Tamil Cultural Elites and Cinema

Outline of an Argument

M S S Pandian

The arrival of the talkies in Tamil in the 1930s confronted the Tamil elite with a challenge in that while they were implicated in the cinematic medium in more than one way, they, in retaining their exclusive claim to high culture, had to differentiate their engagement with cinema from that of the subalterns. This essay discusses how the Tamil elite negotiated this challenge by deploying notions of realism, ideology of uplift and a series of binaries which restored the dichotomy of high culture and low culture within the cinematic medium itself.

I

The arrival of talkies in Tamil during the 1930s was received with much enthusiasm by the lower class film audience. However, such subaltern enthusiasm for this new form of leisure was simultaneously accompanied by enormous anxiety among the upper caste/class elites. Though this anxiety was initially framed in terms of low cultural tastes of the subalterns and resolved within the binary of high culture vs low culture, the elites were soon confronted with newer problems. Quickly they realised that cinema as a medium carried the unwelcome possibility of upsetting and recasting the already existing and carefully patrolled boundaries between high culture and low culture.

Cinema's ability to upset pre-existing cultural boundaries and to reallocate previously ghettoised cultural practices followed from the unprecedented ways in which it brought together the elites and the masses. First of all, the pleasure of spectating did not fail to draw sections of the elite towards cinema as audience, though most of cinema's patrons came from the lower classes. Secondly, cinema as a medium was informed by what one may term as 'intertextual excess' whereby it could borrow both from high and low cultural universes at the same time and recombine them in unexpected ways. Thirdly, as cinema evolved into an industry and trade, i.e., as an avenue for investment and profit, the elites were drawn to it. Then such profit-seeking critically depended on the subaltern consumers of cinema who were kept in contempt by the elite because of their allegedly low cultural tastes. Finally, the act of putting together a film required mobilisation of different kinds of skills — some of which were almost exclusively available only to the elites (direction/camera/editing), while other sorts of skills, which were equally critical, were, for historical reasons, available among the lower classes (acting).

In other words, while the elites were implicated in the cinematic medium in more than one way, they, in retaining their exclusive claim to high culture, had to differentiate their engagement with cinema from that of the subalterns. This essay explores in broad outline how the Tamil elite negotiated this challenge by deploying notions of realism, ideology of uplift and a series of binaries which recuperated within the cinematic medium itself, the dichotomy of high culture and low culture.

II

By the turn of the 20th century, the boundaries between the so-called high culture and the low culture were already well-affirmed in specific ways in the Tamil social milieu. On the side of high culture, one had Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music, which were almost exclusively monopolised by the brahmans and a very small section of the non-brahmin upper castes. Needing years of training, with rules of training worked out in meticulous detail, and marked by caste exclusivity, these cultural forms were available only to the upper caste elites.

Both Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music affirmed themselves decisively as markers of high culture with their institutionalisation by the Madras elite in the form of Madras Music Academy in 1928. We may note here that the first Tamil talkie Kalidas appeared only in 1931. Interestingly, the Music Academy was conceived during and funded by the 42nd session of the Indian National Congress held in Madras in 1927. The Academy not only conducted annual music and dance festivals with much fanfare, but also functioned as a watchdog institution monitoring the so-called purity and standards of classical music and dance. For instance, at the annual conference of the Academy in 1941, it responded to the demand that there should be more Tamil songs instead of Telugu and Sanskrit songs in Carnatic music concerts by resolving that "it should be the aim of all musicians and lovers of music to preserve and maintain the highest standards of classical Carnatic music and that no consideration of language should be imported so as to lower or impair that standard" [Arooran 1980:260].

In contrast to Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music, company drama and 'therukoothu' (folk street theatre) constituted the so-called low culture patronised by the Tamil subaltern classes. Therukoothu, which was confined to the countryside, was performed throughout the night particularly in the post-harvest summer months and during festivals in non-brahminic Hindu temples. Therukoothu was treated by the Tamil elite as a marker of low cultural taste and was despised. Writing about his childhood days, Jayakantha, a Tamil fictionist, noted, "My 'upper caste' [status] informed me that these interesting masqueraders, who had their faces [full of paint] and told stories from Mahabharatham, were lowly people" [Jayakantha 1980:9; emphasis mine].

Company drama, though performed mostly in towns, traversed both the rural and the urban areas. Capturing the flavour of the company drama performances, Baskaran (1991:755) writes,

The repertoire of these companies was limited to a few mythologicals, written as musicals. The stories were standardised in a series of songs. The playwright, in these companies, called 'vathiyar' (teacher), wrote the songs, composed the music and also directed the plays. All the actors had to be singers, including the clown. And there was the pit orchestra, with a harmonium and a tabla. The emphasis was on singing, not on drama. When a character died on the stage after singing a song, he would get up without any hesitation to respond to cries of 'once more' and start singing all over again.

What is important for our argument is the fact that, similar to therukoothu, company dramas were also shunned by the Tamil elites as low-brow entertainment of the subalterns. Rao Bahadur P Sambanda Mudaliar, who was part of the highly educated upper caste elite of the Madras city, reminisced of his childhood thus: "Though there was a 'koothukottagai' (drama auditorium) close to the house where I grew..."
up years back and though Tamil dramas were staged often in different places in Madras city, I did not watch one even for five minutes. Not only that I did not watch Tamil dramas, but had great contempt for them” [Sambanda Mudaliar 1931:1].

Moreover, the Tamil elites derisively referred to the popular stage artists as ‘koothadigal’ (mountebanks), refused to rent them houses and feared them as possible abductors of young women [Avvai Shanmugam 1983:33]. According to Avvai Shanmugam, a doyen of 20th century Tamil stage, “Parents would not allow their children to watch dramas. Youths were ashamed to admit in public that they had been to drama. Opposite to [every] drama hall, a toddy shop would be present” (ibid).

The best illustration of the elite scorn for these artistes is the way they were treated by the leadership of the Tamil Nadu unit of the Indian National Congress. During the pre-1947 period, a large number of these artistes used the medium of drama and songs to spread the message of nationalism. However, their contribution, for most part, was never acknowledged by the Congress leadership. For instance, referring to Madurakavi Baskara Das, whose songs evoked widespread nationalist passion within this already enforced divide between high culture and low culture, the greatest difficulty is getting tickets. There are huge crowds at the ticket counter. As tickets began to be issued, they jostle each other and some climb on the others and get the tickets. In between such commotion, some policemen surface, beat them up and harass them. Some people approach those who could not get the ticket but stand away watching the fun, and offer, “I will get you the ticket. Give me quarter Anna.” Wanting to watch the film, they give the money. Those who collect the money merge with the crowd. Thereafter they cannot be seen. Most of those who go for films are the poor. They go there and suffer so much...”

Rao Bahadur S P Sambandam, who had his own encounter with early Tamil talkies, as actor, script-writer and so on, vouched for the popularity of cinema during the initial years of talkie and noted, “...it is a decade since talkies appeared in our country. There is no doubt that during these 10 years, talkie has spread all over the country... In Tamil Nadu alone, there are 250 cinema halls... We can say without any reservation that in a few years, there will not be even a small village without cinema” [Sambandham Mudaliar 1938:50]. This popularity of talkie among the Tamil subaltern classes itself was good enough reason for the elite to keep away from it. Then, there were more substantial reasons too.

The early Tamil talkies were basically film versions of plays by drama companies, already proven to be successful on the stage. “The practice was to hire a whole drama company and shoot the film in one stretch. So the stage actors, who were not classical musicians but singers familiar with classical music, found themselves in the tinsel world” [Baskaran 1991:755]. In keeping with the tradition of company drama, these talkies carried a large number of songs and placed less emphasis on dialogue. The first Tamil talkie Kutthadu (1931) was not exceptional in having 50 songs. A number of them produced during the 1930s had similar numbers. Also, most of them were from Hindu mythologies and Puranas as in the case of popular stage productions. Equally significant, as during the silent era, the early Tamil talkies drew its actors from the stage. These actors were not ashamed of their career on the stage and often acted both in films and dramas. As late as 1944, N S Krishnan, who was a towering personality of both the Tamil screen and the stage, claimed in public, “Is it fair to accuse cinema as having killed the drama? [No] Drama and cinema have born of the same mother... One is real and the other, image” [Aranthai Narayanan 1994:67].

This overlap between the early talkies and the company drama, which had already been inscribed as part of the Tamil low culture, offered the Tamil elite with sufficient basis to negotiate this new medium. They, to begin with, ghettoised it as part of the low cultural universe of the subaltern classes.

Reflecting this elite cultural politics in Tamil Nadu, the practitioners of classical art forms shunned cinema: “...Carnatic musicians looked down, with a shudder, upon the idea of singing in films, the same way that ladies of respectable families looked upon visiting a cinema hall” [Guy 1988]. As B S Ramayya (1943:269), who straddled simultaneously the exalted world of creative writing and the lowly one of cinema, noted about the classicists’ contempt for cinema, “it was common among those well-versed in classical music to ridicule film songs by posing: ‘To what school of music they belong?’ [Ramayya 1943:269].

It was the same elite politics which made visiting cinema halls a taboo for ‘respectable’ women from upper caste/class families. If visiting cinema halls was a taboo, acting in films was unthinkable for them. Thavamani Devi, an actress who came from Ceylon to Madras to act in Modern Theatre productions, made an appeal in the 1930s that women from respectable families should give up their reluctance and act in films. Responding to this appeal, a Tamil magazine allegedly published her photo in a swimming costume and captioned it thus, “Thavamani Devi, an actress, who has come from Ceylon to act as-chaste Akalya, appeals to women from [respectable] families to act in films” [Aranthai Narayanan 1981:115].

IV

A small section of the Tamil elite clung on rather resolutely to this idea that cinema is incorrigibly a sign of low culture. C Rajagopalachari is perhaps the most telling representative of this cinephobic minority; and even the invocation of nationalism could not convert this nationalist to cinema. In 1939, when the Indian Motion Picture
Association sought a ban on anti-Indian foreign films, he, as the prime minister of Madras state, noted cynically, "I have a notion that in most cases the objection comes from competitors companies that want in the guise of patriotism to keep out as far as possible well executed films that carry away the money. There is so much objectionable matter in the films prepared in India that the "anti-Indian" objection pales into insignificance." His objection to cinema continued well into the post-1947 India. Addressing the South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce in 1953, he was unrepentantly critical of cinema for it, according to him, catered to the uncontrolled sexual urge in the human beings [Diwakar and Ramakrishnan 1978:156-63].

As much as representations about cinema in the elite political sphere, elite literary representations too exhibited such cinephobia. Ku Pa Ragajopalan, a Tamil fictionist belonging to the elite nationalist Monikodi group of writers, published a short story 'Studio Kathai' (Studi Story) in the early 1940s. The story narrates how an educated girl takes to the career of acting so as to sanitise the film world of its evils and make it unthreating for respectable women. She gives up the mission after a day in the studio floor. While she resents the director physically touching her and leaves the studio, the director exclaims, "Why should a petticoat come to the studio?" Setting in opposition the immorality of the film world and the chastity of respectable woman, Ku Pa Ragajopalan names the director in the story as Krishnan and the failed actress as Sita [Ku Pa Ragajopulan 1986:82-87].

However, large sections of the Tamil elite realised, within years of the arrival of the talkie, that this cinephobic mode of engagement with cinema was inadequate. As cinema expanded into an industry and as a dominant mode of leisure, it offered hitherto unavailable possibilities for the Tamil elites. At one level, it had become a site of financial investment and a source of profit and fame. These new possibilities even lured the practitioners of classical art forms such as Carnatic musicians, who carefully kept themselves away from cinema as a way of maintaining their claim to cultural superiority, towards cinema: "Movie business came to mean big money and this did not fail to catch the attention of the classical musicians who had hitherto been ignoring cinema as a plebian entertainment... Musicians like Papanasam Sivan, who wrote and composed more than 500 film songs, entered films and seduced the other classical musicians also into cinema. Musical luminaries of the late 1930s like G N Subramaniam, Dandapani Desigar, Musiri Subramanya Ayyer and V V Sadagopan, all had their stint in films." [Baskaran 1991:756].

Equally important is the fact that cinema as a state of spectating pleasure too worked towards breaking the boundaries between the elites and the masses. Sections of the elites were indeed drawn towards the medium as its consumers. Writing in 1939 about three-fourths of the people "among ourselves" (i.e., the Tamil elites and the middle classes which exhibited elite pretensions), 'Kalki' R Krishnamurthy claimed, "We will keep talking about the ills done to the world by cinema. But, as we hear that a good film is being released, we are only too willing to spend our money and spoil our eyesight." For him, ignoring cinema was any longer a futile exercise: "What is the use in someone saying 'I object to earthquake'? What is the use in someone saying 'I don't accept rain'?" [Karnadagam 1939:45-47]. Similarly, Chandilion, a writer of historical fictions in Tamil, responded to Rajagopalachari's cinephobic comments thus: "Ignoring cinema... will be similar to the story of the old woman who tried to sweep back [with a broom] a turbulent ocean" [Chandilion 1987:30]. In other words, cinema had come to stay whether one likes it or not and the elites were part of it both in the process of its production and consumption.

The cultural elite of Tamil Nadu now required new modes of negotiating the challenge thrown by cinema. They could no longer merely brand it as the leisure-time activity and entertainment of those who lacked high cultural tastes, for they have become part of it. As a first move towards redefining their engagement with cinema, the Tamil elite privileged realism as the governing principle of good cinema. This was a move, as we shall soon see, that was basically meant to free cinema from its demeaning identity with company drama.

C K Sachi, soon after his return from England where he worked in film studios, complained of the lack of realism in Tamil films. According to him,

At present in western countries, those who enjoy watching reality [on the screen] are increasing in numbers. They do not like mere stories. Good Earth portrays the real life of the Chinese people and the real modesty of the Chinese women. That is why it ran for four months in London on its first release; and it is running for [the past] four months on re-release. But look at our films. What we see in [Tamil film as a dasi is a marvellous image which none has seen in life. [Similarly] thieves appear in [these films] in unheard of English costumes of hat and coat... If there is a thief [in the film] he should [look like] a real thief."

As much as Sachi, others like S Satyamurthy too stood on the side of realism [Aranthai Narayanan 1981:56].

Significantly, this anxiety about lack of realism in Tamil films was framed in terms of its shared characteristics with popular theatre. The nationalist Tamil newspaper Dinamani complained in 1935, "Tamil films are devoid of acting and without life like Tamil plays." It elaborated further: "Tamil cinema greatly disappoints those who have developed their appreciation for acting by watching American films and those who innately know what is the art of acting. There is very little dialogue; and even whatever little is there is in vulgar Tamil ('Kodun Tamil'). The rest is all songs. Songs appear [in the films] as one faints and as one gets killed.'" It compared the songs in Tamil films to the "intolerable wrestling and fencing" present in the early Bombay films. Similarly, Sambanda Mudaliar, in listing the shortcomings of Tamil films, noted that they were made "music concerts" [Sambanda Mudaliar 1938:50]. Perhaps the most instructive instance of elite antipathy to songs in films is the review of Lava Kusa by 'Kalki' Krishnamurthy. Instead of calling it a talkie, he called it 'paatti' punning on the Tamil words 'paatu' (song) and 'paatti' (grandmother). For him, Lava Kusa was full of songs and moved at a grandmotherly slow pace [Guy 1988]. We need to bear in mind here that songs (instead of dialogue) were a common feature of both company dramas and early Tamil talkies.

In the place of songs, what got privileged in the new discourse of the Tamil elite on cinema was dialogue. For instance, the review of Iru Sagotharargal published in Manikodi noted, "What infuses life into Iru Sagotharargal is its realistic dialogue. We see (sic) in this film interesting dialogues which fit the situation... We see everywhere in this film fluent dialogue." The review also exclaimed, "Isn't it a wonder in Tamil cinema world?" [Aranthai Narayanan 1988:38-39]. Exhibiting similar attitude, N Shrinnivas, the founder of the film magazine Talk-a-Tone (which announced itself as "A motion picture magazine with a mission and a purpose"), wrote, "Dialogues should be written so as to fit the roles of the actors... One who is drawn from upper class speaks in a particular way. Illiterate low caste person speaks differently. When a rich man addresses labourers, he speaks in a specific fashion. Labourers do not speak the same way as their employers..." [Shrinnivas 1942:51]. Thus, it was not only that dialogue should replace songs, but dialogues also should be realistic.

We may note here that this was exactly the basis on which the alliterative dialogue of the DMK genre of films were critiqued. As M Karunanidhi, who along with C N Annadurai, introduced such dialogue to Tamil films, noted in 1951, "Does the common man on the street, whom we meet everyday, speak in alliteration? Then, why
The shared qualities between company drama and early Tamil talkies did not stop with the presence of large number of songs in both. In addition to songs, both the media drew their stories from mythological and puranic sources. Once again, this was targeted by the Tamil elite for criticism. While Dinamani treated the religious ones and "those who are mad after songs" as equals in sharing low cultural tastes in the context of film spectating, Sambanda Mudaliar (1938:50) specified "ancient stories" as a shortcoming of Tamil films. What they preferred instead was so-called contemporary themes with realist orientation. A review of Maana Samrukshanam in Pesumpadam (April 1945) noted: 

The Tamil film Maana Samrukshanam is a great consecration for the cinema fans who are tired of seeing only puranic films during the past four or five years. It is not only that human beings appear instead of gods in this film; but it is full of realities of the contemporary life that it makes one happy. K Subramaniyam has become popular for his social films. He is a master in observing and reproducing in minute details commoner's life situations, attitudes and daily realities in films. It is these skills which he has correctly applied in this film [Aranthai Narayanan 1988:275].

In other words, the privileged teleology of cinema in the elite discourse was one of progress towards realism - a realism which would annul cinema's bad effects. For him, "cinema, like the stage, had little dialogue in which films 'had nothing to do with real life'" [ibid:38]. For him, the period between 1976 and 1985, when Tamil cinema came to terms with 'partly realistic and anti-sentimental stories', was the best so far, though it was still inadequate. Despite the fact that Seenivasan's scheme was one of calendric periodisation, it is simultaneously a classificatory system by which individual films and film-makers can be evaluated in terms of their closeness or otherwise to realism. In other words, this teleology, which privileged realism, offered the Tamil elite with a space to locate themselves within the universe of cinema and at the same time to assert their superior aesthetic self.

In an effort to further their agency over the cinematic medium, the Tamil elites, as a second move, brought in the criterion of uplift. Good cinema could not merely be realistic, but should also have a social purpose. In 1939, 'Kalki' Krishnamurthy, criticising those who kept themselves away from cinema, wrote: "As the best of the intellectuals- are ignoring cinema, its bad effects are proliferating uncontrolled; intellectuals are [on the other hand] ignoring it because of its bad effects! In short, a powerful instrument, which is capable of directing people's mind, is being used for bad ends" [Karnadagam 1939:48]. He further argued, "To the extent one is genuinely interested in social uplift, one should pay attention to cinema... If cinema leads to moral degradation, one should prevent it and transform cinema as a medium for moral uplift" [ibid:47]. Even B S Ramaiya, who was basically convinced that cinema was the most popular entertainment medium of the lower classes and who was never ashamed to get involved with cinema for that reason, could not give up the temptation towards the ideology of uplift. In his book, Cinema...?, which is a brilliantly written practical manual for film-makers, he wrote, "It is the responsibility of everyone to strengthen cinema and make it useful for the people. The responsibility of the educated and the journalists, who are concerned about the future of the country, is great in this mission" [Ramaiya 1943:273]. If 'Kalki' Krishnamurthy wanted the intellectuals to be invested with agency to carry out social uplift, for Ramaiya, they were the educated.

The career of the ideology of uplift in Tamil cinema is complex and needs separate study. In the pre-1947 phase, the ideology of uplift was framed in terms of nationalism. Even the conservative nationalist daily Dinamani did not mind cinema as long as it served nationalist cause. In 1936, it appealed, "What our country wants at present are only propaganda films. The cinema can participate to a large extent in the struggle for the liberation of the country. It is possible for the cinema to carry on simultaneously in several places a great agitation that can be carried on only by great orators and writers... A new spirit can be created among the people by introducing the songs of poet Bharathiyar in political, economic, social and devotional films." It was only in the context of nationalism as uplift that people like K Subramaniyam and S Satyamurthy could be part of the world of cinema and simultaneously claim an unsullied reputation among the Tamil cultural elites. In the post-1947 Tamil Nadu, the ideology of uplift had different incarnations. To mention just one it set in opposition films that appeal to emotions and films that appeal to mind, and annexed the latter as part of its territory. For instance, films of K Balachander were appropriated as part of elite self-definition within this dichotomy. According to Mukthi Seenivasan (1993:168), "Before the time of Balachander, cinema-goers remained merely as appreciators of emotions" and it was he who converted them to the higher ideal of applying their mind.

V

Though notions of realism and the ideology of uplift recovered for the Tamil elite the necessary space to be part of the cinema but still be different, it was inadequate. As we have noted earlier in this essay, the cinematic medium carries the possibility of 'intertextual excess'. That is, cinema can appropriate artefacts of high culture and low culture simultaneously and represent them in ways which subvert the boundaries between such divisions. As Revathi, a national award winning actress and a Bharatanatyam dancer, lamented recently, films can have a disco dance number in Bharatanatyam costume. The elite, so as to maintain their cultural hegemony, needs to contain such 'intertextual excess' of cinema. Their anxiety in this regard was predominantly about the cinematic representations of classical dance and classical music. To negotiate this challenge, they imported into the cinematic universe those evaluatory schemes which they had already been deploying for boundary-maintenance in the case of dance and music. In other words, they granted the stamp of approval only to those cinematic representations of dance and music which approximated the so-called pure form.
Their period, dance in cinema "witnessed all of them their training: Vazhuvur Ramaiya Pillai, Hiralal, Dandapani Pillai, Kalamandapam Madhavan and Gopalkrishna Master. This nostalgia of Seenivasan is immediately displaced by distress as he moves on to talk about the present state of dance in Tamil films: After the period of Kumari Kamala et al., "dance lost its sacredness. Dances are choreographed and used now in Tamil films only to feed the sexual urges [of the audience]" [Seenivasan 1993:168, 263: emphasis mine].

If Seenivasan invokes the question of sexuality to inferiorise popular film dance, it may be because Bharatanatyam, as it was reconstituted by the Tamil brahmin elite during the 20th century, was sanitised of its eroticism. It is true that a few like T Bala Saraswati tried to resist the efforts to 'purify' Bharatanatyam of Sringara. As she puts it, "Some seek to 'purify' Bharatanatyam by replacing the traditional lyrics which express sringara with devotional songs. I respectfully submit to such protagonists that there is nothing in Bharatanatyam which needs to be purified anymore: it is divine as it is and innate so. The sringara we experience in Bharatanatyam is never carnal; never, never..." [Gihan 1991:14]. As evident in the above quote, such resistance could not go beyond a point and what Bala Saraswati could do was to sublimate sringara as bhakti.

Moreover, Seenivasan's mode of argumentation fits well within the elite ideology of uplift. After all, preaching self-control (sexual or otherwise) has a sustained and long career in Tamil Nadu as elsewhere. The subaltern self always figured in upper caste/class discourse as overlaid with excess sexuality.

We may also note here that occasionally, the opposition between the so-called classical forms of music and dance and their other forms is staged within avant-garde film texts and resolved in favour of the former. Sankarobaranam is a recent case in point. As much as dance and music, other film-associated practices like writing scripts and lyrics were also inferiorised by the Tamil elite. Here they deployed the binaries of literature vs film script and poetry vs film lyrics. For instance, Akilan, who won the Gnanapeet award for literature and had a four-year encounter with cinema, differentiated literature and film script thus: "If one writes a novel keeping film script [as a model], the novel will turn out to be a chain of emotional events and will be interesting while reading. But it will not stand the time as [good] literature exploding socially relevant ideas." In his autobiography, Akilan was shame-faced about his involvement in the film world. He alluded to the 'ill-effects' of the DMK genre films on the illiterates and legitimised his involvement as one of trying to correct the situation: "I used to think that it would be good to use the powerful medium [of cinema] for the benefit of the people. In the north, K A Abbas used his writings and films for the uplift of the nation. I was contemplating whether something similar could be done here, at least at a smaller scale" [Aktion 1984:318-19]. He also claimed that he left the film world because he refused to submit his writings to the dictates of film producers [ibid:335].

The controversy surrounding Bharatidasan's lyrics for Balamani will be an instructive example of the status of lyric-writers in the eyes of the elites. Ariyur Padmanabha Pillai called Bharatidasan's lyrics as "kavithai kolai" ('murder of poetry') and argued that they violated the rules governing the 'virutham' form of Tamil poems. Bharatidasan, who inspired generations of Tamil poets, was forced to respond by writing a long rejoinder defending how his lyrics were governed by the grammatical rules [Bharatidasan 1984:300-02]. Jayakantan, who shares all the assumptions of the Tamil elite so far as cinema goes, confessed it all when he wrote: "Actor is an artiste; even then he can never attain and should never attain in society the high status which a poet (not a songwriter), a writer (not a script-writer) or a scientist..." [Jayakantan 1980:188, emphasis mine].

In differentiating their superior aesthetic self from that of the subalterns, what the Tamil elite endorsed instead was the use of poems by established poets (Subramania Bharati is a case in point) or stories or novels by established fictionists (Moga Mull of Janakiraman is a recent case) in films.

VI

The notion of realism, the ideology of uplift, and the deployment of binaries such as classical vs non-classical — all of them provided the Tamil elite with a new language to engage with the medium of cinema, particularly during the period when they realised that they could not afford to ignore it. All the same, this new language did not lead to the hegemony of the elite over cinema. The doubt which B S Ramaiya expressed in 1943 about the ability of cinema to become the monopoly of the elite continues to haunt them. As Ramaiya (1943:266-67) put it, "Films are produced at present for the attraction of the ordinary people. One cannot say whether cinema will ever reach the place of classical arts such as music and dance. Under the present circumstances, it is not possible to make films just for the satisfaction of the educated classes."

The Tamil elite could succeed in reducing Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music as their exclusive enclaves where both the performers and the audience belonged to their own
class. A similar solution was unavailable for them in the context of cinema. The very economy of cinema which initially attracted sections of the elite towards it, subverted any such possibility. Their desire for autonomy is constantly frustrated by the unavoidable dependence on the masses as audience. In this context of elusive hegemony, the new language of the elite about cinema got reduced to a framework for endless angst and lament about the masses.

Notes

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1 In the specific context of this paper, I define elites as those who were part of an ideological habitus wherein access to certain cultural products/practices (Carnatic music, Bharatanatyam) were celebrated as a marker of superior aesthetic self.

2 For a critical account of how classical music was deployed by the Tamil elite in defining their superior aesthetic self, see (Ratnamasy 1990:1944).

3 In his adult life, Sambanda Mudaliar took to amateur play writing and acting for an elite audience. While he refers to the actors of company dramas as ‘koottathidhal’ (mountebanks), those of the amateur theatre were for him ‘nadaga kalaingrargal’ (stage artistes).

4 It was the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and its leadership, which stood against different forms of Brahminical exclusivity and the elitism of the Indian National Congress, that corrected this situation. In its leadership, for the nationalist cause during the freedom struggle were derogatorily branded by this society as ‘koottahidal’ and were made to feel ashamed [of their profession]. There was this attitude among the people that actors are lowly and should not be mixed with. The exclusive club of elite music training was not an option for nationalists who sought a new kind of music training.

5 NG Damodharan in Dinamani, July 31, 1936, reproduced in Dinamani, July 31, 1935. The Tamil Nadu Archives.

6 The concept of cinephobia has been drawn from Ravi Vasudevan (1995).


8 According to Randor Guy (1989), it was ‘Raval’ Krishna Iyer who introduced regular carnatic music and well known musicians to Tamil film. Iyer achieved this “by getting veteran musician and composer Harikesinenallur Thirumalai Natarajan (Raval’s uncle) to set the music for Lava Kusa...” It seems that Iyer had mobilised his kinship resource so as to break the classical musicians’ resistance to cinema.


11 Ibid.

12 Despite such elite criticism, the alliterative dialogue of the DMK films turned out to be extremely popular. The complete dialogue of these films were reproduced in the form of low-priced booklets and they were sold in thousands. In several cases, there were pirated editions illegally published by unauthorised publishers. The book carrying the dialogue of M Karunanidhi’s Manohara (1954) became so popular that the publisher got the block cover page done in copper from the famous C G Velu company so that it would withstand large-scale printing (Sornam 1992:41; see also Thiruvanmukkarasu 1990:116).

13 Dinamani, May 24, 1935.

14 Dinamani, August 7, 1936, quoted in Bakaran (1981:120).

15 A comparison of the way in which the cultural elites recuperated K Subrahmaniam and S Satyamurthy then and recuperate Maniratnam now would be interesting. Both of them share the common characteristics of deploying nationalism as uplift, though in different contexts.

16 Dinamani, October 6, 1994.

17 If the Tamil elites despised company drama, one of the possible reasons for this was the way it combined different forms of music without much respect for the boundaries across them: “These songs of the drama companies were based on Carnatic music. In addition they introduced a new strain of music into Tamil Gv. natchyangam (drum music), the kind of Hindustani music as it came from Marathi and Parsi drama companies that had entered Tamil Nadu in the beginning of the century. Through this strain, Hindustani ‘ragas’ were observed and the synthesis was quite popular. Folk music also featured in these dramas and was usually sung by the conchdrum” (Bakaran 1991:756).

18 Interview with Subbuda, Subhamangala, February 1993.

19 Interview with Chemmangudi Sreenivasan Iyer, Subhamangala, March 1994.

20 Hayaraja himself is a critic of pigeoholing music as classical and otherwise. As he puts it, “I am not a musician. For a musician raga is a hurdle; tala is a hurdle; his music training is a hurdle; and his very conception about music is a hurdle. Since I am not a musician, I have no parameters to restrict myself. Whatever comes to my mind, I have no hesitation in doing it. I am able to compose a song in ‘aarohanam’ alone, while the whole spectrum of music viadwaans believed for centuries that a song should essentially comprise ‘aarohanam’ and ‘aaravannaham’. This is because I have no bonds” [Panneerselvan 1987:91].

21 Significantly, M Karunanidhi’s Parakutti (1952), a devotional film, emerged to this resolution and privileges cinema over Bharatanatyam. While the hero of the film favours watching films, a vamp-like character in the film, consciously named Jolly, dissuades him from going to films and tells him, “If an association to finish off cinema comes up, I will be its president. Only Bharatanatyam is fit for our country...” She takes him to a public performance, drugs him and cheats him out of his money.

22 Bombay, October 1966.

References


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