

SCREEN SHIFTS IN RECENT TAMIL CINEMAS: THE “NEW” NEW WAVE

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Abstract

A new wave in Tamil cinema is happening on screen which contrasts conventional film style of Tamil Nadu. A visible layer of difference between urban and rural identity and new perspectives of nationhood is being seen in Tamil cinema. The formulas of films are shifting and it can see from the presentation of the character in the marketing of the film. This paper tries to understand the characteristics and outline the Tamil new generation (new wave) cinema.

Keywords: Tamil cinema, new wave, culture

Introduction

Tamil Nadu and Tamil cinema are unified in many ways and its relation is omnipresent. The gap between the culture of Tamil Nadu and that of Tamil film going audience are blurred for the ages. Audience, more appropriately fans of Tamil cinema actors and actress perceive actor and actress as god and goddess; build temples as their token of love. “They not only love, but worship” (Raman, 2012). The Tamil audience influenced cinema majorly by the actors and their glory. Films which highlight actors as “superheroes” are mainly commercial and laid the conventional basis for Tamil cinema for long decades. The image of the hero is not restricted within the screen, but also off screen. They become part of their culture and identity. This is a trend that has been happening for a very long time in Tamil Cinema (Changing Trends - Is Tamil cinema coming of age, 2008).

With strong conventional genres get flourishes, there are also many experimental filmmakers in each times who put their lens towards new light a part of customary way. Gopu Mohan of *The New Indian Express* noted that “young Tamil directors are defying tried-and-tested formulas of filmmaking to tell stories the way they need to be told” (2009) and these “films are successful in the box office too” as reported by *southdreamz.com* (2010). The new wave films are not totally avoiding the conventional style, but accumulating up social reality in the characters and the situation of the film. Neither on the other hand the new experimental films cannot call as art films nor is it difficult to compare new wave bought by Satyajit Ray and carried over by his successors. This (Tamil) new genre of films, which began with *Autograph* in 2004, is not what can be classified as ‘art house’ productions. “They have every *masala* (commercial) ingredient of a formulaic film, but what they also have is a solid storyline, a large dose of realism

and actors who are almost unknown” (Ramnath, 2011). The visual language of these films seems to be real, the cultural and social subtexts are more hinted, which take the audience closer to the character, the violence, romance, rituals takes place high in thematically and presented in raw. “The resultant mix has not only struck a chord with directors and actors, but worked wonders at the box office and, hence, with producers as well” (Ramnath, 2011). The older Tamil films presented cultural and social context of Tamil Nadu and played a major role in bringing out the feeling oneness among Tamilians. There is no irony when we witness political leaders today at Tamil Nadu was or are part of active Tamil cinema or Kollywood. If the main ideas of conventional Tamil cinema are to promote a message to society for purpose to impress them, what is the threat of emerging new wave Tamil cinema scenario? The aim of this paper is to identify the features of Tamil new wave (generation) films and to detail the process of change happening in Tamil cinema.

A new wave?

A new wave in Tamil cinema is happening on screen which contrasts conventional film style of Tamil Nadu. A visible layer of difference between urban and rural identity and new perspectives of nationhood is being seen in Tamil cinema. “The formulas of films are changing” (Arun, 2010) and it can see from the presentation of the character in the marketing of the film. Tamil Nadu films – Kollywood which itself based on a town Kodambakkam in Chennai city produced various films which aimed on angry young man, love and action genres which focused on “*filmic*” features which are stereotyped. The audience liked to see out of life actions from their actors and production house bagged good collection.

Definitely, by the influence of international realistic films waves of *realism* punched into Kollywood – here the camera travels away from the city. It finds its frames and angles from villages where *real life* is pictured. When the realistic approach out broke conventional formulas of Tamil commercial cinema, its concept of identity and nationhood also seems too changed or tend to change. The cinema played a vital role in shaping up political sphere and cultural identity which marked from the state of Tamil Nadu to the world. The new wave attempts from directors of Tamil films are unique in style and technology. But it is interesting to find out whether they transfer identity to screen or transform.

Tamil Cinema and Tamil Nadu

Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu has been a center for the film production in Hindi and other south Indian languages, from the early days of Indian cinema. Thus Tamil industry has a deep heritage of *filmic* culture. Chennai (before Madras) witnessed raise and falls of stars on screen and technicians off screen. The first silent film was *Keechakavatham* (The Extermination of Keechakan) (1916), came just after three years of Indian first film Rajah *Harischandra* (1913). Both films were based on Hindu mythology. First Tamil talkie came in the year 1931 with *Kalidas* which consist of 50 songs. Drama and film were related to each other closely during that period. In keeping with the tradition of company drama, the talkies carried a large number of songs and placed less emphasis on dialogue (Pandian, 1996). Pandian (1996) observed history of Tamil talking cinema to three phases. “(i) The puranic, mythological and folklore period (1931-1950), (ii) the melodramatic story period (1951-1975) and (iii) the partly realistic anti – sentimental stories period (1976-1990). The themes of conventional cinema are connected with politics” (Hardgrave 1973; Pandian1992), its “escapist Utopian content” (Dickey 1993). Later on, “after entry of television the focus slightly shifted towards the middle classes of

the nation” (Prasad 1998). This shift helped to carve realism and thus gesticulated ways for a new wave. As said above, “Tamil cinema has its roots in Tamil drama. The well known stage artist finalized the stage drama in Tamil Nadu. All his dramas are based on the well known stories from the *puranas*. In his time men substituted for women on stage as per the culture of the period” (Jesudoss, 2009).

Tamil Cinema: A cultural outlook

As Tamil cinema developed it looked mostly the social orientated themes that were deeply rooted in the Tamil language and culture. “When the trend turned towards entertainment and commercial Tamil cinema offers a visual commentary in the form of popular culture entangled directly with the lives of the people so as to enable them to consume various information, belief systems, and cultural commodities and thus fulfil social and cultural needs” (Jesudoss, 2009). Tamil cinema enabled a wider dissemination of Tamil culture and ideology. The cultural practices are still merged with cinema, for instance, the exuberant use of Tamil language. Tamil cinema helped to articulate the political and cultural ideology through various signs and symbols, such as *Thali* (the most valued and auspicious ornament worn by married women symbolizing the marital bond). As cultural narratives Tamil films reflect the sentiments and aspirations of the Tamil people. “The cinema industry takes special care to construct the social, cultural, and political values of society” (Jesudoss, 2009). However, Tamil cinema definitely helped in carving the changes in Tamil culture and challenged traditions and religion sentiments. Most of Mani Ratnam films, [Roja (1992), Bombay (1995), Kannathil Muthamittal (2002), Aaytha Ezhuthu (2004)] altered Tamil cinema industry itself and it also confide themes of social political. The other most notable film was *Kattradhu Thamizh* (Learned Tamil, 2007) directed by Ram portrayed story of a Tamil post graduate suffering to secure a job and uselessness in his job as Tamil teacher. The film focuses on emerging IT culture which forgets Tamil traditional culture. Behindwoods.com praised this film as rare, once in twelve year blooming flower *Kurijipoovu* (2007).

Youngblood (1970) observes that “cinema technology shapes and records the objective and subjective realities of every person” (p. 128) to extend this idea in case Tamil cinema realism takes place within the life of an individual. Tamil often portrays cultural rituals of Tamil Nadu. Cultural leaders enjoy high status in every culture and it is no difference in the case of Tamil Nadu. Here we can see the same status is offered to the film stars. We can see darling names for film actors as a representation of the leader. M.G. Ramachandran (M G R) known as *Puratchi Thalaivar* (The Revolutionary Leader), Sivaji Ganesan as *Nadigar Thilakam* (Supreme actor), Rajinikanth is known as Super Star all over the world, Kamal Hasan as *Ullaga Naayagan* (Hero/Leader of World), Vijaykanth as *Puratchi Kalaigarnar* (Revolutionary artist), Vijay as *Illaya Thalapatthy* (Young commander), Ajith Kumar as Ultimate Star, Arjun as Action King and it is still continuing for younger generation actors also. Young and upcoming superstars of Kollywood *Jayam Ravi* and Vishal, respectively known as *Illam Puyal* (Young Strong) and *Puratchi Thalapatthy* (Revolutionary commander).

But it is interesting question to watch how long they “leadership” will sustain in the circumstances of new wave films. After Indian independence Tamil political conditions moved a nationalist movement within Tamil Nadu. The use and promotion of Tamil language and cultural identity were the main problems. Hardgrave (1965) noted that “in late 1964, an attempt was made to expressly provide for an end to the use of English, but it was met with protests. Some of these protests also turned violent. In the same periods Tamil cinema also found cinema, which

highlight Tamil identity”. The first is evident in a number of films such as *Velaikkari* (Servant Maid, 1949), *Manthiri Kumari* (The Minister’s Daughter, 1950), *Parasakthi* (The Goddess, 1952), *Madurai Veeran* (The Soldier of Madurai, 1956), *Sivagangai Seemai* (The Land of Sivagangai, 1959), *Veerapandiya Kattabomman* (The Hero Kattabomman, 1959), *Parthiban Kanavu* (Parthiban’s Dream, 1960), *Pavamannippu* (Forgiveness of Sins, 1961), *Kappalotiya Thamizhan* (The Tamil Who Launched a Ship, 1961), *Tangaritinam* (Precious Stone, 1967), *Engal Thangam* (Our Beloved, 1970) and *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* (A Donkey in the Brahmin Enclave, 1977), which returned to the general theme of “caste and language [which] were the principal bases of Tamil nationalism” (Chadda, 1997:71).

With the popularity of a television cultural transmission happened and arms of globalization lend the Tamil people to know about the *other* cultures. But in the 90's, there has been a slow but sure trend in Tamil movies where they have become more and more North-Indianized or even MTVised (Ramakrishna, 2003). By contrast with the above examples of *Thevar Magan*, we can observe same type of character changes completely to new look (Ramakrishna’s MTVsied) only during songs. It may judge as imaginary or a dream, but it is a reflection of the silent culture of Tamil in the result of television exposure. The song pattern and instruments used behind also deviated from Culturist to international. Here we can see changes in Pandian’s (1996) third stage of Tamil talking cinema, which focused on partially realism and anti – sentimental themes to pure fantasy after the 90s. “Even other things insignificant ranging from the background score to rolling credits at the end are blindly copied from Hollywood” (Ramakrishna, 2003). Filmmakers like Mani Ratnam and Shankar created a brand name and enamors would be *superstars* emerged with new directors and experimental production house.

The political-cinematic relation also found new versions in this period. The MGR path was followed by few and many found failure. The Dravidian political movement used cinema as a tool of propaganda. Despite the iconoclastic Dravidian movement, Tamil society remains, personality-oriented; one’s success in films and politics depends heavily on image-building. Political leaders who went on to become Chief Ministers in the State — CN Annadurai, MGR, M Karunanidhi, VN Janaki and J Jayalalithaa — have all had a stint in theatre or cinema. MGR made the transition from actor to politician from developing a fan base with formula movies where he played a good Samaritan. He carried his good acts from reel to real life. Rajni, however, took a different path. “After deliberations, he decided to stay away from politics, content with entertaining people with formula films” (The last superstar, 2010). Big budget films and overseas collections aimed films being started producing. In the new millennium, saw freethinking in narration and technology.

Understanding the new generation

The current Tamil cinema can be roughly classified as a technologically driven period where all cinemas with respect of any theme or outfit largely depend on technology in its all phases of production, promotion and distribution. With the interactions of international media and arguably influence of film festivals, comes a new wave in Tamil cinema, but this new wave cannot compare with the new wave attempts which we saw in Bengali, Malayalam and Kannada films and even in Tamil of 1970s. This new wave (new generation) of Tamil films seems to be doing is to fuse the energy and entertainment of a mainstream film (without its formulaic excesses) with the complexity and sensitivity of an art film (minus the excessive artiness) (Pradeep, 2008). In a comparative analysis if it's “lack of vision and imagination in art, economy and market values made Malayalam cinema to distress and in Tamil” (Ramachandran, 2009:14) it is distressing in

ideology and stardom in Tamil cinema. As Ramnath (2011), Pradeep (2008) also notes two films as possibly having inspired and kick started this new wave:” Autograph” and “Kaadhal”. Both films were artistically made, entertaining, and — most crucially — huge box office hits. It must have startled the Kodambakkam industry to see two intimate love stories with no stars winning such a huge audience. The recent film *Tamizh Padam* (Tamil Cinema, 2010) a spoof film, which mocked Tamil culture which portrayed in Tamil cinema and conventional Tamil cinema itself with reference of stardom, family sentiments, music, visual cultures, social interaction, comedy and fantasies (A 'Tamil Padam' on Tamil films, 2009) was a viral hit and discussed the film among the audience which indirectly reflects Tamil audience attitudes which longs for a change in Tamil cinema. “The young directors of new wave cinema look for actors, not superstars, but they believe in star system too” (Stars bring the audience, a director makes them sit there, 2008). The popularity and economic success of recent new generation Tamil films show an opening on scholastic concerns over thematic and theoretical debates (Kalorth, 2013).

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