CINEMA AND CULTURE: AN OVERVIEW ON IMAGE WORSHIP OF FILM STARS IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Image worship has been deeply entrenched in the Tamil culture for thousands of years. From ancient times, Tamils people have worshipped and sought the blessings of gods, animals, trees, mythical creatures and kings in the form of images. Image worship holds a pertinent and long history in Tamil culture. Heroes have been glorified and venerated as gods and goddesses. Tamil Nadu is a state where temples have been built for film stars and rituals performed to their images. Richard Dyer (1998) notes that in early the period, stars were considered gods and goddesses, heroes, models – as embodiments of ideal ways of behaving. The convention of trusting protagonists began right from folklores, music, theatres to the digital cinema today. The researchers have attempted to study the culture of image worship of film stars in Tamil Nadu. This research is a qualitative approach wherein 35 articles have been chosen to study the culture of image worship of Tamil film stars by the people of Tamil Nadu. Film stars have been adulated on and off the screen even in today's new age of technologies. Everything changes or evolves with time, but the images remain the same and continue to carry the history, life and thoughts for generations to follow.

Keywords: *Tamil culture, Tamil stars, Image worship, Heroes*

INTRODUCTION:

The changes that begin from understanding situations and circumstances result in evolution. Understanding brings about the need for adaptation that leads to change. Human evolution initially began with a quest for food through hunting and over the years has evolved with the pursuit and search for knowledge. Humans evolve with their society as a whole, not just biologically and geographically but also culturally. Culture is the way of life of a group of people or a community, including their general customs, knowledge, arts, laws, habits, values, and beliefs. Culture is acquired

through imitation, indoctrination and conditioning. Learning means acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being taught and it can be about biology, physiology, psychology, art, culture, languages, relationships, lifestyle, technology and everything. A person who has expertise, knowledge, ability and skill in a field will be praised. When a person is selfless, righteous in his deeds and can influence others is accepted as a leader and seen as a hero. The attributes of a good person will be carried on to the next generations in the forms of poems, songs, stories, and images as a hero. Heroes have always played a significant role in a society for centuries. Image worship holds an invaluable place from ancient days till date in Tamil Nadu where deification of larger than life movie stars, who have become political leaders, has been a prominent culture. Tamils treat heroes as demi-gods and worship them in different forms. Tamil cinema can open the window to understanding Tamil psychology, Tamil culture, and its consequences (Chokkalingam, 2000). In the history of cinema, its political and social nature, there is a typical place for the Tamil cinema, which covers the entire lives of the people (Govindan, 2001). Films portray role models, especially for children and youth to imitate (David, 1983). Rajinikanth has been worshipped like a demi-god by the Tamil people when he appears on the screen. They perform temple rituals like showering him with flowers, garlanding his cutouts, and also bathing or anointing his images with milk. Tamil youth spend their time, energy, and resources this way unmindful of values like self-respect and self-esteem to say the least (Perianayagam Jesudoss, 2009).

Image Worship in Tamil Culture - History:
Tamil Nadu is known to be one of the oldest civilisations. Tamil tradition is one of the most ancient and rich traditions in the world. From the ancient days, people celebrated festivals and occasions in many ways. The culture of carrying images in large public processions is even now a part of many celebrations. People initially worshipped through prayers, chants, rituals and sacrificial ceremonies. The custom of worshipping images of gods and goddesses became a part of ancient practices like Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Tamil people erected monoliths of deities which they believed to possess magical powers. They also buried their dead elders and believed in the afterlife. They worshipped the spirits of their ancestors. The people of the Indus Valley had the tradition of ritually worshipping and honouring deities in image forms. For a long time, Tamil people have worshipped gods, animals, trees, mythical creatures and kings in the form of symbols and images. They pursued the blessings of the deities for protection, good harvest, etc. Image worship holds a long history in Tamil culture. Images can be two-dimensional or three-dimensional, tangible/ visible/illusory form, vivid/graphic representation or description, a reproduction/imitation of the form of a person or thing according to Merriam-Webster. As research on attitudes, attitude and behaviour, person perception (e.g., stereotyping), self-regulation, and metacognition has shown, people's beliefs shape their reality and behavior (Heider, 1958, Kruglanski, 1975; Snyder, 1984). In the early days, people sat under trees and shared their emotions. They ate, talked, laughed and even worshipped the same trees. They paid tribute to kings who protected them and their nation and worshipped them at all times. E.g. Statues of Raja Raja Chozhan, King Akkarajan, etc. People honoured the soldiers who died in wars by building their statues as an act of gratitude, respect and memory. They bear an iconographical and epigraphical apparatus which provides with information

on the identity of the deceased and the context of a king's death. The tradition of 'nadukal' (hero stone) for war heroes, saviours and legends with their figurines were installed and revered. Idols of such heroes were set in temples and have been worshipped till date, as of Valvil Ori in Semmedu in the Kolli Hills. Image worship had found its evolution when national leaders and politicians were adulated, and the culture further spread and included celebrities like actors. The sentiments and aspirations of Tamil people have been reflected in Tamil cinema. The cultural and social ideologies have been articulated by cinema through various signs and symbols. Film stars mirror the society and play multi roles as propagators, educators, entertainers, and guardians of ideas, traditions, culture and the society as a whole. As such, film stars have been playing an evident role in constructing the social, cultural, and political values of Tamil society for generations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The cinema industry takes special care in constructing the social, cultural, as well as the political values of a society (Jesudoss, 2009).

Heroic figures always inspire us; the function and cultivation of the hero and surrounding mythologies reveal essential truths about the existence of human (Allison and Goethals 2015; Campbell 1949; Lane 1981).

Tamil cinema has enabled wider dissemination of Tamil culture and its ideology. The cultural practices are still interwoven with cinema, for example, the exuberant use of Tamil language. Tamil cinema helped articulate political and cultural ideologies through a variety of signs and symbols. However, Tamil cinema has always assisted in carving the changes in culture and challenged the traditions and religious sentiments of the Tamil people. Tamil cinema has often depicted cultural rituals of Tamil Nadu. Cultural leaders have enjoyed high status in every culture, and Tamil Nadu is not any different. We can see the same ranking offered to the film stars (Nithin Kalorath, 2016).

The popularity of film stars, in its manifestations, acquires a far more spiritual dimension, especially in South India. Film stars are not only deeply admired but also worshipped as gods. It is common to see garlanded portraits of famous film stars placed on the family altar. Particularly, the adulation and fanaticism developed for MGR was profound and continued even after his death, and the fans still have the same level of intensity and reverence for MGR in present-day Tamil Nadu (S.Dickey, 1993).

The Tamil film industry produces cultural elements in its narratives by presenting its film stars as 'heavenly bodies.' Looking down the prism of film spectacles and navigating across the charisma of stars, the veneration of Tamil film stars and their political dominancy presents a detailed picture of contemporary Tamil culture (Dhamu Pongiyannan, 2013).

Heroes are described to display moral integrity (Kinsella et al., 2015), doing the right thing (Schwartz and Schwartz, 2010), and showing a noble purpose without selfishness (Singer, 1991).

Hero-worship exists, has existed, and will exist forever, invariably, among humanity (Thomas Carlyle).

METHODOLOGY:

The study is qualitative in design, and the researchers have adopted the textual analysis method within a broader cultural studies approach. Content analysis is a highly flexible research method with research goals and objectives applied in qualitative, quantitative, and sometimes mixed modes of research frameworks. It employs a wide range of analytical techniques to generate findings and put them into context. The researchers have chosen 35 research articles. The articles were used to examine image worship of Tamil film stars and its impact on Tamil society in a cultural as well as social perspective. The factors taken into consideration are Hero, Images, Fans & their Expressions, Images & Hero Worship in Tamil Nadu, Worshipping Stars of Tamil Cinema and Heroes, Images, Cinema & Leaders.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Hero:

A hero is the one who does something good for society, the one who people look up to for the good and the bad. He is someone concerned with the wellbeing of others, sees from a different perspective, possesses skills, competence and compassion. He is the one who is extraordinary, willing to do things that a common man dreams of doing and can rise above those around him for good and against the bad. People aspire to be in a hero's shoes. The etymology of the word heroes (from Greek *heroes*) suggests that heroes protect others. The younger generations need heroes as examples to follow, to look up to and emulate. The character traits and values of a hero in branded stories could have been aligned with attributes and values that associated with heroes and moral exemplars in the heroism literature (Allison and Goethals, 2016 & Fagin-Jones, 2017). The distinguished eight traits of heroes have been clustered as smart, caring, reliable, resilient, strong, selfless, inspiring, and charismatic (the "Great Eight"; Allison and Goethals, 2011). Characters of the Tamil film heroes have been carved to save the nation and help the needy nevertheless to build larger-than-life real hero images for reel heroes. The film heroes inspire their fans and followers, impact their lives, thereby their society.

Images:

Emotions like love and affection differ from person to person in terms of who expresses it and to whom has been expressed. There are many ways to express one's feelings. Sometimes circumstances define the meaning of these expressions even though all emotions have been considered valid, and sentiments can neither be wrong nor right. As a token of love and respect, people offer flowers and garlands to the images of Gods and Goddesses. Leaders and celebrities are also venerated with similar offerings and treated as demi-gods. When people become obsessed with them, they build and revere their images. These images with their form, shape, texture, structure and quality carry all the voices and language that depict the emotions of the fans. The small and large structures or images are transferred onto the screen through various technologies. Images seem to be very prominent identities of the actors. An image has a speciality within itself. There are idols inaugurated by fans who are obsessed with an actor and sometimes by the Government as a tribute to their contributions to the cinema industry or the society. On the whole, notions of people are depicted

as art forms of the structures in cinema and individuals most often strive to create a meaningful life (Duckworth et al., 2005) based on society's values, frequently modelled by heroes and through such means, the stars tend to create a lasting impact and achieve symbolic immortality (Goethals and Allison, 2012) through the images they created over the years. These images would last for generations to come with or without the heroes.

The images of film stars could be seen in different forms that evolved over the years. Some forms were popularly prevalent during particular time periods.

- Idols
- Postcards
- Posters
- Cutouts
- Flex/Banners
- Digital pictures
- T- Shirts/caps/bike/mobile or laptop front covers
- Tattoos
- Teasers, promotions
- Printed image
- Temples for actors

FANS AND THEIR EXPRESSIONS:

Fans were born even before stars were established. A fan is happy when his favourite stars perform and the joy is doubled when the actor defeats the antagonist and succeeds on-screen. From admiring everything about the lead, the fondness reaches the extent of worshipping him or her. The devotion of a fan goes to the next level when he reveres an actor with his idol, treating him as a demi-god. With or without an image, the films of those actors will serve as their identity. The release of an actor's film is celebrated with cut-outs of the actor erected near theatres. Celebrating living people has taken the extent of veneration of their images and has reached the heights of temples built as a symbol of love and affection for these reel actors. As for a God in the temple, offerings including garlands, coconuts, fruits, flowers, bathed with milk, etc. are made to these cut-outs of actors. Heroes may motivate individuals toward being a better person by raising awareness of ideal selves (Klapp, 1969). Also, heroes are described as directing away their personal ambitions from "narrow, self-centred concerns" (Singer, 1991). The fan is so invested in the image such that he feels entitled to be its guardian. Sharing stories of hero transformations can offer the same benefits as group therapy to many (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005). Fans admire their heroes who beat the odds and become successful. That success also helps them forget their failures and problems, as well as draw pleasure from the success and popularity of their favourite stars. Fandom is a constant dialogue between intense affinity, affection and excess versus justification, control and denunciation (Gerritsen, Roos, 2016). Fans look up to their favourite stars, admire them, idolise them, and latch on to the image. In Tamil Nadu, children grow up opting for haircuts of film stars from pictures on the men's salon walls. From childhood, they are made to choose their role models. Gradually, it becomes a common

culture among teenagers to adorn their walls with posters of their favourite stars, be it film star or sports star. They assume their stars as role models and thrive to imitate and worship them. A hero has been seen as an embodiment of virtues, values, worth, courage, strength and nobility. All these factors outnumber the negative traits noted in a hero. Their adoration begins with choosing stars as role models, renaming themselves and naming their children, tattooing star names or images and reaches the heights of worship with treating their stars as Gods and Goddesses. Fans observe their successful heroes, admire them for their accomplishments and push themselves towards such higher goals, relatively influencing the society they thrive in as well.

Images and Hero Worship in Tamil Nadu:
People not only love but worship (Raman, 2012). The popular culture of hero worship has a history long enough in Tamil Nadu that it is carried on from generation to generation in the genes of the Tamils. There have been recorded instances where Gods, Goddesses, nature, kings, heroes, leaders, were all worshipped and celebrated significantly. The culture of image worship is more pronounced in India compared to anywhere else, especially in the South and in Tamil Nadu, to be specific. Tamils have a long history of hero worship. Among Tamils, there is the notion in the context of worship, aka *valipadu* - *akam* generally is the personal, private worship, the reverence of the chosen deity (*ista devata*) as opposed to *pura valipadu* - the public worship, the glorification of the clan/ caste or village deity (Masilamani-Meyer, Eveline, 2004). Tolkappiyam encompasses instances of memorial pillar/*nadukal* (hero stone) erected in memory of a warrior with the history and memories of worship of the warrior, the name and the heroic deeds of the warrior (V. Dhas, G. 2019). God and Goddess, considered supreme powers, are idolised, loved and worshipped by a common man with all his heart. Image worship symbolises the depth of love and care and the height of honour for a person. Images bear many stories with the history behind them to educate and inspire people. They carry all the essence of braveness, love, courage and culture towards its motherland. In Tamil Nadu, cinema has contributed to the culture of deification of stars. Film stars, ordinary mortals turned into idols, brought changes in the idea of God, temple, and worship (Perianayagam Jesudoss, 2009). The film industry is a field from where charismatic stars are worshipped as demi-gods and goddesses, accepted as leaders/politicians. The culture of learning more by watching and imitating through audiovisual images, the gazing culture has always been prominent in Tamil Nadu.

Worshipping Stars of Tamil Cinema:
Veneration of images has passed on from generation to generation with the celebration of film heroes taking place even in today's digital era. With a step towards commercialisation and entertainment trends, Tamil cinema, in the form of popular culture, offers a visual commentary entangled directly with the lives of the people to enable them to consume various belief systems, information, and cultural commodities, thus fulfilling the social and cultural needs (Jesudoss, 2009). The pictures that appear in cinema have more life in reality. Images are loved, cared and celebrated by fans. Hero worship in Tamil cinema continues till date. Beginning from Thiyagaraja Bhagavadhar, M.G.Ramachandran, Sivaji Ganesan, Rajinikanth, Kamal Hassan, Vijay, Ajith to Simbu and from K.P.Sundarambaal, Savithri, Padmini, Jayalalitha, K.R. Vijaya, Rubini, Kanaga, Khusbhu, Jyothika, Simran, Anushka to Hansika, fans have praised and celebrated stars. People have also gone to the extent of considering some of the actors as living gods and built temples for stars like MGR, Kushboo,

Rajinikanth, Namitha, and Hansika. The image of a hero is not just restricted to the screen but also off the screen. This trend has been happening for a very long time in Tamil Cinema. The images may have been annihilated physically, but the history and thoughts behind them will keep them alive for a long time until change changes the culture and these images. The heroes become part of the culture, identity and society.

Tamil Heroes, Images, Cinema and Leaders:
Cinema is a live video that portrays the life of humans on a screen. Cinema is a technology that shapes and records the objective and subjective realities of every person (Youngblood, 1970). Tamil Nadu has the history where political leaders emerge out of admired stars who are praised and idolised by their fans, and these heroes tend to arouse positive emotions like awe, gratitude, or admiration (Algoe and Haidt, 2009). The feature film is a twentieth-century storyteller, and much more than the contemporary novel, it is the model through which we articulate the world (Turner, 1986). The mise-en-scene of a cinema places women, men, children, birds, animals, nature, etc. on stage and all these together are harmonised into a single movie. Each shot, when seen separately in a setting gives a different story for different people as emotions, expressions and perceptions differ from person to person from time to time. These settings are pictured, enlivened with culture, traditions, knowledge and portrayed on screen for the audience.

In Tamil culture, the influence of cinema in the daily lives of Tamils goes deep from the days of theatre to the digital cinema now. Cinema, being the most popular medium for ages, is versatile, in nature, with a universal audience. Politics and the power associated with it is mostly imposed and built based on mass support. Eminent political leaders with a stint in theatre and cinema, like C.N.Annadurai, M.G.Ramachandran, M.Karunanidhi, V.N.Janaki and J.Jayalalithaa were accepted as Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu. Cinematic charisma has opened gates for reel heroes to be considered as real heroes with entries gained into politics as well. Early Tamil films were largely 'mythological' but with the first 'social' films in 1936 came an infusion of politics (Hardgrave, 1973). Tamil film star fan clubs provide significant social spaces for fans' participation in the democratic political process, even though these spaces are hierarchically structured and function to contain youthful exuberance (Martyn Rogers 2009). Every chief minister since the 1960s and many prominent politicians, for instance, have previously been actors, directors or screen writers (Martyn Rogers, 2009).

MGR (titled 'Puratchi Thalaivar' in Tamil cinema) played Samaritan formula movies and established a fan base that aided his transition from an actor to a political leader. MGR was seen as 'one among the people,' 'the incarnation of goodness,' as well as 'the poor man's avatar' (Hardgrave, 1973). He identified himself as one among the common, with political messages via dialogues and even the lyrics gaining entry into electoral politics from the cinema. MGR had a clear understanding about the values and virtues of the Tamils, and this enabled him to create an emotional oneness between himself and the Tamil society (SS Pandian, 1992). Following the death of C.N.Annadurai, M.G.R announced a rival party, the Anna DMK to challenge the legitimacy of Karunanidhi's leadership, the star's fans paraded the streets pulling down DMK flags and stoning Government buses (Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. 1973).

Jayalalitha, protégé of MGR (titled 'Puratchi Thalaivi' and known as Amma) has been the only female actor who outshone her male counterparts and was democratically elected to rule a State three times. She gained her political succession from her cinema success and headed the political party founded by MGR.

Vijayakanth (titled 'Puratchi Kalaginar'), an actor, carefully crafted his political image through cinematic images popular for action, violence, weaponry against the injustice that served instant justice, especially to women and the poor. Nicknamed as Karuppu MGR, he too gained entry into politics with the support of loyal followers procured from cinema.

Popular South Indian cinema is a high entertainment form of cinema, plotted around improbable twists of fate, set in exaggerated locales, filled with songs, dances, and fight scenes, patronised primarily by the poor and typically dismissed by critics with cinema's confounding critical role in state and national politics (Dickey, S. 1993). Cinema and the charisma associated with it have proven to offer the support base imperative for politics.

CONCLUSION:

Change, being the only permanent thing in the world, is an unchangeable law. Human beings change, everything changes or evolves with time, but the images remain the same and continue to carry the history, life and thoughts for generations to follow. The heroes, as sources of inspiration, build their images and have an effect on an individual's life such that the society and its culture is influenced as a whole. Fans observe their successful heroes, admire them for their accomplishments and push themselves towards such higher goals, relatively impacting the society they thrive in as well.

The Tamil people are basically 'iconophiles' (who like sculpture, painting, images, animated or otherwise), and the cult of hero-worship naturally transposed itself to famous film stars (Thoraval, 2000, 52). The culture of image worship portrays the dedication of fans and followers. Although actors may be physically mortal, their cinematic charisma is 'immortal' in the minds of the people (K Jeshi, 2012). With time, physical images may be destroyed or damaged, but the search for knowledge will revive the history of it. So history has the essence of the images to a certain extent, preserving and passing on the culture for the generations to come. Even in today's scenario, people not only carry the images spiritually in their minds but physically in their wallets, pockets, as tattoos on their body and also digitally in their cellphones, laptops, etc. Tamil actors through cinema have had a definite impact in carving the culture, shaping the society, traditions and sentiments of Tamils over the ages and will continue to do so. Tamil cinema, functioning as a social, political, as well as an economic institution, is a powerful medium of cultural expression as such (Pendakur, 2003). Images of film stars may cease to exist, but they do not actually die as the legacy is passed on over generations to feel, as will be the culture and practice of image worship of Tamil film stars. Hero-worship has existed, exists and will forever exist, universally, among humanity.

S.No.	Source	Factors
1	Vanamamalai, N. (1975). Herostone Worship in Ancient South India. *Social Scientist*, 40-46.	The researchers have chosen the aforementioned 35 research articles and examined image worship of Tamil film stars and its impact on Tamil society in cultural as well social perspective.
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