A Cine-Political Look at South Indian Stars and Stardom

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The challenges in "Indian" film theory or film theorising in the Indian context are multifold. On the one side, are the vibrant historical trajectories of cinema made in India in various languages (often termed "regional" or "vernacular"). They are histories emanating from the enchanting encounter between the magic of cinema and local society/culture, its performative traditions, leisure economy, urbanisation and economic development. Their complex interplay contributes to the evolution of their audience base, exhibition networks and industrial structures, and, in turn, to their thematics, narrative modes and styles, generic variety and star system. On the other hand, all Indian cinemas also carry certain "pan-Indian" or "national" features moulded and marked by certain trends and forces.

Cine-Politics: Film Stars and Political Existence in South India by M Madhava Prasad (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan), 2013; pp 224, Rs 625 (hardback).

They are not just limited to the "great" narrative traditions, iconographies and thematic concerns, but also extend to the legal architecture that rules over them, the ebb and tide of sociopolitical movements that hold sway across the country, and the changes and shifts in economic policies at the national level. All these give a certain "Indian" character to films made across the country – as art works, entertainment industry products, and technological artefacts.

Any writing on Indian cinema is a balancing act between these two, and most film writings and theorising in the Indian context tend to slant towards either of the two. In the process, they lose either the dynamics of locality or the national dimensions, and, invariably, the complex relationship between the two. Madhava Prasad's *Cine-politics* traverses these specific yet interlinked and complex terrains not by underplaying one at the expense of the other, but by effectively combining and bringing the two into a stimulating dialogue and interrogation. It looks at a very enigmatic phenomenon – the rise of stars and the stardom in south India (that of M G Ramachandran (MGR), N T Rama Rao and Rajkumar) and its political dimensions by focusing on three south Indian states, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

Instances of film stars entering politics are many and are becoming more and more frequent in the Indian context. But south India stands apart due to the fact that it is not the case of stars merely joining the existing political parties, but, at least in two states – Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh – film stars succeeded in launching their own political parties and achieving spectacular electoral victories. At the same time, not every other star of equal status and popularity, has been able to replicate such success, which brings to the foreground specific issues and complex dimensions of the intersecting narratives of location, culture, politics and cinema. A number of social scientists and film theorists have grappled with the rise of film stars in the political firmament, probing the sometimes mutually reflecting (and often magnifying) relationship between cinema and politics. It is a fascinating interface between the two where the enigmatic persona of the film star is transformed into the very real power and charisma of a political leader. This is done through a complex process of extension, re-engineering and redeployment in the political domain of the popularity that the star acquires through cinema.

According to Madhava Prasad,

when we are dealing with the Indian star system, the usual combination of psychology and sociology which dominates star studies needs to be supplemented by history. Stars here are caught up in the processes of the institution of nationalities, in a multinational federation learning to live without conventional rulers (p 78).

He argues that the stars and their fans forge a virtual political community which operates independently of party politics, and need not in all cases culminate in it. To explain this, there is

a need to reconstitute the object 'cinema and politics' or 'cine-politics'... to take into account factors that are ignored by the 'political communication' model, or indeed any model that relies on the idea that cinema can be used as a transparent medium to transmit messages and thereby win the hearts of spectators. Neither the specificity of the cinematic institution, nor the complexity of political processes in a peripheral, modern nation-state, is given to such models (p 45).

The theoretical thrust of this book is to develop "a historical construction which brings a diverse array of elements together to form a grid of intelligibility within which (the history of cine-politics) finds its meanings" (p 24). The two major tasks of the book as outlined by the author are: (a) to question the prevalent understanding of the phenomenon of star politics; and (b) to propose an alternative explanation that treats the phenomenon as historical rather than sociological or religious in nature.

Such understanding of the phenomenon of cine-politics that is located firmly in the concrete historical ground, the author notes,

makes a vital difference to our understanding of Indian political history, and demands that we return to the drawing board to reconceptualise the political order we inhabit. Given the context of the supranational identity of India, other national identities are obliged to express themselves indirectly. The virtual political orders produced by cinema serve this specific function (pp 26-27).

So, the attempt here is not to explain cinema *and* politics, but to look at and understand cinema *as* politics, or cinema as a ground for forms of political expression that were delegitimated by a "super-nationalism" (p 87).

Reframing Indian Star Studies

A major theoretical break that the book brings about is in the area of "star studies" in the Indian context. Though pioneering works in this area like those of M S S Pandian and S V Srinivas have analysed the phenomenon in detail and depth, they were mostly confined to a particular linguistic, cultural and political context of a state, and with certain stars and their stardom (MGR in the Tamil/Tamil Nadu, and Chiranjeevi in Telugu/Andhra Pradesh). Madhava Prasad's study takes their insights beyond the linguistic/cultural limits and extends them to the context of south India (other than Kerala, which is limited to some passing references). It analyses and discusses the similarities and differences, and points of conflict and convergence in their trajectories, thus yielding far-reaching insights about the complex and tense predicament of linguistic nationalities existing in a multinational federation like India.

Another stream of writing explains the rise and success of stars in politics by linking stardom with divinity. Many earlier writers like Chidananda Das Gupta draw a direct connection between the two, to "explain away" the star's later political avatar, which they consider as an eventual effect of their "mythological" past in cinema. As for Madhava Prasad, this argument does not stand the test of evidence: if one takes their whole corpus into account, NTR acted more in "socials" and only in a few mythologicals, while MGR never acted in any! According to him, though generic choices and preferences of the film industry did contribute to the star personae, even that cannot be seen in a monolithic and linear manner. The rise of stars and the generic mix, along with industrial prerogatives and audience tastes, come into play here:

far from any one genre generating star power because of its thematic content, it was the rise of stars, through a process that was initiated by audiences as well as studios, that contributed to the reconfiguration of narratives, a recombination of elements, a recentring of plots around spectacular hero figures (p 77).

Yet another preoccupation of existing star studies relates to intra-psychic or affective dimensions, that is "the imaginary identification through which individual fans supplement their lives with meaning or seek avenues of pleasure (such as a sense of community, or forbidden fantasies) that they are deprived of in real life" (p 18). But, a close look at the historical contexts defy such generalisations, as the sociopolitical fallouts vary between stars, languages, states, etc, and give rise to different kinds of surpluses that fuel cine-politics. For instance, in the cine-politics of south India,

we are confronted with the transformation of identifications into virtual political institutions. We are thus no longer in the realm of the individual, intra-psychic fantasy, but in concrete programmes of political utopia (or retropia, to coin a neologism) realised in the social world and affecting even those who never participated in the fantasy. Fantasy here reaches out and occupies the place of the universal, the law itself (p 19).

Tracing Star Trajectories

What is theoretically refreshing about the book is its incisive engagement with critical discourses on history, politics and film theory.

In the analysis of DMK politics of Tamil Nadu and the emergence of MGR, Madhava Prasad breaks away from earlier approaches that linked the star's rise with the political programme of DMK. According to him, MGR transcended the role assigned to him by DMK as the bearer of the party message, and transcended the melodramatic narrative form, acquiring new elements. It eventually led to an autonomisation of the cine-political order, where the message itself became valid only because it emanated from the privileged source of the star, and, MGR, the star, himself emerges as the only message of the film. The narrative structure and character dynamics also fall in line, evident in the rising predominance of the condition of infallibility in the hero's roles, the hero no longer "falling in love" but admired and desired by the heroine; and usurping unto himself the role of the patriarch too, with the erstwhile comedian, and even the heroine herself, turning into a surrogate fan within the film.

The NTR Phenomenon

In the case of NTR, Madhava Prasad engages with the two streams of scholarly writings, the anthropological approach attempting to explain why people vote for film stars by attributing it to religious or traditional proclivities of the masses, and the sociological approach dwelling upon the preference for personalities among Indian voters, and the stars' ability to manipulate their roles and image to political advantage. According to the author, the anthropological approach

invokes all the established academic truths about Indian personality, behaviour, religious and caste identifications, etc, it reduces to nothing the sheer novelty of cinema within the Indian context. It dissolves the new medium and its effects back into the already known...It is a sort of scientific enterprise that borders on entomology (p 66).

The situation of NTR favoured a complementary rather than conflictual evolution of mass and elite politics in Andhra Pradesh. Here, in the linguistic and regional-cultural context of Telugu identity and pride, NTR's ability to mobilise the masses became an opportunity for the bourgeoisie, which was complemented by other social forces like the discontented Kammas, educated middle class, and backward castes, all seeking alternatives to Congress. This triggered fresh sociopolitical synergies, all eventually coalescing around the star persona of NTR. Tracing NTR's rise to stardom, the author also delineates how star persona is deeply linked to genre mixing, that infuses elements from different genres like folkore films, social and action

films, to supplement the image of the actor-star and necessitate the restructuring and recentring of the social. This is not just a thematic contingency, or the industry's concern to give expression to regionalism, but

a condition of representability, ...insofar as the audience newly aware of a linguistic national identity, seemed to demand not just a cinema in Telugu, but one which *represented* the Telugus in the political sense of the term (pp 86-87).

The Rajkumar Phenomenon

Unlike his contemporaries in the other two states, Rajkumar kept himself aloof from politics, even while identifying with Kannada language and pride, and despite the pressure from his fans and the people at large.

What the case of Rajkumar makes clear is this: irrespective of whether they ended up in politics or not, film stars in the southern states took on, or perhaps had thrust upon them, a supplementary role of political representation.

Hence there is a political dimension to Rajkumar's career and stardom too. Though it did not culminate in electoral victory or ascent to political power, Rajkumar represents cine-politics in its pure form, because

cine-politics is a phenomenon independent of participation in electoral politics. It is a supplementary, virtual political regime all by itself. It may parasitically inhabit the parliamentary institutions but is not reducible to an effect of the latter (p 90).

The last chapter of the book extends the book's theme by taking a critical look at "Rajni Mania" and the subjection of Rajinikanth's image to the logic of capitalism, followed by an appendix that discusses the relationship between gender and cine-politics in the context of Jayalalithaa's rise to power after MGR.

The book begins with a brief but sharp delineation of the political context of the book and its area of focus: the national dilemmas that haunt the imaginary community of India, which is marked by "a peculiar situation of multiple nationalities being negated/suppressed by an infeasible claim to nation status by a federating ruling class", which has led to an interesting political problem of "a simultaneous surplus and

lack of sovereignty". In this context, the task that the book sets itself is to

reread the recent cultural history of the southern Indian states, in particular the tendency in these states for film stars to acquire political power, as arising precisely out of the contradictions relating to the question of sovereignty – a question which, in the post-monarchic world, is ultimately a question of national identity and political existence (p 4).

Path-breaking

What makes the book a path-breaking effort in "Indian" film theory is its sensitivity and openness to the nuances of the local or linguistic, taking into full account the location of cinema (and the State) within the power and ideological architecture of the nation state. It traces and places them within the context of and in negotiation and engagement with the other. It is an attempt to look at the cinemas of south India in the historical and cine-political process of their being mobilised to serve as supplementary structures of representation. By delineating the phenomenon in its historic specificity without resorting to anthropological or sociological generalisations, this study firmly places and reclaims the contemporary within Indian film theory. As the author himself puts it, "the project of understanding contemporary Indian reality needs to be taken out of frameworks in which what is subtracted from every account is precisely the *contemporary*, the irreducible difference of the present of an event from all pasts" (p 66).

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