EARLY TAMIL CINEMA AND POLITICS: AN ACADEMIC OVERVIEW

Nithin Kalorth

Associate Professor, Bennett University, India

Abstract

Cinema in Tamil Nadu is a cultural text which deals with the Tamil society very closely in a two-way process. From the silent era of mythological cinemas to Pro-Dravidian ideologist cinema, Tamil cinema stood separate from other regional language cinemas of India. There are various studies on early Tamil cinema concentrating its relationship with Dravidian politics and Tamil nationalism done by the scholars of media, film, politics, anthropology, and social studies. The current paper is an attempt to provide an overview of such studies to provide a scholarship on early Tamil cinema, its development and role of politics.

Keywords: Tamil cinema. Dravidian movement, politics, identity.

Introduction

Tamil Nadu government in 2022 introduced monthly film screening for students to improve critical thinking skills in children[1]. The publics and culture of Tamil Nadu is very closely associated with two things – politics and cinema. It is difficult to divide an everyday Tamil Nadu reality from both. It is also difficult to differentiate politics and cinema from each other. The current paper is an attempt to provide an overview of such studies to provide a scholarship on early Tamil cinema, its development and role of politics. Cinema in Tamil Nadu is a cultural text which deals with the Tamil society very closely in a two-way process. From the silent era of mythological cinemas to Pro-Dravidian ideologist cinema, Tamil cinema stood separate from other regional language cinemas of India. There are various studies on Tamil cinema concentrating its relationship with Dravidian politics and Tamil nationalism done by the scholars of media, film, politics, anthropology, and social studies. Dickey (1988) introduces cinema culture in context of Tamil Nadu as *"not only movies are watched, but they are every bit as pervasive a part of residents' daily lives as they appear to be. Huge, dazzling posters line the main streets, and smaller posters are slapped onto every spare inch of wall space. Movie songs blare from horn speakers and cassette players at weddings, puberty rites, and temple and shrine festivals. Coffee stalls play tapes of movie dialogues, which patrons join in reciting as they sip their drinks. Rickshaws and shop boards are painted with movie stars' pictures."* The movie watching is a as part of daily for the

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[1] Learning through films: In 13,000 Tamil Nadu govt schools, watching movies is now a monthly activity Retrieved from https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chennai/tamil-nadu-movie-screening-in-govt-schools-curriculum-8020346/

people of Tamil Nadu from the beginning of cinema in the state (Hughes, 2010) and is going on to till date (Kokilavani, 2016) and Rogers explains the political economy of Tamil film cultures in terms of the "interplay between audience reception and the cinematic representation of political ideologies" (2009). Cinema educated and entertained the masses of Tamil Nadu over decades. They acquired the knowledge of their identity of culture through the films which "bear the messages" (Baskaran, 1981) of the nationalism and culture.

Starting from CN Annadurai,[2] there are many influential personalities from Tamil film industry who played key roles in Tamil Nadu political and social system and structure. The interplay between cinema and politics always helps public interest and following in Tamil Nadu. The Dravidian movement which is followed by the political declaration and electoral politics used theatre, film as a vehicle for their agenda dissemination. The leaders of Dravidian moments had good command over speaking and writing attractively in Tamil. Their artistic and literary talents were used to strengthen them by their party and to propagate their ideas. This point is where Tamil cinema got into an outfit of Dravidian identity and emerged as significant cultural forms. There were many filmmakers and producers who attempted to bring out from it and experiment in narration and production. The Dravidian moment, which marked as an earliest separatist challenge that independent India faced (Lal, 2016). The question of Tamil national identity directed against the logic of the emerging Indian state from the late 1930s and argued for a separate Dravida Nadu. The concerns of linguistic, cultural, and political representation gave transnational Tamil identity that is not bound by geography.

Cinema of Tamil Nadu

Cinema culture in Tamil Nadu is as old as that of Mumbai or Kolkata since British concentrated Madras (now Chennai) as one of their key sites of colonial administration. The first silent film was released in 1916 (Keechaka Vadham) and talkie in 1931 (Kalidasa). Currently, Tamil cinema industry produces an average of 250 films a year with active distribution and reception in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore, South Africa, Oceania, the Middle East, Western Europe, and North America. The Tamil identity of Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Singapore made Tamil cinema much more popular in these countries, albeit they produce their own films in Tamil. They connect and memorize cinema from Tamil Nadu with their trances of faraway motherland and past identity of a nation on screen. The film and business critics refer Tamil cinema as "gold mine" (Pillai, 2016) and "global product" (Bajaj, 2014) considering the popularity of the medium around the world. Unlike, Malayalam films and Telugu films which are highly popular in Middle East and North

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[2] Conjeevaram Natarajan Annadurai (C.N. Annadurai) popularly called Anna ("Elder brother") was Indian politician who served as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1967 to 1969. He was the first member of a Dravidian party to hold that post. He was also Tamil writer who scripted for many plays and films.

America respectively, Tamil cinema is distributed and received around the globe consistently, which is only second to Bollywood in terms of revenue (Schaefer and Karan, 2013).

Tamil cinema industry is known as Kollywood which is based in *Kodambakkam* of Chennai city. Majority of Tamil cinema is shot and edited in Chennai and other cities like Madurai, Trichyand other rural places of Tamil Nadu. Tamil cinema industry is well organized by unions, production and distribution formula and exhibiting practices. Tamil cinema contributes 0.5% of total gross domestic product (GDP) of the state of Tamil Nadu. Apart from its, Dravidian and Tamil identity, Tamil cinema is different from the rest of the Indian language film industry. The Tamil had traditions of *mass* and *class* cinema in terms of production values and narratives. Each decade after 1950, Tamil audience enjoyed *mass* cinema with uniformity of (Pillai, 2012) narratives and experimental *class* cinema. The golden era (1950 – 1980) of Dravidian cinema in Tamil was prominently dominated by the major studios of Madras (now Chennai) and later lead actors took over the front seat of Tamil cinema. The popularity and fandom of M.G. Ramachandran and Sivaji Ganesan were early examples of this tendency. But the conventions of Dravidian ideologies were followed and practiced in Tamil cinema till now. These cinemas follow a set of formula in narrative, production values, distribution patterns and reception. Such films project on big canvas where audience celebrates the film rather than watching it. The fans of a particular actor celebrate upon release of film inside and outside cinema hall. They also offer rituals like decorating the cinema hall with pictures and posters of the star, pouring milk on the picture of the star (*paalabishekam* – the practice of worship in Hindu temples where the milk is poured over idol of God and Goddesses) and involve in social service (feeding the poor, distribution of cloths etc.). Like political, religious and community organizations, these fans are also organized in fan club which is operated by state head office (usually in Chennai), district office, village offices and town offices and there is no bolt from the blue how these are used as a "political agency" (Rogers, 2009). In an interview Rinku Kalsy[3] with Ghosh (2015) stated that *"... most of these fans belongs to the low-income group. Being part of it all gives them a sense of identity and a social standing."* She focused on fans of Rajnikanth in her documentary, but the case is true with the fans of other stars too. This is an irony where Anant[4] (2022) feels disturbed when an atheist ideology driven Dravidian movement and film culture influenced by the movement walking against the philosophy. The practices of hero worship are like Brahmanical practices of idol worship which was greatly opposed by *Periyar*.

Major Literature on Tamil cinema

South Indian cinema had developed into a major 'cultural industry' from its inception with the enveloping influence on culture, politics, society, and the economy. Started in *Madras*,

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[3]Director of documentary film *For the Love of a Man* (2015) about historical and political context of fandom in Tamil Nadu through the stories of four fans of Rajinikanth.

[4]Anant, R. (2022, February 25). Current Status of Dravidian Politics [Telephone interview]

the cinema capital of South India, the south Indian cinema had witnessed a phenomenal growth and along with the political and geographical reorganization of the erstwhile Madras presidency it is evolved into four separate Dravidian linguistic factions.

The South Indian cinema became an integral part of daily life of its besieged addressees (Mehta and Pandharipande, 2010) with its continued engagement with society. From this view, cinema became more than a tool of entertainment; it has been playing the role of an educator of the society in various ways. As a powerful medium, it educates masses on a wide range of issues and influences perceptions. From the colonial times, cinema responded to the changing character of the society. In colonial times, cinema apart being the medium of expressing opinions and views it had also assisted to popularize the culture of south on the celluloid and also worked as a tool of promoting the "national consciousness" (Bhaskaran, 1981) among the masses. But when it comes the post-colonial era, the subject matter, narrative style and genre underwent radical changes with the continuous availability of new technology.

The writings on Tamil cinema are mostly available in Tamil language without proper categorization. This due to lack of translation to other languages and published by small scale magazines and publishers which not existing now. The film critics, reviews, memories, comments and other article published in major newspapers and magazines are archived on their respective websites and other websites like WorldCat, TCRC. The Tamil articles and other languages were found in local and government and private libraries of Chennai, Coimabtore, Trivandrum and Hyderabad. Since Madras was the centre of silent South Indian films, any writing about early South Indian films of any language will be driving force in attaining information about the "Tamil cinema" and Tamil cinema industry.

Among the academic sphere, Theodor Bhaskaran, a popular film historian, had extensively worked on the history of early Tamil cinema and had created a new academic interest in the southern cinema. He became a stand-alone authority on south Indian cinema, especially in the Tamil cinema. Baskaran's major works *The message bearers: The nationalist politics and the entertainment media in South India, 1880-1945* (1981)and *The eye of the serpent: an introduction to Tamil cinema* (1996) were among the first by an Indian historian to chronicle the early history of film in India and are still essential reading for any student of Indian film. *History through Lens: Perspectives on South Indian Cinema* focuses on the early history of the Tamil cinema and trade unionism.

As mentioned above, the major works on early Tamil cinema and history in English are written by film historians Theodore Bhaskaran and Randon Guy. Velayutham (2008) extends the list to Yves Thoravel for his involvement in noting down Tamil film history.

Bhaskaran's 1981 scholastic shaping book *The message bearers: The nationalist politics and the entertainment media in South India, 1880-1945* laid a strong position for understanding the role of cinema in containing and bearing messages of nationalism, ideology and *ethno-*politics. The book was a landmark in both Tamil media and political history. Baskaran has done his research well and succeeds in presenting a fascinating bit of social history. In the introductory part of the book Prof. Bake, stated that "Baskaran has scripted of the marriage of

culture and politics in South Indian cinema". Even the book titles on South Indian cinema but gives an upper hand on Tamil cinema and its connection with the politics. Baskaran clearly establish the relationship between cinema and politics with citing the example of Congress leader who pioneer in using the cinema as a tool for promulgating the nationalist ideology even before the inspection of the Dravidian connection with cinema. In words of Bhaskaran "In 1939, S. Satyamurti the Congress leader who supported the cause of cinema and the industry, displaying admirable foresight, proposed in the senate of the Madras University that cinema should be introduced as a subject in the university".

Baskaran furthermore established the relationship between Tamil early cinema and politics in *The eye of the serpent: an introduction to Tamil cinema* (1996). This book provided apparent academic disclosure to anonymous remained hitherto of Tamil cinema – political relationship. Baskaran also drew a clear picture of how the Tamil cinema self – attained its roots with Tamil national politics and ideology. "Poet Subramanya Bharathi's work brought poetry closer even to the semi - literate and gave a boost to the process of revivalism. In a society that had been humiliated by colonial rule and the attendant cultural hegemony, the nostalgic vision of a glorious past was almost like recompense and was zealously embraced. Gradually, the ethos of revivalism began to manifest itself in films" (p. 32). This beginning led the idea for the film producers; the cultural and political leaders employ the advantages of cinema to visualize ideas. During the beginning of film media, people saw the silent films and thought the ideologies. The contribution of Baskaran in Tamil writings also provides details on the Tamil cinema history. Most of his Tamil work is unexplored in academia due to lack of translation. His books like *Chithiram Pesuthadi* (2004) and *Em Thamizhar Seitha Padam* (2003) are "extremely interesting and informative for both Tamil cinema lovers and scholars" (Guy, 2005) by providing detailed mentioning of Indian and foreign filmmakers and technicians whose names were not written anywhere in history. He collected these data from interviews, old film magazines and printouts.

Madabhushi Rangadorai known by his nom de plume Randor Guy is prominent Tamil film historian columnist. His regular articles in newspapers, journals and books on Tamil cinema provide unparalleled insights on early Tamil cinema. His writings focused more about Tamil cinema in the pre - independence era, censorship, star system and music in Tamil Cinema. His articles found place in international newspapers and agencies which made him a popular columnist of film history. The other writers such as "Film News" Anandan, Vijay Lokapally, M L. Narasimham, Vijay Krishnan, Manoj Nair also provides insights about film history as well as contemporary Tamil cinema.

When these writings from Indian authors were part of habitual publishing in newspapers, journals and magazines, there are many other foreign scholars and researchers studying Tamil cinema as their subject in the field of cultural studies, anthropology, political studies, and sociology. These books, articles, thesis used and discussed the above-mentioned scattered literature, collected information about the ground reality of Tamil Nadu, applied systematic research methods in analysing the films and culture related to it. The major concerns for these studies were of political power shifts, religion and culture, economics, nationalism and regionalism, language and culture and star and fan culture. The tradition of Western

publishing style made new Indian scholars and writers to "publish" their findings and disclosures on Tamil cinema as book chapters and journal articles. This occurred mainly when studies on "Indian cinema" got shifted from Bollywood to "Other" and "Regional" cinema. Selvaraj Velayutham, Sara Dickey, Vijay Devdas, Preminda Jacob, M. Madhav Prasad, M.S.S. Pandian, S. V. Srinivas, Constantine Nakassis has explored the relationship between cinema as an institution and cultural reproduction and its relationship with power, fandom largely within the domain of south Indian politics. This chapter mainly focuses on all these writings on Tamil cinema to frame the concept of Dravidian identities in Tamil cinema and marking of new wave.

Early Cinema of Tamil

While tracing the origin of Indian art and performance, the Natya Shastra *(Nāṭyaśāstra* of *Bharata Muni* (Sage Bharata) gives a grand position for understanding. This book details about principles and fundamentals of plays, music, dance and stage design (Narayanan, 2012) which influenced Indian art tradition and therefore, cinema. Furthermore, as Christopher (2011) notes other influences like folk art and the international development of film language (p. 103).

The early silent cinema produced in Tamil Nadu, mainly in the capital city of *Madras* (now Chennai) was mainly distributed all over South India with title cards in representative language. Hughes notes that Tamil cinema had become a "naturalized object, comprising a historically accumulated body of films and film making, which is centrally located in Chennai" (Hughes, 2010). Devdas and Velayutham (2008) marked the year 1916 as the birth of Tamil cinema with the first *Madras* production and South Indian film release *Keechaka Vaadham* produced and directed by R. Nataraja, who established the India Film Company Limited (p. 156). There are various articles claiming Coimbatore as Tamil cinema's hometown referring efforts from Samikannu Vincent, who built South India's first permanent theatre, Variety Hall Talkies in the year 1914 (Jeshi, 2011; 2014). Before that Vincent screened founding films of the Lumiere Brothers to the South Indian audience. The film *Life of Jesus* became a huge hit in the tent cinema where he projected his films (Guy, 2010). Jeshi (2011) also notes that "Samikannu Vincent is barely remembered in the annals of cinema and in the memoirs of Coimbatore". Later in 1930's Central Studio was co-founded by him with the help of industrialists B. Rangaswamy Naidu, R. K. Ramakrishnan Chettiar. They made many films like by Thukkaram (1937), Valli Thirumanam (1933). This notion makes us understand that along with Chennai, Coimbatore also shares prominent space in a growth of Tamil cinema.

The religious films were produced with notion to attract the people to the screen. The silent films with Tamil and English subtitles (title card) inserted between the scenes were popular in Tamil Nadu. When the talkie arrives in *Madras*, scenes which were depicted on the screen in the early period and the movements of actors on the screen created a great change in the minds of the people. The Tamil cinema acquired a new "relevance and respectability" when filmmaker had to structure his own *mise en scene* and a narrative technique that would suit

the story. The many film's stories became a mere standing still while it carried a heavy dosage of ideologies to the masses who blindly accepted.

Tamil epics like *Silapathikaram* and *Manimekalai* of *Sangam* period and life of Thiruvalluvar, the author of *Thirukural* an ethical account of 1,330 couplets got their film adaptations. *Sangam* is the period in the history of ancient southern India (including Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and northern Sri Lanka) spanning from c. 3rd century BC to c. 4th century AD. This period witnessed poets and scholars centred in Madurai who developed iconic remarks in history of Tamil literature, art, education, and culture (Abraham, 2003; Wilson, 2000). These adaptations and acceptance paved a strong basement for lifting the Dravidian ideology later. The influence of *Thirukural,* nationalist ideology for Indian independence, *Bhakti* movement and Dravidian movement employed crucial role in shaping early Tamil cinema.

The arrival of Tamil talking cinema, the clear identity of Tamil established through language. The talkie not only gave visual identical to the language, but also broke cultural boundaries of Tamil Nadu. Pandian argued that cinema as a medium had "ability to upset pre-existing cultural boundaries and to reallocate previously ghettoised cultural practices followed from the unprecedented ways in which it brought together the elites and the masses" (1996). He also put forward three critical reasons which formed the Tamil cinema audience regardless of caste.

1. *The pleasure of spectating did not fail to draw sections of the elite towards cinema as audience, though most of cinema's patrons came from the lower classes.*
2. *Cinema as a medium was informed by what one may term as 'intertextual excess' whereby it could borrow both from high and low cultural universes at the same time and recombine them in unexpected ways.*
3. *As cinema evolved into an industry and trade, ie, as an avenue for investment and profit, the elites were drawn to it* (Pandian, 1996).

Pandian focused on how cultural autonomy elusive hegemony failed before the mass medium of cinema where the arts such as "Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music as their exclusive enclaves" (1996). There was a serious attempt from the elite class of Tamil Nadu to make cinema as a classical art form. But the film was not confined to the educated class. It equally satisfied the poor, outlasted groups of pre–Independent India. Interestingly, the class division was found within the Tamil film context and narratives (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998; Rangan, 2015) and its industry but the audiences were unified by the cinematic attraction. The cultural elitism which divided most of art into – high and low or fine and art was neglected by early talkie lovers (Sivathamby, 1983). The realistic perception, ideology and deployment of duality, Tamil cinema gave a new language for its audience. From there in between the newly formed language found no time to catch hold of the audience and it became part and parcel of life and society. Hardgrave (1973) observed that [Tamil] "cinema has become increasingly pervasive in almost all aspects of Tamil society and perhaps the most prominent in political life."

The Hindu myth, history – arguably covered with pseudo ideologies were prominent themes of early Tamil talkie. The acceptance and disagreement with cinema by the society has a long run history worldwide. As discussed above, when elites considered as low culture silently, they were waiting for shift in which cinema can turn into "good."[5] The writings from old film magazines and newspaper writings, there were attempts made by the elite class run media to establish cinema as elite media. Such article had duality in which one side, they neglect cinema and on the other side they tried to establish cinema as realistic or "good for society" media (Karnadagam, 1939; Ramaiya, 1943).

The mythological themes were popular till early nineteen forties when the emergency of Independence and social issues became a social and political agenda. The theatre culture was popular in Tamil Nadu, and it catalysed social change. The introduction of cinema affected the popularity of theatre, but the social and political issues carried by theatre found a new form in talking Tamil cinema (McNish, 2012). This shift was concerned by political spheres of Tamil Nadu and parties took their stand. There were political leaders supporting and opposing the idea of cinema as a vehicle of political messages (Hardgrave, 1973). For example, the Indian National Congress leader Kamraj was upset on the popularity of film stars among the public and their influence. On the other hand, cinema shaped Dravidian politics and identities which is one of the major concerns forming this paper. Since then, Tamil Nadu always had mesmerizing correlation linking politics and cinema (Gopalan, 2012). Before the introduction of star - dominant cinema, Tamil talkies used social dramas which were developed by political and studio systems. Meanwhile the equal part was also helped by the studios established in Madras.

The iconic study made by Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai (2010) analyzing "innovative genres, narrative devices, and formats" of Tamil cinema which catalyzed South Indian and larger body of Indian cinema. His study on Madras studios and the films they produced were between 1940 and 1957 in the context of cultural, economic and political factors. The historical significance of the seventeen years is justified by the author enables a consideration of "Tamil cinema during British rule, the Second World War, and in independent India" (Pillai, 2010, p.2).

The Modern Theatres, Gemini, AVM, Vijaya-Vauhini, and Prasad were the five significant studios studied by Pillai. There were more than 25 studios in Madras during the high hours of the fifties and sixties, but these five studios were considered as "studio" with operational definition which matches with Hollywood. The production houses which provided post-production process and other dubbing assistance were also coming under "studio".

The films made during this period had a political and social identity. Jean Luc Godard (2005) made a distinction between making political films and making films politically and Baskaran argued that "what happened or happening in Tamil cinema is about second variety" (2010). The early Tamil cinema tried to engage its audience with narratives of political willingness. *Thyagabhoomi* (K. Subramanyam, 1939) was a significant film in highlighting Gandhian philosophy and way of life. During the freedom struggle, *Tyagabhoomi* created an

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[5]Good for elite class or establishing cinema as classical art.

atmosphere of independence struggle. The film also had original footage of Gandhi. The following note by Randor Guy on *Tyagabhoomi* makes the sense of the impact of film on an audience and British government very clearly. "The film, which ran successfully to crowded houses to packed houses all over the Tamil-speaking areas of South India, was banned out of the blue by the British Indian Government of Madras when it which took overpower from the Congress Party which resigned over the Second World War issue. One of their first acts was to ban Thyaga Bhoomi, which was then enjoying at that time, the film was in its 22nd week run its 22nd week run at the Gaiety cinema in Madras city" (2008). Influenced by this film, there were a series of attempts made in Tamil Nadu focusing Hindu-nationalist social drama. The films reckoned that the freedom of India can be achieved only by overcoming social illness of society like untouchability, dowry, menace, ill-treatment of women and children. The films had strong dialogue written in rich language with its hilarious and minimalism came as a fresh breeze to Tamil writing at a time when it continued to be very archaic (Mohan, 2001).

The other works of director Subramanyam were also patriotic and aimed for social reformation like Balayogini (1937), Sevasadanam (1938) and Geetha Gandhi (1949). The later film, Geetha Gandhi was made by Subramanyam was because of disappointed that the country was forgetting the values Gandhiji propagated for many years. As Guy (2009) noted [He] "wrote a story, adapting the principles of high living and simple thinking, incorporating the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita and Mahatma Gandhi". When the state political party *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) officially formed in 1949 under the leadership of C.N. Annadurai they needed a perfect tool for idealizes and mobilizes party identity, political declarations, and elaboration of Tamil culture. After Independence, Dravidian politics searched deep in Tamil culture to problematize the issues of Tamil nationhood and identity.

This is the point when Tamil cinema and Tamil Nadu politics merged completely. The films were made as *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (D.M.K) propaganda, not only by narrative but also the involvement of directors, writers, actors associated with the Dravidian politics and identity as discussed in the introduction chapter. *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*'s most successful leader and writer M. Karunanidhi always tries to connect Tamil culture with every ingredient of Tamil society life. One of such example is well noted by scholar and writer C.S. Lakshmi establishes how Tamil identity and womanhood were correlated. The films were made with strong looking woman characters – showing the good and evil. Most of the movie had "good woman, bad woman, mother and whore" formula which drew the boundaries of social responsibility and cultural dynamics (Lakshmi, 2008).

On the other hand, the filmmakers like T.R. Sundaram, A. Bhimsingh, P. Pullaiah, Adurthi Subba Rao, V. S. Raghavan continued to make commercial films which targeted at an audience. They had mixed themes which include the myth, fantasy, social dramas and political dramas. They made films independently under the studio and also associating with the political ideologies of *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*. Overall, the films made during this era had "racy on- screen narration, slick presentation, fast-paced action, story told in a straightforward manner, melodious music, dance, comedy scenes and so on (Guy, 2008)."

While studying the ideologies associated with early Tamil cinema, scholars tried to theorize the Tamil cinema connecting *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* politics and its negotiations.

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