



Constructing Political Image through Film: A Case Study of “Nenjukku Needhi “

Regasounder K¹ & Dr. J. Balasubramaniam²

¹Research Scholar, ICSSR Doctoral Fellow Department of Journalism and Science Communication Madurai Kamaraj University Madurai – 625021.

²Assistant Professor Department of Journalism and Science Communication Madurai Kamaraj University Madurai – 625021.

Abstract: In the history of Tamil cinema, no other political party has utilised the medium as much as Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Dravidian leaders C.N. Annadurai, M.Karunanidhi, M.G. Ramachandran, and J. Jayalalitha, who served as Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu, were in the film industry in their initial time. Among them, M. Karunanidhi, as a writer, propagated the ideology of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam through films and mobilised people. M.Karunanidhi, who served as the Chief Minister for five terms in Tamil Nadu, made a laudable contribution to Tamil cinema. This article tries to analyse how his grandson, Udhayanidhi Stalin, who is the Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development, used the film medium to create his own space in politics. The paper traced how “Nenjukku Needhi” tried to extend the political clout of Udhayanidhi Stalin. The core of the article traces the changes made in the original script, “Article 15,” which was remade as “Nenjukku Needhi,” concerning elevating the political image of the protagonist, Udhayanidhi Stalin. This paper on the whole deals with how Udhayanidhi, actor and politician, has utilised cinema (especially “Nenjukku Needhi”) as a tool to reach a wider audience and position himself as a politician with Dravidian ideology.

Keywords: Tamil Cinema, Tamil Nadu Politics, DMK, Sociology, Culture and Media

Introduction:

Tamil cinema has been serving as a political tool since its creation. Cinema has been used as a tool to propagate their political ideologies by Dravidian leaders. Dravidian leaders like C.N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, M.G. Ramachandran, and J. Jayalalitha were successful in both cinema and politics. It is to be noted that they all became the Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu using their cinematic backgrounds. According to Paul Rautha, cine-fiction is often formulaic but also has two meanings. One lies with the context of the story, and the other relates to political reality. DMK¹ films were mostly in the cine-fiction genre (Sivathamby, 1981). Films that reflect Dravidian ideologies—social justice, secularism, and social democracy—were commonly considered DMK films. This film, *Nenjukku Needhi*, is a tailor-made genre of cine-fiction. This film is the right choice to remake in Tamil as for the career of Udhayanidhi Stalin, Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Chepauk-Thiruvallikeni constituency in Chennai currently serving as a Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu also holding the portfolio of Minister of Youth Welfare and Sports Development, concerning his political image. The title of the film itself has a political connotation with the autobiography titled *Nenjukku Needhi* of the notable Dravidian icon and former chief minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr. M. Karunanidhi, better called Kalaigarnar by his legion comrades. In this instance, it is to be noted that Udhayanidhi Stalin, who is an establishing politician of the DMK party, is also the grandson of Kalaigarnar M. Karunanidhi. The Dravidian stalwart is known as Kalaigarnar because of his relentless contribution to Tamil literature and also to the Tamil film industry as a screenplay writer. Cinema had played an inevitable

¹] According to **Brittanica**, the **Dravidian Progressive Federation**, also known as **Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)**, is a regional political party principally in the state of Tamil Nadu, south-eastern India. It was founded by C.N. Annadurai in 1949.



role in his triumph in his political career. Now the grandson is complying with the path of Karunanidhi. Furthermore, Udhayanidhi Stalin's father, M.K. Stalin (the elder son of M. Karunanidhi), is now the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.

Nenjukku Needhi (Justice for Heart), directed by Arunraja Kamaraj, is a Tamil remake of the Bollywood movie Article 15 (hereinafter original). This critically acclaimed and box office-successful venture was produced and directed by Anubhav Sinha. The film is about how the protagonist, a caste Hindu, fights for justice for Dalits. The film starts with Vijayaraghavan, an IPS officer (Udhayanidhi Stalin) who got transferred to a rural part of Pollachi, Coimbatore district, in Tamil Nadu. In that village, two Dalit girls are found dead hanging from a tree, and one has gone missing. The Inspector of Police (Sundaram) tries to close this case as an honour killing, but Vijayaraghavan finds it suspicious and starts investigating the case. Despite pressure and political suppression by higher officials, Vijayaraghavan cracks the case and gets justice for the victims, says Nenjukku Needhi.

The film centres on the investigation of a horrific crime by a dedicated police officer, who uncovers the deep underbelly of casteist outrages happening in Tamil Nadu. The remake justifies the content through thought-provoking dialogues that reflect Dravidian ideology, but it doesn't seem preachy. The director had scored politically well in showcasing Nenjukku Needhi without disturbing the essence of Original.

Review of Literature:

According to Sivathamby (1981), among all the media in Tamil Nadu, films were crucial in helping three well-known film personalities—C.N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, and M.G. Ramachandran, or MGR—be elected as the state's chief ministers. Also, the author opines that the DMK films also signal a shift in political consciousness. The author also indicates how the writers from the DMK Party utilised cinema to mobilise the people and succeed in electoral politics. He explains that there were two phases to DMK in cinema: the first was controlled by writers C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, while MGR took over the second phase. Although MGR disseminated the ideals through action, C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi did it through dialogue, he adds. Furthermore, by highlighting the dynamism of the oppressed, M.G.R. changed the conventional societal pattern by using his fist rather than his tongue to create the image of an "action hero." The article's conclusion is that DMK's films were a strong reflection of the socio-political environment in which they were created.

According to Hardgrave. et al. (1975), the Dravidian movement has been greatly aided by the film in South India, as seen by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's meteoric ascent to power and its resounding victory in the 1967 election in Tamil Nadu. The author points out that DMK stars included party insignia and references in their films, performers graced the platforms of DMK rallies, and Ramachandran and Rajendran used their fame to win seats in the Legislative Assembly. This article acknowledges that the star factor unmistakably indicates that M. G. Ramachandran fans are more aware of films.

This article, "Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK," by Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., discusses the power of the film as a strong political medium in Tamil Nadu. Also, it examines the image of the film stars in the political arena. It explains how the influence of "stars" on Tamil politics has made political astrologers of those who would strive to comprehend it. The role of movies in Tamil Nadu politics has been noteworthy. And the author also adds that the audience that the DMK films served was one that no other method could have reached. He opines that M.G.R., also known as Vadiyar (meaning "teacher"), Puratche Nadigar (meaning "revolutionary actor"), and Makkal Thilagam (meaning "idol of the masses"), is a South Indian icon of hope for the impoverished.

According to Pillai (2015), a significant turning point in the history of Tamil cinema occurred when the genre transitioned from mythological to social, embracing Dravidian ideals. The writers from the Dravidar Kazhagam raised the changes. In Tamil film, C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunidhi in particular were the trailblazers in highlighting the change in societal themes.



While the writers of the DMK Party were dominating in the Dravidian ideology-oriented narratives, M.G. Ramachandran used his star image as a vehicle to penetrate among the masses. In 1956, M.G.R. founded "EMGEEYAR PICTURES," his own production firm. The image of a man and a woman clutching the DMK flag was featured in the company's logo. The first hero in Tamil cinema history to use a formula for his films was MGR (see Narayanan A, 2008). Jamalan (2022) argues that mass cinema is not mesmerising the audience; it actually constructs the mass. M.G.R. was the first mass hero of Tamil cinema. He constructed a mass audience through his films, which later helped him succeed the throne in the Tamil Nadu State Assembly Election in 1977.

Research Methodology:

The present study used a qualitative approach, incorporating integrated descriptive content analysis, to investigate the ways in which the film "Nenjukku Needhi" was produced to further the political image of its protagonist. This study used content analysis to track the changes in the textual, visual, and aural components of the remake version from the original, relating the political career of the protagonist, Udhayanidhi Stalin, since the film "Nenjukku Needhi" is a remake of the Hindi film "Article 15." This is to ascertain how the director employed the elements of the film medium to present the protagonist's political image among the general public.

Visuals and political Identity:

In the original, the protagonist can be identified as a Brahmin, while in *Nenjukku Needhi*, it is not apparent. But in the Tamil remake, the police inspector (Brahmin) asks for Vijayaraghavan's surname as an attempt to identify his caste. In reply to that, Vijayaraghavan, the protagonist, says, "It's just Vijayaraghavan," which portrays himself as an anti-caste, followed by a semiotic scene in which the books of E.V. Ramasamy (better known as Periyar), an anti-caste social reformer and founder of the Justice Party, will be shown (refer to Image 1). Additionally, in a scene from the original, the protagonist's caste—a Brahmin—is confirmed by police authorities, explaining India's caste system. However, the mother of the main character in the remake is said to be from a dominant caste, and his father is a minority Christian. Since the DMK Party's core principle is anti-Brahmanism, so that the protagonist should not be portrayed as a Brahmin, the alterations have been made to be more explicit in this regard.

To showcase the infrastructural contributions to Tamil Nadu by the DMK Government, scenes where the hospital is named Peraringar Anna Government Hospital are shown multiple times. Also, it is used in the film to idolise C.N. Annadurai, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and the founder of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Refer Image 2). In the opening sequence of *Udhayanidhi*, a reflection of the 'rising sun' is shown in the window glass of the vehicle he is travelling in, followed by a close-up of his face as the window glass slides down (Refer Images 3 and 4). Similarly, in a built-up shot, 'rising sun' is shown in the background of the protagonist to establish the symbol of the DMK party, *Udhaya Sooriyan* (The Rising Sun) (Refer Image 5). This kind of symbolic representations can be highly seen in the MGR movies (Narayanan, 2008) In the original, where the protagonist keeps the downtrodden people outside the house and listens to their grievances, this was changed. And in Tamil, it is taken in the way the Vijayaraghavan invites them inside the house, gives them water, and listens to their grievances (Refer Image 6).

Dialogues and Political Stand:

Dialogues like "ella saathikkum vali onnu than, aana saathiyaala anubavikkura vali vera" (people from all castes are suffering, but suffering due to caste is different), "athunga ithunga" (addressing Dalits as a non-living thing), and "Nammala erikka viduvanga aana eriya vida maatanga" (Dalits can work in a common graveyard, but their bodies should be cremated in a separate graveyard) have clearly called out the social injustices prevailing in society. But scenes of Dalit mid-day meals cook issue in the school and had made a deviance from the story line. And it is conveyed in the way that these scenes are intentionally added to showcase the movie against caste discrimination.



The deliberate dialogue “oru mozhiya kaththukirathu aarvam, kaththikiranumnu soldrathu aanavam” (learning a language should come by interest, but compelling to learn one is arrogance”) resembled the long-lasting language dispute on Hindi imposition in Tamil Nadu and the bi-lingual policy of Dravidian ideology. The director connects the film more politically wherever possible, without disturbing the line of Article 15. Particular dialogue: “Quota la pota doctor coat ah?” (Became a doctor through quota or reservation) by the caste Hindu police inspector Sundaram, referring to a female doctor, demeaning the affirmative action. Subsequently, the doctor character is named Anitha, in reference to a real-life incident involving a 17-year-old doctor aspirant named Anitha², who killed himself in 2017 after failing NEET, a central entrance exam for medicine courses. She scored 1176 out of 2000 in the Class XII Tamil Nadu State Board Examination, yet failed to reach her dream. The scene standing as a tribute is commendable and appreciable.

In a scene, the protagonist messaged, “If all are equal, then who will be king?” To his girlfriend, she replied, “The ‘one’ who thinks all are equal.” But in the original, it is mentioned by dialogue, “Why have a king at all?”

The change made in the discourse seems to be political. It seems to point out that someone should be the king in vote politics to rule. And it can be assumed that this scene has been altered to convey in some way that the protagonist, Udhayanidhi Stalin, coming from a Dravidian background, can be a king who treats all equally.

Political Outlook of the film:

A sub-inspector of police character is shown as Dalit. He is showcased as a person who cannot understand English and takes the wrong understanding whenever the protagonist, Vijayaraghavan, scolds him. How can a sub-inspector can't understand English? Is that being a Dalit a reason? However, the protagonist character is depicted in this way as the saviour of the oppressed. The protagonist stood by him all the time, whenever he got mocked and insulted by the dominant class inspector. At a point, the Dalit sub-inspector fights with his superior due to the courage and faith given to him by the protagonist. The way it is presented is set as if the protagonist is in a position to restore the self-esteem of the rotten community.

And also, the name of that character is Malaichamy. While Upper Caste Inspector character Sundaram introduces him to Vijayaraghavan, he sarcastically says, “He is Malaippambu (which means Python); later, he corrects it as Malaichamy. Malaichamy is the founder of the Dalit Panthers of India in Tamil Nadu. He is a prominent Dalit leader in Tamil Nadu, particularly in the southern region. It is to be noted whether that Dalit sub-inspector character is named after him. This question arises because, after Sundaram mocks SI by his name, Vijayaraghavan pronounces his name proudly and greets him “Nice Name.” This parable may be designed to show the respect of the protagonist towards the Dalit leaders.

In the original, a character is shown as a revolutionary leader from the Dalit community who fights for the justice of Dalit victims. Even though the protagonist is an upper caste who is shown as the protector of Dalits, the contribution of that Dalit revolutionary leader is remarkable in the original, which is lacking in the remake. It is presumed that the alteration was made in order to present the protagonist as the defender of Dalit justice. To further emphasise this point, the protagonist, in spite of all the charges, met and underwent conversion with the

² A 17-year-old Scheduled Caste girl, who had scored 1,176 out of 1,200 marks in her Class XII State Board examinations but was unable to join the MBBS course due to poor scores in NEET, ended her life in Ariyalur district on Friday.

Dalit revolutionary leader. This serves to demonstrate how attentive Udhayanidhi Stalin, the main character, is to the concerns of the oppressed.

Conclusion:

The director, Arunraja Kamaraj, executed everything well and didn't compromise on content. Political aspect of the protagonist on one side, to apprise the social woes on the other side. He packed up all kinds of atrocities happening in the name of caste and delivered the film with power-packed dialogue and engaging screenplay, which makes "Nenjukku Needhi" a remarkable film on caste discrimination. In this kind of movie, the director adapts Udhayanidhi Stalin, with the necessary modifications in the original with regard to his political career. Even though "Nenjukku Needhi" is Udhayanidhi Stalin's first full-fledged socio-political film, the original script underwent a lot of alterations to incorporate all of his political symbols into the movie. This movie has done a sufficient job of establishing the protagonist's political identity and placing him in the Dravidian political arena. The reaction of the film among viewers and critics makes it clear that the remake's aim, which was to present Udhayanidhi Stalin from Dravidian Ideological Politics as a promising leader of the next generation, was accomplished to a certain extent.

Image 1 and Image 2:



Image 3 & 4:



Image 5 & 6:





References:

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ⁱ Image 1 to 6 are screenshots from the Tamil Movie "Nenjukku Needhi"