring towns, as Indians from the South flocked to the city throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Professional play began as an early type of Indian commercial entertainment in Madras during the nineteenth century.

The parse style was first performed in Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Andrapradesh in 1870 CE. There were musical, theatrical presentations of well-known Persian and Hindu legends.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, members of the Indian professional classes had formed their amateur dramatic associations as an alternative to commercial drama. Professional and amateur drama both contributed significantly to the development of Tamil cinema.

The early movie theatres in provincial cities were not constructed to show films. They were built to stage commercial dramas and to rent as public town halls.<sup>2</sup> Villagers in Coimbatore paid a high cartage and train expenses to see the movie. In the Nilgri Mountains, there were three seasonal cinema rooms in 1920. Because the Indian music that accompanied the films was terrible, Europeans and Anglo-Indians did not attend Indian cinemas. The Madras government amended the 1888 public resort statute to allow cinema presentations. It specified that no cinematograph show might be conducted without the commissioner of police's consent.

Silent films were created in India in the 1920s, inspired by Hollywood. In India, action movies were made on the model of American serial films. Many Indian silent cinemas adapted the plots, settings, and representation methods from American serial films.<sup>3</sup> For weeks, Indian films were shown in theatres. It was continuously screened in additional theatres with more film prints. There were a few silent films in South Indian languages, all in Tamil and Telugu. Malayalam and Kannada speakers need help understanding them.

## DMK and Cinema

Some attempts taken by confident Congress leaders to employ Tamil film stars, however slight, were limited due to the rural population's lack of access to this media (who were in the majority). The Congress's politicization of cinema ended almost immediately after India's independence in 1947.<sup>4</sup> Dravidian leaders were able to use movies as a critical political organ after the delivery of electricity to rural areas in the 1950s.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was the first – and at the time, only – party in post-colonial India to use visual movie media. Guerrilla theatre actors and playwrights, inspired by Periyar's ideals, pushed Tamil nationalism and anti-Brahminism to the silver screen.<sup>5</sup> The films not only made blatant references to the independent Dravida Nadu that its leaders preached for but also used party emblems on several occasions. Murasoli Maran, a former DMK central minister, said that the DMK movies portrayed the past (showing Tamils' rich language and culture) and the future (with social justice).<sup>6</sup> In its early films, the DMK films used long conversations to promote Dravidian ideals. However, as the party's political ambitions developed, movies with Dravidian social reformation themes were replaced with plots that would boost celebrity popularity.<sup>7</sup>

### Scriptwriter of Karunanidhi

Kalaignar Karunanidhi isn't only a government politician; his dedication to Tamil cinema is extraordinary. The DMK patriarch started his film career as a scriptwriter for Jupiter Films.<sup>8</sup> Muthuvel Karunanidhi, the young man who wrote the film's script, sought to fulfil his father Muthuvelar's yearning to "watch" it.<sup>9</sup> His poor health had hampered Muthuvelar's vision. Thus, he had to make do with "hearing" the movie, that is, the dialogue. This act of "hearing" the words symbolizes Dravidian cinema, which echoed in the Tamil cinematic space and public arena over the following few decades, eventually becoming the essence of Tamil cinema and the Tamil people.<sup>10</sup> The supporters of resurgent Dravidian nationalism had gone to the screen space after capturing the masses' interest with rhetorical discourses from makeshift platforms on street corners. The timing of the relocation was perfect.<sup>11</sup>

In his piece "from songs to Speech," film scholar Rajan Kurai Krishnan demonstrates how C.N. Annadurai (Anna), M. Karunanidhi, and other Dravidian scriptwriters successfully managed the shift from song to speech. He accomplished this by elucidating the French philosopher Giles Deleuze's complex movement image and time image notions.<sup>12</sup> "While the DMK employed its strong new language in literature, public speaking, and play, the use of the rhetoric in cinema had an elevated value for politics because of the nature of the film sign," argues Rajan Kurai Krishnan.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of theatre and film as possible weapons for spreading political ideas and programmes has been introduced previously. Congress nationalists have addressed it since the days of stage song play and cinema's "starting to speak." However, their techniques and creative abilities could have been more impressive and pleasant. The closest they could come up with was a guy wearing a Gandhi cap wandering around Devendran's heavenly court and breaking out into a "Kanada raga" song extolling Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>14</sup>

Most films were either amateur attempts by artists or commercial gimmicks by producers at the time.<sup>15</sup> *Thyagabhoomi* (1939), widely regarded as the literary genius 'Kalki' Krishnamoorthy's nationalist magnum work, was no exception. Although it was a more significant attempt than the rest of the films at the time to narrate Gandhian programmes, the ultimate result was only Papanasam Sivan, a classical composer who also acted as the lead actor.<sup>16</sup> Nearly a decade later, the Dravidian counterpart proved the possibilities of artistic involvement that permanently transformed the face of Tamil film.

It's difficult to say when Karunanidhi's artist, known as "Kalaignar" (meaning "artist"), reached the peak. His childhood was filled with song and dance, being the only son of a nadaswaram singer and guru. He was also allowed to learn nadaswaram but showed little or no interest in the musical instrument. Instead, he dabbled in theatre, or drama, as it was termed at the time. When he was just 12 years old, Karunanidhi wrote the dramas that were performed in cow sheds.<sup>17</sup> Even more astonishing is that *Dravida Nadu*, a newspaper maintained by Annadurai, the Dravida Kazhagam's (D.K.) General Secretary then published an essay by Karunanidhi when he was just 14 years old. When Karunanidhi was 20 years old, he sold his first play, Palaniappan, to the Nagapattinam Dravida Nadigar Sangam for Rs.100. He did it to cover the costs of a D.K. conference he had organized in Tiruvarur.<sup>18</sup>

## Screenplay

The approaches to achieve the desired impact in the screenplay will be clear after a critical review of three film scripts. Two of them were successful theatrical plays that were adapted for the film and went on to become Tamil movie icons. *Parasakthi* and *Manohara* were their names. Pavalar Balasundaram wrote the drama *Parasakthi*. It reflected the story of a family caught up in the Burmese struggle, which left a severe scar on the Tamil psyche. When A.V.M. Chettiar and P.A. Perumal decided to make a film, the tale was near his heart since the people suffered greatly during the Burmese struggle.<sup>19</sup>

Karunanidhi was tasked with writing the film's script. His screenplay went down in Tamil movie history as a watershed moment. The film's depiction of a family's anguish and pain was skillfully communicated to all Tamils. The story used always stayed within its core format. The deft change had a mystical quality to it. "Pandian situates the movie in the history of the Dravidian movement and evaluates the ideological movements it contained or symbolized" in his study.<sup>20</sup>

Pammal Sambantha Mudaliar, the doyen of Tamil theatre, wrote *Manohara*. The plot centres around the life of a king who abdicates his throne to a young woman he adores. The paramour queen's selfish motives greatly anguish the people and the family. Karunanidhi's script went beyond the plot's specificity to delve into politics. Vasanthasenai (the paramour queen) became a political symbol for evil women of all time. Prince Manoharan's furious address to the court became legendary. He frequently begs the queen's mother's permission to act (*ideal lanai thaa ye*, meaning "order me mother") but is pacified by her. When Vasanthasenai's brutality approaches breaking point, his mother arrives at the court and finds her son chained to a pillar and orders him to rise and act (*poruththathu pothum pongi ezhu*). The crowd was enthralled by the discourse of a seething Manoharan (Sivaji Ganesan).<sup>21</sup> From Annadurai's *Velaikkari*, the youthful scriptwriter's rhetorical, alliterative, and passionate dialogues had specific importance. As Rajan Kurai Krishnan points out in his article, the language was embellished and poised to the point that such remarks transcended the cinema realm and addressed the broader public with clarity and subtle skill.

*Raja Rani* stands out as a superb example of screenwriting. The screenplay for this film was written by Karunanidhi, who blended his expertise in dealing with social issues and historical events—the plot centres around faked or incorrect identities.<sup>22</sup> Although it is unknown if Karunanidhi was aware of William Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, the film strongly resembles that famous English play. Raja, a wealthy young man (played by Sivaji Ganesan) who is interested in theatre, falls in love with Rani, a poor girl (played by Padmini) who is playing as a rich girl and has abandoned her home. Babu (S.S. Rajendran), who is well aware of the situation, plays the spoiler.<sup>23</sup>

Because all the characters are interested in theatre, theatrical enactment becomes an essential film component, allowing for historical writing. The movie's legendary *Cheran Senkuttuvan* play, which lasted more than five minutes and was performed in a single shot, was well-received. Sivaji Ganesan created history with his five-minute nonstop speech delivery, which included sophisticated punctuation and stylization. The film's Socrates dramatic recreation turned out to be another excellent speech.<sup>24</sup> Socrates is shown here as Greece's Periyar. The film's and play's conclusion was a masterstroke, demonstrating Karunanidhi's masterful handling of the narrative. Socrates continues his discourse in complete seriousness when "hemlock" is handed over to him.<sup>25</sup> Then there's the unexpected twist. N.S. Krishnan, the famed Tamil comedian (who, in the film, happens to be the brother-in-law of the evil character, Babu), is overcome with emotion as he presides over the performance. He enters the stage, interrupts the action, plucks the cup loaded with poison from Socrates' hands (the villain fills the cup with actual poison instead of honey), and asks the villain to drink it, which resolves the knot. A film focused on a comedy of mistakes and misidentifications involving a theatre troupe was groundbreaking at the time.

As a result, people began to speculate about a government transition in 1967 when the ruling congress government was defeated, and movie stars took over the government. Thus, in the 1967 election, cinema stars significantly impacted Tamilnadu politics. Following the death of C.N. Annadurai in 1969, M. Karunanidhi, Annadurai's student and another legendary cinema figure, became Tamilnadu's chief minister. His political oratory, literature, and diplomacy had a unique position in Tamilnadu and throughout India. He built public support via movies and served as Chief Minister of Tamilnadu five times.

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> C.B. Devaraj, *Indian Talkie Era: Silver Jubilee*, Madras, 1957, p.11.
- <sup>2</sup> Ramnath, D.V., *Thirai Valartha Tamil, (Tamil)*, Chennai, 1987, p.28.
- <sup>3</sup> *Report of the Corporation Election in Madras*, Madras, 1959, p.45.
- <sup>4</sup> Narayanan, V.C., *Kalaivanar*, Chennai, 1979, p.27.
- <sup>5</sup> Paradhaman, *Kalaivanar Vazhvillee, (Tamil)*, Madras, 1985, p.17.
- <sup>6</sup> Elavazhagan, P., *Arivuppunal Anna, (Tamil)*, Bangalore, 1980, p.49.
- <sup>7</sup> Swaminathan, S., *Karunanidhi Man of Destiny*, New Delhi, 1974, p.77.
- <sup>8</sup> Kalaighnar Karunanidhi, *'Nenjukku Neethi', (Tamil)*, Madras, 1975, p.14.
- <sup>9</sup> Lena Tamilvanan, *Kalaighnar Karunanidhi, (Tamil)*, Madras, 1982, p.9.
- <sup>10</sup> Lenin, P., *Vazhum Sakaptham Kalaighnar, (Tamil)*, Trichy, 2001, p.206.
- <sup>11</sup> Karunanidhi, *'Nenjukku Neethi (second edition), (Tamil)*, Chennai, 1986, p.64.
- <sup>12</sup> *Murasoli*, Tamil Daily, Madras, dated 25.08.1956.
- <sup>13</sup> *Dinathanthi*, Tamil Daily Chennai, dated 17.03.2005.
- <sup>14</sup> Parthasarathy, T.M., *DMK Varalaru, (Tamil)*, Chennai, 1961, p.22.
- <sup>15</sup> Karunanidhi, *'Nenjukku Neethi (second edition), op.cit., p.252.*
- <sup>16</sup> Puratchi Dhasan, *Cinemavum Arasiyalum, (Tamil)*, Chennai, 1996, p.89.
- <sup>17</sup> Pattalagan, M., *Pugalin Uchiel Kalaighnar (Tamil)*, Chennai, 1998, p.33.
- <sup>18</sup> *Dinathanthi*, Tamil Daily, Chennai, dated 21.01.2005.
- <sup>19</sup> *Dinathanthi*, Tamil Daily, Chennai, dated 09.03.2005.
- <sup>20</sup> *Dinathanthi*, Tamil Daily, Chennai, dated 28.03.2005.
- <sup>21</sup> Lena Tamil Vanan, *Shivaji Oru Sahaptham, (Tamil)*, Madras, 1982, p.2.
- <sup>22</sup> Lena Tamil Vanan, *Nadigar Thilagam Shivaji Ganesan, (Tamil)*, Madras, 1987, p.24.
- <sup>23</sup> Jeevan, *Shivaji Nadippilakanam, (Tamil)*, Madras, 1979, p.85.
- <sup>24</sup> *Dinathanthi*, Tamil Daily, Chennai, dated 15.03.2005.
- <sup>25</sup> *Dinathanthi*, Tamil Daily, Chennai, dated 07.03.2005.

