Tamil Cinema
The cultural politics of India’s other film industry

Edited by
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Popular Tamil film and the remaking of rural life

*Anand Pandian*

Any man today can lay claim to being filmed. Walter Benjamin (1968: 231)

On a hot March morning in 2002, I set off by foot for the southernmost orchards of the Cumbum Valley, a triangular vale tucked between the mountains of the Western Ghats and the plains of Tamil Nadu in southern India. Farmers throughout the valley were preparing to plant another crop of onions, and many laborers were at work that day raising orchard soils into the small divided beds most suitable for planting and irrigating onion bulbs. I came across my friend Pandian, a young wage laborer who had managed to save up enough money to take a half-acre plot of orchard land on mortgage three years back. He was working alongside the Dalit laborers he had hired to heap the loose red soil of the field into small rows of rectangular beds. Leaning over at one point to scrape a bit of dry soil into a low-lying hollow on the field, Pandian broke out suddenly into a few lines of song, drawn from the 1987 film *Velaiikaran*—“Making beds in the orchard, I’m looking, looking . . . ” “This is the work,” he told me when I looked on with bemused surprise. His wife Ayyammal later told me that her husband often sang this song as he worked on the orchard tract: “Isn’t that the work he does? He sings of that.”

This was by no means the first time that I found cinema bent to suit the needs of daily life in rural Tamil Nadu. Throughout my fieldwork on the subject of agrarian social reform in the southern Tamil countryside, I was struck by the extent to which film had crept into the intimate texture of rural experience. Scenes and songs from commercial Tamil film streamed endlessly from tea stall televisions, speakers mounted on street corners and rooftops to signal special occasions, and living rooms tuned nightly to the same popular channels. Many of my interlocutors turned most often to didactic lyrics and dialogues drawn from such films in order to navigate the ethical trials of everyday life. Young men and women professed a close identification with or even a love for one or another popular actor or actress. Older men and women spoke in turn to blame cinema for the moral depravity of contemporary youth. A surprising number of families could
point to relatives who had sought a place in the distant film industry of Chennai, several hundred kilometers to the north. Each of these phenomena testifies to one of the most prominent ways in which the rural citizens of the Cumbum Valley identify the very nature of the present: as a cinema kaalam or an “age of cinema.”

The identification of the rural present as an especially cinematic time is greatly indebted to a significant development in Tamil commercial film production that began in the 1970s: the emergence of a genre of cinema dedicated to the realistic depiction of rural life onscreen. These “nativity” films—as they have been termed by moviemaking professionals—are shot extensively in rural locales, depicting peasant protagonists, staging dialogues in regional dialects and idioms, and introducing folk rhythms and instruments into cinematic soundtracks. Many among the hundreds of these films have been staged in the Cumbum Valley and the surrounding countryside, often by filmmakers hailing from the region itself. I was startled to find certain elder villagers react with cynicism to my own first earnest attempts to record their field and folk songs, voicing a suspicion that I intended only to sell their oral traditions to moviemakers for a handsome profit! That the Tamil film industry has been extraordinarily concerned in recent decades with depicting rural custom and culture onscreen is widely obvious.

What I seek to do in this essay is to chart some of the most significant points of intersection between Tamil commercial film and everyday life in the Tamil countryside today. I am less concerned here with what these films mean and more with what they do: that is, the myriad ways in which Tamil celluloid has interposed itself as the language and landscape of daily life. Rather than addressing the narrative unity of particular cinematic texts, in other words, I attend to the multiple and dissonant ways in which fragments of cinema come to work as incitements to live in a particular fashion. Cinema has emerged as one of the most powerful and supple means by which rural people in south India grapple with the challenges and imperatives of modernity.

Each portion of this essay calls attention to one of four aspects of such popular engagement with film in the countryside: cinema as an arena of spectatorial pleasure and desire; as an instrument of everyday moral practice; as a way of articulating the character of quotidian rural experience; and as a field of active rural participation in production. I rely on evidence culled from over a year of ethnographic fieldwork concerning modern agrarian developments in the Cumbum Valley, a fertile and well-irrigated agricultural region west of Madurai in southern Tamil Nadu. The tales that follow focus in particular on the village of KG Patti near the head of the valley, a settlement of over one thousand households populated primarily by Kallar, Gounder, and Dalit castefolk. By anchoring this essay in a series of encounters and anecdotes, I seek to convey how filmic residues have worked themselves so closely into the fine grain of Tamil rural experience.
On a June evening in 2002, I snuck off to the Yuvaraja theater in the town of Cumbum with my young friends Bose and Malai. We were on our way to see *Thulluvathoo Ilaamai* (Youth Leaps About), a new film about the trials and pleasures of adolescence directed by Kasturi Raja. As we bumped along on my motorbike down the gravelly road from KG Patti, Malai said that this was their own *thulli thiriyum kaalam* or “time to leap about and wander”—refusing to heed their parents, resisting the pressure to wed, indulging in whatever mischief suited them. Both of these young men, just a few years younger than me, easily related to the story and especially its closing statement that youth should be allowed by their parents, teachers, and other wards to enjoy themselves freely. Throughout the film, Bose and Malai pointed out nearby locations that they recognized onscreen: a bus stand, a college campus, another regional movie theater. Relishing the tales of a young man’s first exposure to razors, cigarettes, beer, and pornography, they remarked again and again about the “reality” of the film. Although they were rural electrical workers and the story narrated the exploits of educated urban kids, the film invited wider masculine identification with its visual and aural pleasures.

The Yuvaraja theater was packed with hundreds of people that night, a rare event as far as I had seen. Forms of cinematic spectatorship have changed a great deal since the first tin-roofed movie sheds were put up in the larger towns of the Cumbum Valley several decades ago. Nearly every village in this relatively prosperous region now has at least one satellite cable television network running lines to individual houses and making cinema broadcasts available on a daily basis. By no means does every home have a television, but with at least a couple present on even the poorest streets of each village—not to mention most of the tea stalls and even some of the grocery stores—films are far more easily accessible to rural residents today than the scattered halls that once monopolized their presentation.

One consequence of these proliferating screens is that the viewing or reception of cinema has assumed a far more fragmentary form than in earlier years. Rural viewers are much more likely to catch a few minutes of a film onscreen in a moment of rest after an afternoon meal, on a visit with a friend or relation, or in the midst of a lull in a tea stall conversation, than by means of a trip to a cinema hall screening. This is even more the case with respect to popular Tamil film songs, which are not only screened independently on televised programs but also mixed together and loudly replayed at most domestic festivities. As I will argue in what follows, this fragmentation of transmission greatly shapes the nature of its rural reception.

The attractions of the cinema leave their many marks on the lived spaces of the countryside in other ways as well. Here as elsewhere throughout the state, fan clubs are a ubiquitous means of both social affiliation and distinction, among young men in particular (Dickey 1993). In 2001 and 2002, when I conducted fieldwork in the Cumbum Valley, clubs devoted to younger stars such as Vijay and Ajit as well as older stalwarts such as Rajni Kanth,
Vijay Kanth, and Satyaraj were common. Groups of young men would celebrate the weddings of their friends by plastering public walls with printed posters of congratulation, usually distinguished by the image of a favored star. A rival crowd of youths might retaliate in turn by identifying their own congratulatory posters with a notable villain or antagonist to this particular actor. Glossy color portraits of cinema stars are also circulated among friends as framed gifts on such occasions. Although barber shops and roadside stalls are also plastered with posters for Hollywood pictures and pornographic

Figure 8.1 Young men act out a scene from the 1999 film Sethu in the midst of a temple festival.
“blue films,” the prevalence of these Tamil film idols testifies to the continued appeal of commercial Tamil cinema among contemporary rural youth.

Much of what is attractive in these films to young men and women alike is the image of a romantic love cast in an inevitable tension with social and familial expectation (Inden 1999). Although almost all of these rural youths would ultimately bend to the convention of an arranged marriage, I met hardly any who had not nurtured the fantasy of a romantic attraction pursued to public recognition, if not clandestine consummation. The latter prospect bedeviled most of the parents and grandparents of adolescent boys and girls that I knew, who often blamed the obvious evidence of bus stop flirtations, riverside glances, and furtive love notes circulated by pint-sized messengers on the tempting spectacles of film itself.

This silhouette of love had grown so threatening that many parents admitted to arranging marriages for their children at ever younger ages, seeking to bypass the dangers of adolescence altogether. An elderly wage laborer named Karupayi amma had married her own daughter off at the age of 15 for this reason—in this “age of cinema,” she told me, the desires of young boys and girls could no longer be restrained. For her and for many of her peers, cinema was a recurrent lesson in corrupted wants, one that displaced what they saw as the more virtuous traditions of the past. When I accompanied her and a small group of women laborers on a weeding expedition one morning, for example, Karupayi amma complained that the pair of teenage girls in the group neither knew nor enjoyed the folk kaattu paattu or “field songs” that the older women were singing: “Our songs aren’t fit for them,” she observed. And indeed, while these older women playfully sang and repeated their folk verses for me with an exaggerated and comical gusto, I noticed the two young girls singing a few recent film lyrics to each other in a quieter riposte, each teaching words that the other did not yet know.

As a young and unmarried man conducting fieldwork in south India, I rarely had the chance to speak directly with younger women concerning these controversial themes. It was clear to me, however, that these girls were not alone in taking cinema as an arena of pedagogy. Other elder men and women that I knew turned to cinema itself for a language of ethical instruction and moral critique, rather than for an exemplar of modern moral degradation. It is to this latter possibility that I turn now.

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I knew Manivannan as a massive middle-aged man with a heart of equally generous proportions. Unlettered and mostly unschooled, he had spent most of his life felling hardwood trunks from the mountain forests surrounding the village, until the strain of this illicit enterprise led him to buy a small herd of goats instead. I tagged along with him one July morning as he drove these animals into the fallow stubble to the south of his village, where we saw women harvesting sesame on scattered expanses in the distance. As
we ambled along, we began to speak of the rash of recently unveiled adulteries in the village. “A man should not behave just like cattle,” Manivannan observed. “He should not feel desire for the things of another.” These were lines from a film song whose name he had forgotten. But he went on then to muse on another animal in verse—

The heart is a monkey,
man’s heart is a monkey—
Let it leap, let it escape and run,
and it will land us in sin,
it will shove us into attachment.

These were lines I often heard repeated in the village. A monkey could be coached even to ask men for money, Manivannan went on to explain, arguing instead that “it must be habituated.” But those who failed to train their own monkey natures should be tossed aside, he suggested, like one rotten fruit among a basket of tomatoes.

“The heart is a monkey” or manam oru kurangu was the most popular song from the 1966 Tamil film of the same name, scripted by Tamil playwright and critic Cho. Ramaswamy as a loose adaptation of Pygmalion. This was only one of the many film songs and dialogues from numerous periods and genres that the men and women of the Cumbum Valley regularly invoked as guides to proper self-conduct. A ploughman, for example, once noted to me that although one could reform the habits of an unruly bull, men would change only as a result of their own volition, citing lyrics to this effect sung by MGR in the 1961 hit Thirudaathee (Don’t Steal). In the midst of a heated debate about the difference between sincere and “thievish” love among youths, a teenage grape orchard laborer brought up the narrative of Thangar Bachan’s 2002 Azhagi in order to insist on the virtues of an amorous devotion even in the face of its impossibility. And Manivannan’s own brother Mohan paused to carefully recite the lines I had overheard him singing as we worked together on his orchard one October morning: “man desires the soil, the soil desires man—the soil wins in the end but the heart hides this from us,” a truth proclaimed by Rajni Kanth in the 1995 Muthu.

The “social” films of mid-twentieth century India were clearly marked by their overt concern for moral redemption, presenting a hero who must navigate—as Vasudevan (2000) has observed—between rival spaces of virtue, villainy, and respectability. The explicit moral pedagogy of films such as Thirudaathee continues to resound in everyday discourse in the Cumbum Valley, brought into the present by the replay of popular lyrics over public loudspeakers, by regular televised retrospectives, and other channels of transmission. But the appearance of Tamil film as an element of moral instruction in everyday life has another broader yet hazier horizon intimated by the brief examples I have just presented. The narrative unity of individual films as emblems of moral propriety is of less concern here than
the exemplary value of particular scenes, lyrics, or dialogues to the pursuit of a desirable way of acting, feeling, or thinking. It is these cinematic fragments, drawn as pieces from the archive of available film, that come to matter most in the imagination and exercise of an ethical life.

My woodcutter friend Manichamy, for example, reciting yet another line from an unknown film in the midst of another conversation on his small doorstep one afternoon, told me that filmic lyrics whose philosophies he appreciates are “recorded” in his heart while the others are simply forgotten. Although references to such lines were an inseparable part of his discourse on the necessary resistance of a “good man” to the temptations of “crooked paths,” he could rarely identify the films that he had drawn them from, the actors who had spoken them, or the scenes that they had punctuated. Rather than calling my attention to particular films, he would preface each quotation with a more general invocation: “as they have sung in that time” or “as that poet has said.” These lines appeared in the space of everyday conversation as anonymous reverberations. The repetition and recirculation of older moral themes by means of cinema—the visage and diction of a roaming poet and devotional saint that actor Muthuraman assumed in 1966, for example, when singing of the heart as a monkey—draws moral tradition forward into the present as a tumbling cascade of fragments.

Rural men and women in south India today find their ideas of virtue among many different arenas of moral pedagogy: cautionary tales printed in vernacular newspapers; lessons on character from schoolbook texts; rhetorical claims of public leaders; religious discourses broadcast through temple loudspeakers and personal cassettes; popular proverbs, jokes, and folk verses shared in tea stalls, courtyard stoops, and working fields; and indeed, didactic lyrics and dialogues from popular cinema and television serials. Tamil film emerges here as one among the many archives of elements with which one may assemble the image of a well-lived life: one that is significant, I might stress, for the lettered and unlettered alike. But more particularly, in recent years Tamil cinema has come to provide for rural citizens an image of the very life they are already living in the present. I turn now to the closure of the gap between cinema and countryside in commercial Tamil film, and its consequences for the texture of rural experience.

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Every now and then in the Cumbum Valley, a quiet morning or afternoon would be interrupted by the sudden bursting of firecrackers and the loud broadcast of a single song from the 1993 Tamil film *Kizhakku Chimaiyilee* (In the Eastern Country). As its horns and drums rose to a stirring crescendo, some of the first lines of this song would proclaim a moment of arrival: “Your maternal uncle comes carrying gifts for you, he is bringing golden anklets to give to you.” These lyrics and the particular scene that they ornament celebrate the generosity and concern with which a brother
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fulfills the social expectation for his care of his sister's children. The film itself is a cinematic ode to the customs and traditions of the Piramalai Kallar caste, a community to which its director Bharatiraja belongs. Among Kallar households as well as those of many other castes in the region today, this one song serves as the ordinary means of marking the moment in family rituals and ceremonies when a maternal uncle arrives to discharge his obligations. Film has come to provide a language for the social life of kinship and attachment.

This was only one of the many ways in which I found cinematic references and likenesses flashing up repeatedly among the foundations of everyday rural life. A young man and I were picking our way down a riverbank when he expressed a desire to wait for a few minutes and wave his legs in the water—"like cinema." Another youth described how he had eloped across this very river with his lover several years ago, averring that "it happened just like cinema." An elder man described how he had come to this village on his own as a youth, in the same way that Sivaji Ganesan had once been abandoned as a baby in the forest of a particular film. Another elder man showed me his outstretched hands when I ran into him working on his orchard tract. "See the toiling hands," he said, gesturing toward a 1976 film of the same title—"like MGR." And I was sitting one afternoon
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under the shade of a tamarind tree with my friends Bose and Malai, chatting about certain cultural practices in the region, when one chided the other for his many references to Tamil films. "You shouldn't speak about cinema," Malai said—probably with the integrity of my anthropological interview on his mind—to which Bose retorted sharply: "Dey, they're making cinema about nothing but our culture!"

There is no question that the close resemblance today between village life in the Tamil country and the universe of Tamil cinema has much to do with the turn of many south Indian filmmakers toward the quotidian trials of rural life itself. The "nativity" or folk quality of their films can be traced back to the genre of commercial moviemaking that emerged in the mid-1970s with the aim of conveying the countryside in a realistic idiom. The *man vaasanai* or "scent of the soil" often attributed by critics to this cinema derives from its wide use of rural locales for shooting, regional dialects for scripting, and folk elements in its soundtracks. Three of the most important exponents of the genre—director Bharatiraja, music director Ilaiyaraja, and lyricist Vairamuthu—hail from the Cumbum Valley and the surrounding countryside. In his many interviews, Bharatiraja has consistently represented himself as a "villager" at heart, keen on evoking in his films the everyday savor and affective resonance of forgotten modes of rural conduct: a markedly ethnographic *verité* (Shanmugasundaram, 1997). The "soil" stands in this cinematic imagination as a metonym for the village itself in all its purity and difference from the norms of urban civility. Vairamuthu himself described *man vaasanai* to me—in an interview at his office in 2002—as "an idiomatic expression of our culture."

S. Kaali (2000: 174) has called attention to the way in which Tamil nativity films from the mid-1970s onward shifted narrative agency from the hero to the village itself as a "collective actant." What I find most striking is the way in which individual rural actors today seize upon these representations of the village environment as a means of articulating the significance of their own deeds within it. In other words, what is at stake in the reception of such cinema by rural Tamils is the character of their own lives and practices rather than the narrative meaning of the cinema to which they turn. Suffused by their auteurs with the resonance of the rural landscape, these films are taken by rural subjects as a way of expressing the quality of their own struggles with the substance of the countryside. The soil itself is laden with a cinematic texture. This is clearest when farmers rely on filmic residues to speak of their own agrarian experience.

On a March morning just one week after cultivator Pandian had sang of making crop beds—the incident with which I began this essay—I ran into cultivator Logandurai tending to his own small plot of onions in a nearby tract. A middle-aged farmer from a well-respected family in KG Patti, Logandurai had spent most of the previous night drawing water to irrigate bed after bed of onion shoots. The electric current powering the motor in the well that he relied on had suddenly cut off before this task was complete.
He had returned this morning to water the soil that remained dry. The field was far from the well and the stream of water flowing into its channels was thin and sluggish. I squatted on a bund to chat with Logandurai as he waited for the flow to slowly fill each rectangular bed. And then he too began to sing. “In desire I raised a bed and planted a single shoot,” he said with a smile as he crouched down to loosen a wall of soil dividing a dry bed from the running stream. I laughed in surprise and asked if he knew which film this song had come from. “Isn’t it Ramaraj,” he asked, naming a Tamil actor once noted for his rustic films. I learned later that it had come from *Enga Ooru Kavalkaran* (Our Village Watchman), a 1988 Tamil film that did indeed star this man.

*Enga Ooru Kavalkaran* depicts a romance between an honest and diligent village watchman and a young woman named Puvayi, who belongs to an agrarian household of a different caste. An invocation to the goddess Meenakshi at the very beginning and references to the Vaigai River’s floodwaters make it clear that the film is set in the Madurai countryside of southern Tamil Nadu. The song sequence that Logandurai quoted from follows one of the first scenes of the film, when Puvayi leads other women of the village in the transplanting of paddy seedlings from a nursery bed into a wet field. She gives voice to its lyrics as she dances through these fields with the other women, chasing after goats and other animals through a lush green terrain. The song is a paean of amorous and religious devotion, set to orchestral melodies and the gentle rhythm of a folk beat. Puvayi sings of herself as the earnest lover of a distant male god, beseeching him to come and protect the crop so that it ripens fully. Delivered in a local dialect, the lines of the song suggest that she is concerned about the fruition of much more than the plants that she is dancing among. The soil bed raised “in desire” here lies within the landscape of her own heart, which will ripen only with the fulfillment of her love for him.

These qualities of the song might appear to present a certain puzzle. Why would a middle-aged cultivator in the midst of his agrarian labors assume the voice of a young woman in devoted love? But when I asked Logandurai why this song had come to mind at that particular moment, he mentioned none of these features of its cinematic setting. The lyrics had instead provided a language with which to convey the nature of his own work the previous night and that morning. “With how much desire, irrigating water the whole night. Wasn’t able to irrigate four sets of beds—then how would it be?” he asked. He described the hopes and desires with which he had struggled to raise these shoots: clearing the residues of the previous crop; ploughing the soil countless times; making a sleepless journey by truck to purchase these onion bulbs; losing even more sleep watering the crop. A line had been wrested from a filmic love song to convey the affective resonance of an altogether different kind of embodied experience. But this seizure of a filmic fragment was prompted by a specific likeness between film and rural life. The image of a raised soil bed brokered a recursive relation between
Figure 8.3 “Making beds in the orchard, I’m looking, looking . . .” Pandian liked to sing as he and Ayyammal worked on the tract that they had carefully cultivated.

cinema and the everyday: each had come to rely on the other for its depth and texture.

Closely sutured into the fabric of rural existence, Tamil “nativity” films aid in what Appadurai (1996) has described as the “production of locality.” Cinema not only generates persuasive representations of the countryside, but also infiltrates these places and their inhabitants themselves as an instrument of imagination and interpretation. With these relations in mind, I want to turn briefly to the means by which everyday experience is recomposed as filmic artifact in the universe of Tamil rural cinema.

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In the 1980 film Kallukkul Iram (Moisture Within the Stone) Bharatiraja portrayed himself directing a film shoot in a Tamil village, and the trail of desire, threat, fascination, and ultimately destruction that shadowed the divisive enterprise. His films have consistently set the village milieu against the larger world in a relation of hostile tension, V. Chakravarthy (1986) has observed. But the very movement toward the rural that Bharatiraja and his colleagues propelled has now thoroughly caught much of the Tamil countryside within the machinery of cinematic production itself. The village, in other words, must be understood as a locus of filmmaking as well as public reception. Take the Cumbum Valley, for example. Bharatiraja himself was
born here in the small town of Alli Nagaram, some forty kilometers north of KG Patti. Music director Ilaiyaraja maintains a waterside bungalow just a few kilometers upstream from the village, along the same river. Rising director Bala hails from the village of NT Patti no more than a few kilometers to the north of KG Patti. Many in the region have tapped these and other kin relations to seek a foothold in the Tamil film industry as artistes, technicians, and crew. But more to the point perhaps, numerous films have been shot here.

Tamil filmmakers rely on a dispersed network of location managers in order to identify appropriate places for shooting their features. There are certain areas like the Pollachi countryside of western Tamil Nadu that have hosted the making of literally hundreds of commercial films and televised serials. In the pursuit of novelty and diversity of visual spectacle, location managers continuously seek to identify new sites suitable for film: increasingly, of course, in exotic locations beyond the boundaries of India itself. But as nativity continues to maintain a certain niche in the Tamil commercial film market, camera crews are drawn on a regular basis to regions like the Cumbum Valley as well. In my first few weeks in the area I was surprised to discover that one film—the 1985 Rasathi Rosakili—was shot almost exclusively in the village of KG Patti itself. Some of my closest interlocutors here had themselves landed bit parts in the narrative. I turn now to this experience of theirs in order to broach one more question concerning the intimacy between cinema and rural life: how does it feel to find oneself onscreen?

Directed by S. Devaraj, Rasathi Rosakili is a tale of terrestrial moral failure and cosmic revenge. Kuda Thevan secretly poisons his own widowed uncle in order to enjoy the latter’s abundant wealth and possessions. He and his wife raise the widower’s only son Surattai as a guileless farm boy, planning to wed him to their own daughter in order to secure their claim to the dead man’s lands. Surattai falls instead for his own poor cousin Rasathi, and the two become lovers. The unscrupulous Kuda Thevan kills Surattai and stages the murder as a suicide. But the young man returns to walk the earth as a furious and vengeful pey or demon, terrorizing his antagonists until they stumble into and drown within the same well where his body had been dumped. Rasathi inherits Surattai’s possessions on behalf of their unborn child, and a satisfied demon ascends a white beam of light into the heavens.

Close to two decades later, many men and women in KG Patti had stories to tell concerning the making of the film. The artistes and crew had settled into “Boatman” Raju’s large house within the village itself for several weeks of shooting. Comedian Goundamani would sit on a porch asking old women to gather around him, I was told, while his diminutive sidekick Senthil searched the village lanes for iced lime sherbet. Cultivator Logan-durai himself spoke of teaching the actress Sulochana how to carry bundles of threshed paddy on her head. Another man described how he and his friends had lingered then as children on the outskirts of the working crew—
“we would wander around only with them,” he said. When I tracked down a cassette copy of the film in Chennai and arranged to have it screened on the village’s closed-circuit cable service, those who watched it with me could point out familiar locations onscreen: the threshing mill, the Ganapathi temple, the road to Suruli Falls, and so on. Certain things had even remained the same in the intervening years, I was told: Devarasur, for example, still poured tea at the same grocery store of his that he had tended as an extra in the film.

At the same time, however, I was surprised to discover that Rasathi Rosakili was not the most popular of movies in the very village where it was shot. Many simply found it boring, deriding it as an “old-style” production and a tedious “saw” or rambam as painful as the experience of cutting one’s own neck with a dull blade. Others argued that it had failed to closely represent the character of life in the village: the nuances of regional dialect or the way in which women sat together outside in the evenings to talk and share gossip. It was suggested by some that such criticisms of the film stemmed from the jealousy and disappointment of those who had been left out of its scenes. But even those who had won a small place within it seemed less than enthusiastic about their role in its making. When I asked Logandurai if this was a good film, he laughed and said that it was “rustic” and solely about agriculture. Meanwhile, Devarasu complained of being represented as a “supply-master” or servant in the film. Yelled at and disrespected by a customer onscreen, his place in the story was a reason for regret rather than pride.

A more particular problem lay with the manifest intent of the film, which begins with an image of producer and writer Rama Pandian standing behind a podium to inform his viewers that the scenes to follow were based on a “real event.” Born in an adjacent Cumbum Valley village himself, Rama Pandian studied sociology at Madras University before embarking on a lucrative career in shipping. The presentation of rural culture in Tamil film serves a specific purpose, he told me as we spoke on the porch of his Chennai home: “it reveals the heart.” He had scripted Rasathi Rosakili as an allegory for the story of his own uncle Chinnasamy Chettiar, who had clashed with a powerful landlord named Kottaichamy Thevar in the 1950s. Kottaichamy’s henchmen had reportedly murdered Chinnasamy in the mountains above the Cumbum Valley, disguising the deed as an elephant attack. When a stray buffalo forced Kottaichamy’s car to veer off the road into a tamarind tree soon thereafter, killing him too, it was widely suggested that Chinnasamy himself had assumed the form of this animal as a vengeful demon. Rama Pandian had seized upon this incident to produce a cinematic censure of the “rowdyism” of his native milieu, the “atrocity” perpetrated by a caste different from his own. That the film was a “scolding” of the Kallar community that dominated KG Patti village was well known.

Caste clashes are an undeniable feature of public life in the southern Tamil countryside today, and they have been tackled quite successfully in
numerous Tamil films. The failure of Rasathi Rosakili to win appreciation from its own subjects lies perhaps in the paradoxical character of its claim to realism: because it was too real and at the same time not real enough—because, in a sense, it insisted too crudely on the shame of rural society itself. Those who seek to cast the quotidian life of the countryside in the register of collective fantasy always run the risk of lingering on forms of experience that their own subjects find increasingly undesirable. Rama Pandian’s film dwelt on aspects of life in the Cumbum Valley that many there identify as the relics of a less civil age. Tamil rural cinema captures and preserves for posterity what its makers themselves find appealing and unappealing in this milieu. But pleasure in such representations depends on the vitality of a popular desire for what they represent. Few may love a village film whose very subjects begin to appear as unlovable themselves.

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I did not come to the Cumbum Valley to study cinema. Yet its traces were inescapable at every turn. I asked people of the region to speak about their own lives, and found them speaking their own experience instead by means of film—

“My story is like a cinema story.”
“The history of my life deserves a cinema.”
“My story could make four pictures, that’s how much I’ve suffered.”
“I could even sell the tale of my hardship as a cinema script one day.”
“Even if the tickets were 100 rupees it would pack the houses, this story would make that good a cinema.”

Statements such as these, which I often heard, testify to a widespread sense among the rural people that I knew that their everyday lives were somehow cinematic in their very nature. These statements imply both that these were lives appropriate for the cinema, and that cinema in turn was an appropriate medium for the narration of their trials. This may also be true of course for the urban audiences of Tamil cinema, and in particular its urban spectacles; in calling attention to these rural spirals of experience and representation, I have intended only to show what an examination of such recursivity might disclose.

In these pronouncements of a markedly cinematic life we must also recognize an element of pride in the face of hardship, a complex feeling that has been nurtured in part by Tamil cinema’s close attention for nearly thirty years to the everyday trials and tribulations of rural existence. But we must also ask at the same time whether social suffering in rural Tamil Nadu today is at least partly due to a waning of public interest in the countryside itself as a realm of advancement and wellbeing. As economic rhetoric today dwells incessantly on the urban middle classes, and Tamil cinema also turns
toward their exploits in localities as far flung as London, Sydney, and Los Angeles, the image of the village begins to blur, decay, and fade from view. The future of a vital rural cinema in south India appears as uncertain as that of a vital rural life.

Notes

1 “We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier,” write Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 4): “We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed.”

2 A manuscript based on this research—concerning the cultivation of the soil, the cultivation of an ethical life, and the colonial and postcolonial politics of collective identity—is forthcoming.

3 For an analysis of MGR as moral paragon, see Pandian (1992).

4 The language of the song plays on the landscape poetics of Tamil devotional verse. For a discussion of this literary genre, see Cutler (1987).

5 See Kaali (2000) for a discussion of this film.

6 The region is often described as a “mini-Kodambakkam” in reference to the Chennai seat of the Tamil film industry, and I intend to closely study it in future research.

7 See Rajan Krishnan’s contribution to this volume for a discussion of this theme.

References


