The Benevolence of MGR, Subaltern Audiences and the Tamil Nadu State

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Tamil Nadu has been seen as the pioneering Indian state in launching unique welfare schemes such as noon meal, free rice/cereals, free electricity for farmers and urban poor, free canteen, free laptops, free home appliances, among others. There are myths and facts about the historical and filmic contexts of these schemes as sites of welfare politics of a state that invoked the principle of “benevolence” on the part of the rulers towards their subjects two-three millennia ago. In fact, “benevolence” as a principle of righteousness and a cornerstone of public governance was a deep-rooted tradition in the larger canvas of ancient “Thamizagam” during the Sangam age. Sangam age rulers and philosophers valued “benevolence” as the cornerstone of relationships between the rulers and the ruled. In recent decades, acts of “benevolence” became a part of filmic and policy narratives in Tamil Nadu. This paper explores the intersections of filmic contexts of “benevolence” in the emergence of the so-called welfare state model of Tamil Nadu with particular reference to the linkages between M. G. Ramachandran’s (MGR’s) articulations of “benevolence” in his films and the expressions of Dravidian socialism in the films that were scripted by his mentor, C. N. Annadurai.

Keywords: benevolence, Tamil films, Dravidian movement, Dravidian socialism, C. N. Annadurai, MGR, Jayalalithaa, Rajinikanth, postcoloniality, welfare politics

Tamil Nadu has the third largest economy in India with a current Gross State Domestic Product of ₹13,842 billion (US$220 billion) (“Economy of Tamil Nadu,” n.d.). Tamil Nadu also has a debt of over ₹2.5 lakh crore and the highest revenue deficit among south Indian States at US$154.59 billion (Ramakrishnan, 2017). The State is home to countless number of welfare schemes which are either appreciated as “bold social programmes” (Sen & Dreze, 2013) or labeled as “populist” and seen as contributing to negative developments such as rural dispossession (Vijayabaskar, 2016). These schemes are often seen as retaining the vote banks of the two parties that have governed Tamil Nadu since 1967, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK - Dravidian Progressive Party) and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK – All India Anna Dravidian Progressive Party) (Wyatt, 2012).

The social reform movement launched by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar during the second decade of last century and the political parties that became the political offshoots of the movement are seen as the canvas which has made Tamil Nadu the model welfare

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state where social development hinges on democratic action (Sen & Dreze, 2013). Sen & Dreze (2013) note:

Tamil Nadu, much to the consternation of many economists, initiated bold social programmes such as universal midday meals in primary schools and started putting in place an extensive social infrastructure – schools, health centres, roads, public transport, water supply, electricity connections, and much more. This was not just a reflection of kind-heartedness on the part of the ruling elite, but an outcome of democratic politics, including organized public pressure. (p.78)

The Corporation of Madras pioneered the mid-day free meal scheme nearly hundred years ago in 1925. The former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, K. Kamaraj, launched the mid-day meal scheme for primary school children during 1962-63. This scheme was extended and expanded in 1982 when M. G. Ramachadran became the Chief Minister. Several Indian States subsequently emulated this scheme. The scheme aimed to improve the health of the children, improve enrolment rate and reduce drop out rate of children in schools. These acts of benevolence are not incidental nor peculiar if one makes attempts to understand the cultural and historical linkages between contemporary practices of benevolence by film stars on screen and what is criticised as the populist benevolence of successive governments in Tamil Nadu since 1967, when DMK rode to victory on the promise of 4.5 kilograms free rice to people of Tamil Nadu. It is said that C. N. Annadurai, the man who promised it and implemented it had some financial reservations once he came to power. Former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa had to her credit 18 schemes.

Tamil Nadu attracted national and international attention when former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa launched the free laptop scheme on September 15, 2011, the birthday of DMK’s founder and former Chief Minister, C. N. Annadurai (Press Trust of India, 2011; “Mother of welfare,” 2016). The scheme entailed the distribution of 68,00,000 laptop computers to students of government and government aided schools, colleges and polytechnics during the five period 2011-2016. While launching the scheme, Jayalalithaa remarked:

My Government will ensure that students will not suffer any deprivation -- uniforms, textbooks and shoes to geometry boxes and laptop computers; every possible facility is to be reached to them as tools to help them realize their full potential. ( “Speech delivered,” p. 35)

Do these figures and facts have something to do with the logic of benevolence cultivated by film stars turned Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu? Are we missing something in our reading of the contemporary waves of populism and benevolence in Tamil Nadu? This paper will provide linkages between the politics of benevolence on screen, in the policies of successive regimes of government in this part of India and the cultural and historical origins of practice of benevolence.
The notions of benevolence and benevolent subjectivity have been serving as important theoretical constructs in relating to the conditions of subalternity in diverse cultural contexts. Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) theoretical addresses concerning the above have elevated the purportedly centuries-old feudal marker of benevolence into a colonial marker par excellence. Spivak regards benevolence as violence as it does not afford the subaltern subjects the right to speak and grants instead the interlocutors and the causative agents of subalternity the right to speak. However, benevolence as a theoretical construct has a chequered history as a site of life and material philosophy in Tamil Nadu.

During the Sangam age, (spanning from 400 BCE to 300 CE) (Singh, 2009, p. 15), the rulers went out of their way to be benevolent to the needy. To be ethical meant that the rulers and ruled became subjects of a world view where giving, sharing and accepting resources were acts of benevolence mediated by group cultural norms in public interest. During post-Sangam age, as revealed by the work of Thiruvalluvar, Thirukural, benevolence becomes an act of individual righteousness and an individual virtue to be cultivated by the domestic men (Elango, 2008). The contemporary linkages of benevolence between the rulers and the ruled on the one hand, and the film stars and their subaltern audiences, have their cultural and philosophical origins in these contexts.

However, Spivak’s logic seems not only a theoretically sound mode of understanding the conditions of subalternity and their sources, but a pragmatic one as well, particularly in the postcolonial contexts of countries like India. The markers of postcoloniality in such contexts are as widely populated as the subaltern groups and their detractors. The public spheres in which these divergent markers of postcoloniality are made visible and influential are structured by the subaltern groups and their detractors, in an intensely collaborative mode. One such public sphere is Tamil cinema. This is the plane where celebrity colonialism finds its subaltern subjects, the Tamil film fans. This is the plane where the formation of subalternity hinges more upon the formation of benevolent subjects of the stars and superstars of Tamil cinema than the real world conditions in which subalterns find themselves.

Tamil cinema and its socio-cultural milieus have their roots in complex layers of feudal, colonial and postcolonial histories. These layers are difficult to relate to in their entirety, but one can see a microcosm of the feudal, colonial and postcolonial worlds in one plane. This is the plane where the subalterns encounter the sources that are seeking a collaborative mode of existence with them, not withstanding the socio-economic realities that separate them. The benevolent superstars of Tamil cinema and their subaltern audiences have been existing in this collaborative mode of existence since 1940s, when Tamil cinema saw the birth of its first superstar in M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar. The postcolonial markers of benevolence, exploitation and subalternity have their influences writ large in each and every of the hundreds and thousands of Tamil films and the relationships these films sought to foster between their subaltern audiences and their benefactors, the stars and superstars of Tamil cinema.
These markers took a great leap forward during the 1940s - 1960s, when the DMK (the political party that sprang from the Dravidian political movement) sought to construct a public sphere where the subaltern consciousness was made to come alive politically on the screens where Tamil films espousing the cause of Dravidian socio-political ideology started rolling. The core of the then Dravidian ideology had strong Marxist layers sandwiched by appeals to Tamil ethnic identity and signals against the threats to Tamil language and economy. There could not be a more fertile ground than this for the subaltern consciousness to emerge on the lines suggested and controlled by the public sphere that they did not create in the first place. They were made willing accomplices of the stars and the party ideology that promoted the stars in a journey that has metamorphosed to other interesting postcolonial trajectories in the post-Dravidian cinema era. Tamil cinema is no longer avowedly political as it was during 1940s - 1960s, but it still bears very strong imprints of the postcolonial subjectivities it sought to foster in the subaltern film audiences with the active collaboration of the stars who were born with Tamil political cinema.

Benevolence as a postcolonial marker also exists in a peculiar location in Tamil cinema. It is a Pontean (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) location where the subjects of benevolence and objects of benevolence seem to exist on a plane where distinctions between them are blurred due to the rapidly fused manner in which the subjects and objects exchange their acts of benevolence. It is a Pontean location because the causes and effects of benevolence of stars and their fans are feeding on each other to the point where it becomes difficult to locate them separately. Stars as subjects or sources that cause benevolence have their basis in the objects of benevolence, film fans, as effects, which in turn seek to reconstitute themselves as subjects of benevolence in their acts of adulation of the star. In the later position, the stars exist more as the objects of benevolence or recipients of the goodies from the fans. For instance, the benevolence of Rajinikanth, on screen and off screen, gets matched by the benevolence of his fans in numerous ways. The various acts of the Rajinikanth fan club members are carefully orchestrated to acknowledge not only the benevolence of the star, but also express the benevolence of the fans.

When fans of Rajinikanth repeatedly urged the star to plunge into politics, it must be read as a crucial point in the Pontean postcolonial location where Rajinikanth is turned into an object of benevolence by his fans. In such a location, what becomes of the distinctions between subjects and objects can be related only phenomenologically and through the logic of Merleau Ponty on subject-object continuum.

The planes of Tamil cinema where benevolent superstars and subaltern film audiences seek to exist in a collaborative mode is a postcolonial game where the loser (subaltern film fan) is made visible to the winner (the star-turned politician) in myriad ways, but is not made visible to himself. Subalternity grows with every losing points gathered by

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2 Rajinikanth, who is praised as the super star by his fans, has been projected as a potential politician since 1996, when he had a tiff with the former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa. Despite his indifferent/studied responses, the fans did not miss any opportunity to urge him to enter politics. After two decades of exchanges of benevolent gestures between himself and his fans, Rajinikanth announced his decision to enter politics in December 2017.
the subaltern film audiences and the unhindered progression of stars as super stars and super stars as political supremos.

One superstar of yesteryears, MGR\(^3\), personified the logic of benevolent subjectivity remarkably well in his addresses to his subaltern fans. The benevolent subjectivities of film stars and the subalternty of their audiences are rooted in a collaborative mode of existence where denial of difference is as much an acknowledged fact as acceptance of difference between the subalterns and the stars who seek to personify subalternity in all their words and deeds, on screen and off screen.

MGR’s acts of benevolence on screen and later as a politician, Chief Minister, has its origins in his personal life as well as his political and social grooming in the Dravidian movement’s socio-political ethos by his mentor, C. N. Annadurai. MGR sought to connect with his subaltern subjects in unprecedented creative modes. For instance, MGR’s films are known for colours that had too many contrasts and conflicts to defy any logic of contemporary colour designers. The colours of red, white, blue, black, green vied for attention in their locations on his hats, belts, shirts, shoes, pants, socks, etc. While his contemporaries settled for conventional and non-conflicting colour schemes, he had a plan to speak to his subaltern subjects in an exaggerated manner through the exaggerated mixing of colours and thereby suspend the conflicts they convey otherwise to a non-subaltern member. Moreover, the colours of his attire echoed the unrealised fantasy longings of his subjects who could not afford a colourful life in their lives. MGR scored high on colour design, not to score points on aesthetics, but to score points politically, even as it became a Benjaminian case of aestheticisation of the politics (Benjamin, 1936).

MGR’s strategies on screen were as political and social as they were aesthetic in the Benjaminian mode. MGR’s strategies became as much a site of aestheticisation of politics even as they nurtured in the minds of the subaltern subjects that benevolence is not just the desire or the act of the benefactor, but the enduring bond that keeps the benefactor and the beneficiary in an unassailable state of relationships; relationships that became the envy of MGR’s filmic and political rivals. Here, the conflicting colours of his attire ought to be seen as the source of unity between the disparate elements of his subaltern fan groups and their regional, caste and religious affiliations. His colour scheme wanted to defy the logic of mainstreaming and wanted to privilege the multiplicities his subjects embodied. This came to the advantage of his mentor’s (C. N. Annadurai) party, DMK, when it won with a thumping majority in 1967 elections, and the electoral victories of the party MGR founded, AIADMK, till his death. It must be mentioned that MGR’s creative colour strategy could work wonders because of the prevalence of a film colour technology, Eastman Colour, that helped him realise his vision of himself and the relationships between himself and his co-characters and the subaltern subjects outside the filmic frame in the way he wanted.\(^3\) His aestheticisation

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\(^3\)MGR’s early life was filled with economic hardships. He struggled hard to become a super hero, after acting in minor roles and enduring hard times. His encounters with hard times probably made him a champion of poor in his filmic and political roles.
of the filmic frames resulted in a peculiar aestheticisation of the benevolence his acts embodied in such frames and eventually resulted in an oeuvre that speaks of the Benjuminian case of aestheticisation of politics in Tamil Nadu evocatively. MGR’s aestheticisation of the filmic frames succeeded because of the match/mismatch between the polarities of distractions and concentrations that Benjamin (1936) wrote about in his seminal work. Benjamin (1936) noted:

The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation. The fact that the new mode of participation first appeared in a disreputable form must not confuse the spectator. Yet some people have launched spirited attacks against precisely this superficial aspect. Among these, Duhamel has expressed himself in the most radical manner. What he objects to most is the kind of participation which the movie elicits from the masses.

Duhamel calls the movie

a pastime for helots, a diversion for uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a ‘star’ in Los Angeles. (as cited in Benjamin, 1936)

Additionally,

this is at bottom the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator. That is a commonplace. The question remains whether it provides a platform for the analysis of the film. A closer look is needed here. Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. The laws of its reception are most instructive. (Benjamin, 1936)

4 Geva colour, technic colour and Eastman colour dominated Tamil film industry since the advent of the first Tamil film in colour, which had MGR as the lead hero, Alibabavum Narpady Thirudargalum (Alibaba and 40 thieves) in 1955. MGR’s preference for strange colour combinations was woven around colour red and Eastman colour had a bias for red. His films, made during 1960s, succeeded on the colour front for two reasons: MGR’s preference for a strange colour scheme and the prevalence of Eastman colour in Tamil film industry during the period, which accommodated MGR’s colour preference. Anbe Vaa (Come my beloved – 1966), Ayirathil Oruvan (The one in a thousand - 1965) and Enga Veetu Pillai (Son of our home -1965), among other MGR films, have to be studied for their colour schemes to uncover a different facet of MGR’s mode of aestheticisation of politics through the medium of film colours.
The laws of reception of MGR’s films are not only most instructive, but defiant too. They defy the instructive logic of the laws of reception in terms of the polarities of distractions and concentrations. For instance, the conflicting colours are to be seen not merely as colours, but as sources of distractions and concentration. In a sense, these are not polarities as far as his films are concerned. They are sources of concentration in their states of distractions.

Long before MGR became the de facto party actor of DMK, thanks to the sidelining of the second party actor of DMK, Sivaji Ganesan, after his growing roles as actor in mythological films. Films scripted and acted by Dravidar Kazhagam/DMK loyalists such C. N. Annadurai, N. S. Krishnan and K. R. Ramasamy had the vision of Dravidian socialism in the narratives. Dravidian socialism is not a peculiar entity. C. N. Annadurai and N. S. Krishnan pictured it as the alternative to the feudalism of the Dravidian land, where the rich, religious and the casteist elements became the enemy of the subaltern people. Dravidian socialism, in effect, refers to not the import of an alien political ideology, but its domestication in the sites of Dravidian movement’s socio-cultural and political frames of reference. This domestication process also created unique sites of relationships between the benefactors and beneficiaries of benevolence in the films made by the loyalists and leaders of Dravidian movement.

*Nallathambi* (Good younger brother) (1949), which was scripted by C. N. Annadurai, had N. S. Krishnan as the zamindar (landowner) who is passionate about the upliftment of his subaltern subjects. He wants to quit his feudal role and become a benevolent benefactor of his subjects. He gets into the act of giving away his inherited material assets and becomes an anti-thesis of his inherited role as a feudal lord. The same year saw the successful run of *Velaikari* (Servant maid, 1951), which was scripted by C. N. Annadurai for providing a career break to his party loyalist, K. R. Ramasamy, who became the first party actor of DMK. In 1951, *Or Iravu* (One night), scripted by C. N. Annadurai, was released with K. R. Ramasamy as the lead actor. This film was based on a play by the same name which ran successfully and made K. R. Ramasamy a well known theatre artist and a hard-core loyalist of C. N. Annadurai. All the three films had their versions of Dravidian socialism in their narratives and proved that the aestheticisation of the politics was the need of the hour in Tamil Nadu. This drive for aestheticisation of politics eventually resulted in the oeuvre of MGR as the site of benevolence borne of earlier filmic versions of Dravidian socialism.

Besides the colours of benevolence MGR created for his subaltern audiences, the also worked with other tools of aestheticisation of politics. The foremost among them is the aesthetic tool of songs MGR laboured hard with the lyricists and the composers to

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5 Even though, DMK did not have a system of party actors and a method for the use of films as approved by the bodies of the organisation, three actors who acted in the films of the party loyalists and leaders can be counted as the party actors. They are K. R. Ramasamy, Sivaji Ganesan and M. G. Ramachandran. They worked in an environment where the individual roles of party workers turned actors became enmeshed in the then propaganda milieu of the party in an informal mode. Had Sivaji Ganesan continued his role in the party without offending party’s atheist principles, there was no scope for MGR to became what he became, the third party actor.
employ in his films. While C. N. Annadurai laboured hard to create scripts imbued with the vision of Dravidian socialism, MGR did not leave any stone unturned to make his songs the leit motifs of his kind of benevolence and the ideology of Dravidian socialism, his intellectual mentor, C. N. Annadurai authored in his films. The following section provides an eye view of this particular trajectory of MGR’s aestheticisation of politics with a sample of his important songs.

In the film, *Nann Anaiyittal* (If I order, 1966), one year before the crucial election in which DMK rode to victory, MGR was closer to being prophetic when he said through a song:

“If I order and when it comes true,
the poor will not suffer here.
Till the last breath,
there will not be a sad moment.
They will not fall into the sea of tears.”

In *Oli Vilakku* (Light lamp, 1968), he does a subaltern duet in the role as a gypsy with his partner. He was drawing the attention of the beneficiaries of the benevolence of the government headed by his mentor, C. N. Annadurai, in the form of a free rice scheme to the people of Tamil Nadu, the first major welfare scheme of Tamil Nadu government. He was also echoing the voice of subalterns who were provided with houses in the place of their hutments. He was reliving the voice of the subalterns who did not want to violate law as they were blessed to have a government that was working for the betterment of the poor:

“When we are getting one padi (a traditional measure that equals 4.5 kgs) rice,
We will not go begging by climbing stairs.
When the hutments are becoming houses,
we need not live on streets.
When the government is on the side of the poor,
We will not violate the law.
When everyone thinks alike here, we will not hide anything here.”

The filmic connection of benevolence here is striking as it reminds the subalterns of the good choice they made when they voted in the 1967 election to elect DMK, the party MGR represented then. In the film, *Padakotti* (Boatman, 1964), MGR laments,

“He (God) gave everything.
For whom He gave?
Did He give for anyone person?
No, He gave for the world.
The God does not deserve the blame.
The hungry man has not sinned.
Those who got shared the bounty.
The workers stood on the street.
The God does not tolerate the sufferings of the many and the lives of the fortunate.
...Those who have nothing live on.
Those who have everything say they have nothing.
They have everything on their laps.
Their hearts are filled with darkness.
Whatever be the situation, let’s praise those who keep everything for public good.”

MGR’s expressions of an egalitarian notion of benevolence in favour Dravidian socialism is also very convoluted, if one remembers the atheist policies of his party, DMK, and his references to God in some of his songs. For instance, in the above mentioned example, he alludes to the provider as the God and seeks to picture a reality of inequalities where “He (God) gave everything. For whom He gave? Did He give for anyone? No, He gave for the world. ...Those who have nothing live on. Those who have everything say they have nothing.”

In Annamitta Kai (The hand that fed, 1971),

“The hand that fed
is the hand developed us.
It helped us to soar heights
and helped the world to live.
It is the hand that shaped us.
Poverty must be eradicated.
The industry must produce.
Everyone must live here,
ammust strive to develop,
should have good thoughts,
should earn their bread.
The hand that laboured is the hand of the proletariat.
The hand that considered its occupation as God and strained its body
is the hand that developed us.
The hand that turned thread as silk cloth
to cloth us and save us for shame.
It dug the earth,
and got gold nugget,
but saved only the required to fulfil the basic need.
It is the hand that helps us to live.
It is the poor people’s hand.
It cleared the forest land.
to keep the countrymen’s sadness away.”

The ideal of Dravidian socialism lives on in this song, even after his break with DMK, and the founding of his own party, AIADMK, in 1971. It once again pictures a scenario where the proletariat’s hand is seen as the basis of a world where socialism lives on as “it is the hand that helps us to live. It is the poor people’s hand. It cleared the forestland. to keep the countrymen’s sadness away.” It is the hand of benevolence that belongs as much to the subaltern subjects MGR addresses as to himself, the person who enacts a socialistic vision for his filmic audience.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the films authored by C. N. Annadurai and his political disciple, MGR, proves that the linkages between filmic acts of benevolence and the policy-centric benevolence by the governments headed by them and their successors such as M. Karunanidhi and J. Jayalalithaa are emblematic of the ideological longings for a different kind of socialist discourse, Dravidian socialism, they envisioned in their filmic and administrative roles. One will be missing the true linkages, if one roots only for ephemeral, a cultural understanding of the contemporary and previous versions of welfare politics in Tamil Nadu as purely populist and vote bank politics driven.

References


