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Media And Values:
A Study On Celluloid Culture Of Tamil Nadu

By

A Amal Raj
MEDIA AND VALUES
A Study on Celluloid Culture of Tamil Nadu

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MEDIA AND VALUES

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT:

Our society today is saturated with media images, images of sight, images of sound and images of print; images produced by a vast range of media from sign board to satellite communication. The mass media are becoming more and more powerful in terms of their reach, pervasiveness and accessibility. In India 90% of the population are reached by Radio waves and almost 70% are reached by Doordharshan. Film industry is a major factor to reckon with. The advertising world, with an annual turnover of about thousand crores of rupees, fills the environment with messages of all kinds. With the advancement technology and growing concentration of money power the vertical flow of information is more and more accentuated. National media industry is changing hands from family business to corporate business houses. Multinational media conglomerates are invading ariospace to build not the 'Global Village' but 'global market' and thus taking neo-colonialism to its peak. With the onset of cableTV, dish-antenna and starTV the western culture in Asia, India has come to stay.

Culture is the social and intellectual environment that shapes our thinking, lifestyle, values and behaviour. The media are the major forces that determine and constitute this environment. Media have become our window to the world. Outside reality is brought to us through media. The sources of almost all our information are media. To understand
the values that govern our society we should study the media.

This paper attempts to study media and values with special reference to films. In Indian context and Tamil Nadu context film becomes the centre around which all other media are built. Films involves face to face communication. The literacy rate being low, this audio-visual medium has more popularity. It is quite cheap and accessible. The most remote villages too have 'touring theatres' where electricity has not reached. Everyone is familiar with the medium. The two major mass media, Radio and TV mostly depend on film-based programmes. There are any number of cine-magazines; besides that other magazines and newspapers do a significant coverage of films, film personalities gossips etc. Film has become an environment. "Cinema is an all-pervasive phenomenon: cinema's stars are kept in the limelight by the media; film songs and dialogues are distributed in millions of gramaphone records, and are heard anytime in the most likely and unlikely places; bill boards advertise the movie shows at a particular time; gadgets, designs, garments and fashions bring the presence of the films into the daily lives of people. Cinema has become part of man's psychic environment. Cinema and man have become one" 1. - Thus popular film has made inroads into every sphere of life. Hence a study of film and values could amount to the study of media and values.

The paper will, initially scan some of the major approaches to media studies and present how it understands the media in the light of these approaches. Then it tries to give a
picture of the Tamil-film world. It culls out the guiding factors of Tamil Culture and identifies certain cultural anxieties which are expressed and exploited in Tamil-films. From there it goes on to talk about certain values about family, women, sex, love, violence etc. It concludes with a note on film education, which is part of media education.

APPROACHES TO MEDIA STUDIES:

Films, so also other media, are often accused of as the cause of evils in society—violence, sex etc. This may be too naive, but never-the-less this concept exists among us in the form of protests against obscene posters. Some may hold that films are merely an entertainment medium and it has no role beyond that. Each stand presupposes an underlying approach to media studies. We shall highlight some of the major approaches to media studies.

CONTENT ANALYSIS: It uses the survey method. Basically it counts how many times 'X' or 'Y' appear or occur in the media. The results are compared and contrasted and rated. It can give us broad generalizations but cannot give insight into the subject. There is also a danger of taking things out of context. However the 'aerial view' derived from such a study could serve as "the starting point for more detailed and delicate probings of the media's messages." 2.

STUDY OF EFFECTS: In the area of media research the concept of 'effects' was quite prevalent. And it still lingers on. First it was thought to be a 'stimulus—
response' kind, media having magical powers and producing dramatic effects. With the results of researches on voting behaviour and consumer behaviour they came to the conclusion that media have little or no effect on the audience; of course effect here meant immediate or short term change. Later the effects were thought to be indirect and media to be one of the factors. 'Cause-effect' approach presupposes a mechanical understanding of communication and media and does not consider other factors in communication.

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEDIA INSTITUTIONS: The power of the media is measured in terms of their structures of ownership and control. Hence the message of the media and its meaning depends on the economic base. From a Marxist perspective the ideas of the dominant class will be reflected in the media to serve the interests of the same class.

SEMILOGICAL STUDY: It deals with three questions "What are the basic units of the text—the signs? How are these combined to produce the meaning? How are these meanings related the social structure of society?" Every sign/text has a direct meaning as well as an indirect one which is associated with the existing values of a society. It is based on the assumption that that the text will be read subjectively. It is only analytical.

No single factor determines the impact of media and media by its very nature dynamic. 'Effects' approach attributes no power to the audience; semiological study holds that
media has little power. Political economy approach lays stress on the source of media. Recent studies are the combination of semiological study and political economy, along with the insights drawn from 'content' and 'effects' approaches. All these and many other approaches are methodologies to understand and analyse the complex phenomenon, media. Each of these approaches has made its own contribution to the study of media. As we try to understand the relationship between media and values we hold that

a) all media are constructions;
b) media constructs reality;
c) media are not neutral;
d) media messages are value-ladden;
e) audience negotiate meaning;
f) media has its own codes and conventions;

With these understanding we shall probe into Tamil films. The observations and findings made on these films, I'am sure, can very well be applied to other regions.

TAMIL-FILM WORLD:

A few weeks back a friend of mine and myself were travelling in an autorickshaw in Madras. The rumour that the recent film 'ANNAMALAI' starring Rajnikanth being banned, was in the air. Hence the auto-driver asked us: why was it being banned? My friend tried to explain to him about the supposed connections between the actor and a politician and the fear of the Chief Minister about the possible entry of the actor into politics. As the auto-driver was listening to this explanation he went into his
own calculations. After a moments' pause he thought aloud saying that if he began a Rajnikanth fan association in his locality, he would surely become an MLA in the next elections. He went to the extent of calculating how to raise money for contesting the elections. The nexus between the silver screen and politics in Tamil Nadu is evident enough. The last three decades of political scene demonstrates how the 'images' have been built through cinema.

Tamil Nadu releases about 300 films every year. There are hundreds of theatres with three shows everyday. Tamil cinema has been offering a dream far away from reality. Since Tamil society is centred around the institution of family, almost all the films have their some central themes on family or related issues. Like other Asian communities in Tamil Society a person operates basically in two areas namely family and society - private and public. In Tamil culture there is a systematic division between public and private or domestic sphere. Normally men operate in public sphere and women in domestic sphere. Though in modern context women come out to public sphere ultimately they go back to or belong to private sphere. Within the society or family, main guiding factor will be honour vs dishonour, which gives status to an individual. How to maintain this honour becomes his sole preoccupation and his values are centred around this. To fulfil the assigned social roles will bring him honour. While society is confronted with modernity or western culture the traditional value system changes slowly. The resulting cultural anxieties are expressed in films.
Film makers appropriating and exploiting such anxieties, take up some aspects and construct its own reality. Inspite of the multi-caste, multi-class and multi-religious nature of Tamil society, the reality depicted in Tamil films are stereotyped and biased. There are upper caste and upper-middle class bias, urban and Hindu bias and a blatant male bias. Only certain social roles are projected as stereotypes. We can also find a constant conflict between traditional value system and modern value system. When what is constructed becomes widespread, then that 'reality' is taken for the 'real' and taken as parameters to evaluate a person, or community or his own life. Even though the audience can negotiate meaning at one level, the sheer repetition of the images make them real and at another level the closed structure of Tamil film does not give room for any other way of perceiving the reality. Thus representation is not taken as representation but as reality itself and this reality affects people's culture, life style etc. We shall explore how certain aspects of life are stereotyped and the underlying values beneath these stereotypes.

FAMILY: With the onset of industrialization and urbanization and the to government's population policy, joint-family system began to collapse; 'small-family' has become the way of life. Earlier films had upheld joint family, whereas recent films portray nuclear family and small family as ideal. Family reunion, care for the parents were some of the ideals. In family, man is the decision-making person; but the responsibility to
maintain family honour always lies with the woman. Marriage and monogamy are unbreakable institutions. Marriage bond is symbolised by 'thali' the mangalyam. This becomes the focus of the picture and in every film there is long drawn sermon on this. The 'mangalyam' is the ultimate thing which binds the man and woman at any cost and every time it costs the woman her individuality, self-respect and so on.

WOMEN: Values held high for women are virginity, loyalty, beauty, submissiveness, etc. Beauty is represented by 'fair-skin'. For example 'fair-skin' has nothing to do with South Indian complexion. It has come from outside but accepted as our own. But it has become an accepted phenomenon for the heroine to be exceptionally fair while very often her companions are dark-skinned. This myth of superiority of 'fair-skin' is exploited by the film. As a result the commercial interests are able to sell their product such as 'Fair&Lovely' etc.

There is a clear dichotomy between 'his woman' and 'the other woman'. In early films these were represented by two sets of women, namely those associated with the hero and those with the villain. Hero's group of women will have all feminine qualities like submissiveness: villain's women will be sex objects. But the trend has changed now. 'Till recently all the 'woh' (the other woman) categories of song and dances were monopolies of the 'cabaret' or the 'kotewali' girls. With the advent of the 'new heroine' prepared to do anything and
everything, this category is seen less on the screen". 4. The merger of these two different roles is almost complete. But the difference is the other woman’s role is taken up by the heroine before marriage and the traditional role after marriage. Invariably the girl, before marriage is portrayed as foolish, childish and emotional – through her silly pranks, her voice, innocence and the costumes she wears. But as she confronts her ‘man’ or ‘falls in love’ with him, she loses all her innocence and is ‘tamed’ by her man.

The woman is always projected as less intelligent, emotional and so on. They are always housewives or subordinates. Very rarely they take the role of an officer or professional. But when fulfilling that role, man is shown to be very professional-like and succeeds by his rationality; whereas the woman is shown to be sentimental and finally gives-up the profession or sacrifices it to become a ‘good housewife’. The stereotyping of women has gone so deep that the recent medium TV has been depicting women in the same manner and further reinforcing these values. Analysing the programmes of Doordharshan, the Working Group for Software for Doordharshan has this to say: “Middle class ideologies of women’s roles as wives and mothers provide the underlying basis for most programmes. In a country where 36 percent of the agricultural workforce is female, women continue to be projected as predominantly non producers and as playing a limited role outside the home. Women are basically seen as performing a decorative function and as
being marginal to national growth and development. Their primary place is seen as being within the whole and this value is reflected in the content and setting of most television programmes. The plural nature of Indian culture and diverse roles that women play is neither acknowledged nor communicated. This results in a reinforcing of the stereotyped images and role specifications of women and in a unidimensional production of their reality."

"This is reflected in its starkest form in the programmes relating to the commercial cinema on which Doordharshan so heavily relies. These programmes are loaded with derogatory images women and usually explicitly or in implicitly sexist. They play a significant role in reinforcing negative stereotypes such as:

- A woman's place is in the home.
- The most important and valuable asset of a woman is physical beauty.
- A woman's energies and intellect must be directed to finding the right man and in "keeping" him.
- Women are dependent, coy and submissive, they are masochistic in their response to indignities, humiliations and even to physical violence inflicted on them.
- The good woman is the traditional housewife, long suffering, pious and submissive; the modern woman who asserts herself and independence is undesirable and can never bring happiness to anybody nor find happiness herself.
Women are women’s worst enemies.

The working woman is the undesirable exception who must be brought into the marriage fold and made to conform to the social norms etc.”

SEX: In taboo areas, especially sex, fantasy plays a key role. Since sex is ascribed to private sphere and woman in the film cannot indulge in sex openly. So film promotes fantasy. The inter-mittent fantasy baloons where the hero and heroine freak out in song and dance sequences, mostly are part of dream sequences. In earlier films there was only sensuality. Physical attraction or admiration was stopped with her face. We had close-ups, extreme close-ups of face and utmost eyes; whereas now with ‘modern values’ the woman has come into public sphere and her “body” has been made an object. Sensual has become sensual. Her body is exposed through the camera feeding the male gaze. The once-symboically portrayed kissing sequence is now quite explicit with the more ‘liberal’ attitude of the censor board. This is more due to the coming of western films and to catch the NRI market. While posing as guardians of morals the censor board’s ‘A’ certificates have become meaningless. Falling in line with the State’s interests the board turns a blinding eye to some crucial issues like political and ideological controls.

LOVE: Inspite of certain progressiveness in some areas of life there are a lot of restrictions on human relationship. Hence love has become a fantasy, not a matured
relationship. Earlier films revolved around problems regarding marital and family conflicts. Now films concentrate on 'love' and related problems. The characters belong to mostly teenage-group and love becomes an adventure. In love, there is no time for the relationship to become mature. The physical aspect of love is given prominence and is presented only from a male perspective. This love is always channelised to marriage and family, more specifically to monogamy. Triangular love is a successful formula. When monogamy is so strong and triangular love is an existing problem, the film conveniently eliminates one person.

VIOLENCE: People have lost faith in democratic institutions like court, police etc., due to corruption, terrorism and state violence. People tend to think 'might is right'. Hence instead of going through a democratic process immediate solutions are sought after. Violence becomes a means. Hence people are able to identify with the violence on the screen. Violence has been on the increase in recent films. There used to be violence at the climax, symbolising good winning over evil. But now violence is strewn throughout the film. There are two types of violence - one gory, bloody violence and the other as art and skill. The skillful, stylised violence, with sound effects, becomes a kind of performance. The children enjoy watching it. Another side of violence is its glorification through films like NAYAKAN. Even the so called villain has become the hero. However the family or domestic violence is ignored or taken for granted.
INDIVIDUAL ADVENTURISM: In most films there is an individual, often from outside the community, who will confront the power group. For example - a landlord in the village exploits the people; they are dumb and powerless. The hero, single-handedly, withstands all the cunningness of the landlord and finally wins. Similarly if it is an urban/industrial set-up, a single worker tackles every problem. The village or workers' community always follow the commands of the leader. This reinforces the existing value system: to seek solution from outside; to 'follow' the leader blindly. This facilitates the emergence of cult figures. Hence stars use this medium for image building. Collective action or democratic process is far away from the grasp of the audience.

CASTE AND POWER RELATIONs: Film normally never questions the hierarchical relationships. It only questions the evil doings. The bottom line of this hierarchy are from the lower strata of society, naturally the lower caste/class groups. To support this system the characters from this lower strata are portrayed less intelligent, less capable. In films they are given a subordinate role. Their romance is always made into a parody. Their handicaps or disabilities are portrayed in a negative or comical manner. This is reinforcing the caste hierarchy and its power relations. Even though they are a majority, they are made invisible and insignificant in society. Films too reflect and reinforce the same. Though a multi-religious society most of the films are based on Hindu values and customs. The minority
religions are seen with the perspective of Hindus. Again there are very few films on other religions. The minority groups are rarely portrayed in films: if portrayed it will be in extremeties—either as noble characters or as evil doers—Christians—Priest/nuns or gangster/underground leader; muslims—noble character or associated with smuggling etc.

HUMOUR: Healthy humour is almost absent on the screen. Perverted sex and suppressed anger have become the source of humour. There are three types: situation comedy, slap-stick and verbal encounter. It is often cheap and vulgar. The major subjects of such humour are women and lower caste groups. The comical characters are associated with lower caste groups, through their names, dress etc.

CHILDREN: The child on the screen is not a representative child: it is always the stereotyped upper middle class child. Even if it is a mentally retarded child it has to fit into this type. Children are either used as a prop or projected as child prodigy. This expresses the middle class anxiety to see their children 'super-intelligent' able to enter the competitive world of education and employment. Ultimately the childhood disappears and in the media context the child is always in an adult world.

The repeated stereotyped representations slowly and steadily color one's perception of reality. "Stereotypes in their very nature do not encourage exploration. They deny
stereotypes, they reduce the many dimensions of a particular experience into a simplified, predetermined image. They do not challenge but seek to elicit recognition, familiarity, a feeling of "knowing what it's all about"—instant understanding. So, it is not so much the particular stereotype that is whether it is a 'positive' one or a 'negative' one, but the fact of an image being a stereotype that reduces the relationship of the viewer to the film to one of passivity." Thus, such portrayals ignore and avoid questions against the system and help to maintain the status quo. The values behind these stereotypes and portrayals are not universal values but projected as universal; most of the values are distorted and modified by media and commercial interests. Thus the media reality is a constructed reality. There are contradictions between what they seem to portray and what is behind their portrayal or what is actually portrayed. For example, women are placed in high esteem outwardly, but in actuality her submissiveness is glorified. At every level this occurs and the resulting values are negative. There is an inbuilt mechanism to develop a particular 'way of seeing'. In order to break this filmic representation of values, alternative ways of seeing must be developed. That is where the role of Media education or film education comes in.

MEDIA EDUCATION: Film is only part of the larger media environment. There are 'images' other than film images that equally need exploration. Hence film education has to become part of media education. However, in the Indian context, film
education needs to be given priority.

From our involvement in Media Awareness Education among school students and youth we found that film plays a key role in their lives and they are very much immersed in film environment. We experienced a positive response from the students. Once we are able to facilitate a distance from 'the media image' they become free to take or reject the message. Hence the objectives of Media Education have to be:

a) to objectify the hitherto taken-for-granted media environment;

b) to problematize the 'unproblematic' media reality;

c) to decode the codes and conventions operating in media texts;

d) to unearth the forces behind the media industry and ultimately

e) to empower the audience so that they participate in the production of their own culture.
EDIT NOTES:


3. ibid. p. 117

4. Shrikanth Prabhu, Singing in the Rain, in DEEP FOCUS, Bangalore, Dec. 87, p. 46
