



Globalization and Contemporary Tamil Cinema: The Face of Change

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Abstract

The study focuses on how culture and social aspects are modified because of the effect of liberalization and globalization. It would focus on the prime factor of globalization - how it has produced a different Tamil cinema culture, of both conceptualizing the text as well as interpretation of the text. While commenting on contemporary Tamil cinema, the author puts forward the hypothesis that, present day Tamil cinema has a deep attraction to popular culture along with an amateur way of film making. These films and their film makers have diverted the global attention to Tamil cinema, along with providing their ardent audience a wide range of different films which they are ready to see and accept. Tamil cinema of today has more or less taken the 'middle path', where commercially viable films are made with a sense of identity with original stories set within the culture.

Keywords: Globalization, Polity and Public Sphere, Cinema

Introduction

Globalization has triggered off forces of change, which have set people rethinking about political institutions such as the state, the democracy and the civil society. In their functioning, the role of cultural pluralism and protection of the local cultures is now particularly recognized both in terms of institutional mechanism and as an element of political morality

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or value system. New thinking is taking place about the changing role of nation-state, its sovereignty and the role of political party, etc., under the growing forces of globalization (Kothari, 1995; Sartori, 1991; Apter, 1991; Keane, 1991). Globalization is not an even process, but occurs on many levels simultaneously and with the different levels of intensity and effects. Appadurai (1990) emphasizes the notion of 'multiple worlds' which underscore the fluidity and changeable nature of globalization process, marked by disjuncture between the political, economic and cultural spheres. Within this paradigm, globalization is marked by dynamic, multidirectional flows, which are no longer geographically bound. However, differences in the control and initiation of these flows remain (Massey, 1994, pp. 150). These flows are creating a new communication geography, which is increasingly "detached from the symbolic spaces of national culture, and realigned on the basis of the more 'universal' principles of international consumer culture" (Morely and Robins, 1995, pp. 11). In contrast, local programs aimed for domestic distribution possess their own styles, techniques and narratives, which reflect local issues of concern as well as local culture; thus, contributing to a viable public sphere in which political as well as cultural issues can circulate.

The public sphere as defined by Habermas (1997) is a forum which is free and accessible to all citizens for the exchange of ideas, information and debate; a space of social life determined neither by market forces nor by the state; and a major "societal mechanism for the production and circulation of culture which frames and gives meaning to our identity" (Dahlgren, 1995, pp. 23). Habermas says that this advanced capitalist phase of modernity effectively transformed the public sphere from a culture-debating to a culture consuming one. Rational critical thinking had to be replaced by consumption and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception (Habermas 1989:161). Political debate still receives airtime across today's media but such debates have lost their critical edge and no longer speak to public concerns because the umbilical cord that formerly connected private individuals by the mass media, is a public sphere in appearance only (Habermas 1989:171) and far removed from the golden age of culture-debating public sphere. Today's mediated political debates function as a 'tranquilizing substitute for action' (Habermas 1989:264) in which participants carefully hone their self - presentations so as to manage public opinion about their political positions.

Role of Films in India

Films have played a very important role in India, and even today remain the most popular form of entertainment and recreation. They have also played a crucial part from time to time in promoting educational and reformative values. They have proved to be a major source of linguistic and cultural integration. Indian films have gone beyond the geographical boundaries. They have come out of the epoch of love and fantasy and learnt to work on experimental plots. The effect of globalization of Indian cinema is applicable not only to the Bollywood, but also to the regional film industries of the country.

Industry of Tamil Cinema

Tamil is one of the four main south Indian languages, and like its more popular cousin from the north, (the Bombay film industry), the Tamil industry boasts of an old home-grown film culture. As the film medium evolved in India, regional film industries consolidated themselves along linguistic lines. Nevertheless, it would not be appropriate to define a common Indian film aesthetic. The most obvious traits include song and dance, lavish productions and high melodrama. This though, is the accepted "format" for mainstream or popular cinema, but, considering the internationally popular Bengali cinema from the 1950s and 60s, of which filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy have been pioneers, did not conform to the stereotype.

The worldwide Tamil cinema market can be estimated from the approximately 74 million Tamil speakers around the world, most of whom are based in the southern part of South Asia (South India and Sri Lanka), with a significant number of speakers in the Malay peninsula, various Indian Ocean islands, South Africa and a large number of expatriates settled in Europe and North America. Even though each of these places can be construed as an independent market, for the sake of convenience, the Tamil (or for that matter, any South Asian language's) market can be divided into two main sections: natives speakers market (in Asia); and expatriates market (mainly in Europe and North America). Many Tamil film viewers would dispute the claim that mainstream Tamil cinema is no

different from mainstream Bombay cinema, but Radhika Nair, who works as the BBFC's Tamil interpreter, (also being part of the expatriate market), puts things in perspective. She watches Tamil as well Hindi cinema coming into the UK, and finds very little difference between the two, though she says that recently, she has come across a few Tamil films that are willing to be experimental and break the mould of formulaic tradition.

'*Aaytha Ezhthu*' and '*Mudhalvan*' dealt with vigilante topics and were trend setters in vigilante Tamil movie culture.

Objectives of the study

This present study would be a bridge between the factors discussed above

- This would focus on regional cinema- Tamil cinema and its growth not just as a medium of propaganda but also as a medium, which sets trends in society and helps in shaping society with the changing times.
- It would be looking at contemporary cinema and whether it has remained successful in maintaining its bonding with the old school of Tamil cinema.
- Apart from this it would look further into the new political, social, cultural theories; contemporary Tamil cinema is propagating to the society.
- Provides wider scope for a continuous study unlike most of the literature available.

Literature Review

The missing links that have been identified within the existing literature is that majority of the literature concentrates on how this medium was exploited or made good use for political propaganda. How the medium has helped in building a post-colonial political state, how it has strived with its various political players to maintain it, till it was successfully instated in the coming generations also. The effects it had on the Diasporas which in turn affected the geo-political stand of the state. But there is very limited

literature with regard to a particular regional cinema, which analyses the future of that cinema, in the context of emerging liberalization policies. Would this industry be able to retain its classical heritage or would it wither with the effects of globalization. The present study also carries the weight age of being a continuous study unlike most of the literature available.

Methodology

The data collected is purely based on secondary data and analysis of the thematic patterns of the directors, the music, script, diasporic approach and promotion of the films. Expert interviews from authentic sites, journals and news paper have been used here.

Ideologies and decoding/encoding of Cinema Texts

As Hall (1980) notes, we 'decode' media texts in different ways - sometimes we agree, sometimes we disagree. Nonetheless, the power to decide what stories, ideas, tastes and values are offered to us via media communications is structured unequally in favour of some interests (the ruling one's) rather than others (the interests of the silent majority).

While he does not theorize ideology in any great depth, Barthes is none the less clear that myths contain ideological meanings. Myth and ideology in their structuralist senses are synonymous. The concept of 'ideology' has been theorized to a greater extent by structuralist Marxists who followed Barthes such as Louis Althusser and Stuart Hall. Althusser (1971) argued that individuals and capitalist societies are governed by ideological state apparatus (ISA) including schools, legal system, religious institutions, media communications and so on. These ISA espouse the ideologies of powerful political institutions such as governments and armies, in implicit - not explicit - ways, and sometimes without moving it. Here it would be relevant to state that Tamil cinema after the post-colonial stage had followed the above strategy to disseminate the Dravida Ideologies to the masses through the mass medium of cinema (mainly). As such, individuals 'internalize' ruling ideologies, unaware that their lives are repressed by the very institutions that represent and serve them (and perhaps even employ them). If earlier cinema was instrumentalized by the ISA,

the scenario still remains, but now the ideologies have been modified with the advent of globalization in this medium.

Hall's aim is to rediscover ideology as a concept that can reveal the 'politics of signification' engaged by media institutions. Here there is a deeper understanding of the behaviourist theory of media. Models of 'effects' such as Laswell's formula theorize the communication process in terms of its reliability. If messages are not received as intended, this is deemed to be a failure of communication in a technical or behavioural sense. The meaning or messages themselves, however, are assumed to be distortion free and universally transferable. But Hall argues that behaviourist models are flawed because they fail to situate media communications within existing social, economic and political structures. The meanings of messages, then, are able to be distorted and interpreted differently than intended according to the positions of producers (senders) and audiences (recipients) within these existing structures:

- Meaning is a social production, practice. The world has to be *made to mean*. Language and symbolization is the means by which meaning is produced. This approach dethroned the referential notion of language, which had sustained previous content analysis, where the meaning of a particular term or sentence could be validated simply by looking at what, in the real world, it referred. (Hall 1982: 67)

Like Saussure and Barthes, Hall states that meaning is a discursive process that operates within a language system, (what he terms as 'a set of codes') loaded with ideological significance. Media institutions and the texts they generate are important ideological dimensions through which we make sense of the world. Hall deploys semiotics to understand the sense making process, by which media transmit messages to their audiences. Language *encoded* (made to mean something) by those with 'the means of meaning production' (i.e. producers) and is then *decoded* (made to mean something) by audiences (Hall 1982:68). Hall extends this semiotic theory of meaning construction to the model of media production and reception which is commonly known as encoding / decoding model. Contemplating on the above mentioned points, the poetic Tamil language of Bharati Daasan, Bharatiyar, Anna

Durai, N.S. Krishnan and M Karunanidhi to mention a few, in the form of powerful dialogues, lyrics and comedy track, was instrumental in Tamil cinema, which played on both the local as well as the diasporic Tamil audiences. This has now been slowly transformed/modified in today's cinema in the form of fusion music, inclusion of expressions from popular Indian and English languages and comedy tracks which are of the 'easy go' type; this is what the new genre of Tamil cinema viewer understands.

Convergence between Reel Life and Real Life

In India, perhaps more than in any other country, the dividing line between the imaginary world of cinema and the reality of daily life is blurred. Cinema has often been described as an 'art form', 'a means of telling stories', 'a business' (usually a family business) 'a powerful medium'. Movies are made for the largest possible audiences. Films hold such an important place in the lives of the audience that they are believed to fulfil important social functions like providing recreation, information and education. That is why films are kept under control during and after their making, by those who have a say in the evolution of social life, like politicians, among others. Films are also the living forms of contemporary Myths. As the meaning of the word 'myth' indicates, they are stories – stories of the world held by a particular society at one time. As a technique, film-making is constantly influenced by the development of science. In some societies, a film is regarded as a commodity produced by an industry and circulated among consumers by a trade, which itself enjoys the support of a complex publicity business. The quest is for a more specific political framework, in which an apparently unselfconscious and routinized leisure practice may be investigated for the politics of how films are produced, of what is shown to whom, and how desires cantered on stars, lifestyles, commodities, and social identities influence the politics of everyday life and imagination (Roberge: *The ways of film studies*; 1992). When a film is shot, the 'look' of the cameras presumes the look of the spectator in the form of the screen. This assumption of a frontal baseline address to the spectator is built into the way shooting, composition and subsequently, editing, takes place. In these successive stages, the frontal baselines address is invoked and shifted; and the 'actual' spectator is mobilized into

an inscribed spectator (Ashish Rajadhyaksha). A mention of 'Muthhu' or 'Ejamaan' which are Rajinikanth starrer films, where in the protagonist is shown in an angel (in the introduction), which would make him look like a 'larger than life' persona, this definitely creates an aura in minds of the audience, wherever be his seating in the cinema hall. In his book on popular cinema, *The Painted Face*, Das Gupta, views the spectator of popular cinema as incapacitated by pre modern cognitive features, unable to distinguish between screen image and reality. Believing what he sees, the mass spectator is eminently susceptible to a totalitarian politics founded on the image of the leader. In his understanding, the weakness is dramatically underscored by the way film is put to political use in certain regional cultures as in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and, less successfully, Karnataka. In the Tamil and Telugu cases the cinema also has a strong linkage with the politics of regional and ethnic identity. In recent times the cinemas of the south have also made a greater effort to diversify their products than the Bombay industry.

In this account of the political domain of the popular cinema, the ideological dimension of film form has been privileged by most writers, whether to explain the reproduction of political authority or its subversion. We seem to have mislaid the question of how a compact is formed between popular films and their audiences through their mechanisms of cultural recognition. At one level, however, even the problems of form, whether the convolutions of segmentation and re-housing of forms or the obfuscations resulting from the probations are abstractly not universal. A formal solution when it becomes a stable way in managing conflicts provides an archaeological image, various past forms inhabiting the present in a layering of time. Cultural recognition maybe evoked in the process of registering the embedded histories to which we are heir.

Central here is the issue of recognizing authority. The ruling forces have to convict themselves, as much as their subjects of their capacity to adapt to new conditions. Here tradition is a cultural necessity as well as an ideological instrument. But we also need to think of the subject, negotiating new conditions, while appearing to accept the reproduction of older relations of authority and subjectivity. As we have seen, tradition is not fixed but varied in

the array of resources it offers. When cultural subjects choose or invent traditions, those choices may involve an adaptation to modernity, to make 'our modernity', rather than a rejection or neutralization of it (Vasudevan).

Present day cinema especially South Indian cinema has films which orchestrate very different, heterogeneous, denunciative or signifying systems by spatializing the conflict or antagonism between them: Fusion music, saturation of the visual field of urban space by all kinds of objects, liberalized political spaces, and traditional spaces. Take for instance the recent Gautam Menon directed blockbuster '*Vinnaithaandi Varuvaaya*', where the soft lighting, the colour, and the fusion music by AR Rahman and the panoramic locations helps the audience to detach themselves from the old, without knowing as to why is it growing or from what it is growing.

Conclusion

This study would concentrate on how culture and social aspects are modified because of the effect of liberalization and globalization. It would focus on the prime factor of globalization - how it has produced a different Tamil cinema culture, of both conceptualizing the text as well as interpretation of the text. This plays on the building of a public/genre, which indirectly forms the social-political state. Further it would also be discussing the pale shadow effects of its former self (here the focus would be more on how it has graduated/transformed itself from one form to another). Hence this would be a unique study in itself which can be further discussed in the future also.

There has been a gradual paradigm shift in the movie culture, where the focus has been identifying the common man as 'common' and there-by making this a saleable factor for the film. This has also led to the redefinition of the identity of the common man. This is to say that rather than identifying himself to the larger political setup, the viewer finds his personified aura on screen dealing with his confused identity and relation with the state.

Films made in the past 7-5 years have a different thematic pattern and are inculcating a new definition for the viewers who for

generations have been used to the cinema with a political agenda. For instance films like ASK (*Azhagar Samiyin Kuthirai*) are both a visual and musical treat. The film does not have a detailed choreographed fight scene or any dream song filmed in a foreign location. But in the end there is a lot of realization with the proper treatment given to issues like cast discrimination, blind faith and for the audience it's a new realization that the hero of the film need not be a man with muscle power and good looks.

Present day Tamil cinema has a deep attraction to popular culture along with an amateur way of film making. These films and their film makers have diverted the global attention to Tamil cinema, along with providing their ardent audience a wide range of different films which they are ready to see and accept. Tamil cinema of today has more or less taken the 'middle path', where commercially viable films are made with a sense of identity with original stories set within the culture. Films like '*Paruthiveeran*' by Ameer Sultan have had a special mention in the Berlin Film Festival 2008, director Vetrimaran's *Aadukalam* 2011, won 5 national awards including the best director award.

Perhaps this is one reason why the attention of potential investor/producers from the International market and Bollywood are attracted down south especially to the Tamil film industry.

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