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## “Boys Be Ambitious” : Popular Theatre, Popular Cinema and Tamil Nationalism

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## **“Boys Be Ambitious”: Popular Theatre, Popular Cinema and Tamil Nationalism**

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This paper discusses the special role played by Boys’ Companies in Tamil (Dravidian) nationalism in Tamil Nadu, South India. The Boys’ Companies of Tamil Nadu inherited the genealogy of traditional popular theatre. They frequently staged themes based on myths while simultaneously introducing socio-political subjects, and became extremely popular in Tamil Nadu during the first half of the twentieth century. The TKS Brothers and Madurai Bala Gana Sabha in particular had a strong political hue, and many of the political leaders of later years started their careers here.

In this paper, I discuss: (1) the trend of Indian mythological theatre which formed the core of the Boys’ Companies; (2) the relationship between the Boys’ Companies and Tamil cinema; and (3) Tamil politicians who belonged to the Boys’ Companies and the process of the transformation of Indian popular cultural topics from myths to politics under British influence. I further explain the process whereby poor youths entered the world of the cinema through Boys’ Companies, and their further advancement in politics to occupy important positions.

### **From Classical Theatre to Popular Theatre**

#### **Theoretical Basis of Classical Theatre**

Traditionally, Indian plays took the form of “musicals” or “operas” together with music and dance, having inherited the tradition of Sanskrit *nāṭya*. The base for Indian plays was the *Natya Shastra*, the treatise said to have been compiled during the Gupta period (4th-5th centuries). According to this, the theatre is the totality of *nāṭya*, *nṛtya* and *nṛīṭta*, and dance and drama cannot be separated from these. In other words, the play is a totality of drama-song-dance entertainment, and there is clearly no such concept as independent theatre or dance. On this point, we can compare Indian *nāṭya* tradition with Japanese plays such as *Kabuki*.

Further, the plays were generally enacted at important religious rituals during temple festivals, and the staging of such plays was considered as a dedicated visual offerings to the deities. The plays must have happy endings; tragedy did not exist in Sanskrit classical theatre. Moreover, in the sixth chapter of *Natya Shastra* mention is made of *rasa*, i.e., the emotions aroused in the audience by the plays, first as eight separate feelings and then as nine, the so-called *navarasa*: passion, valor, laughter, grief, surprise, fear, anger, hatred, and peace, which run the entire gamut of human emotion. The plays and their derived form of cinema were amply sufficient to satisfy these nine tastes.

The golden age of Indian classical Sanskrit theatre was during the Gupta period (320-550 C. E.) when the Sanskrit culture was at its height. Kalidasa, who lived in this period (4th-5th centuries) was famous as the most eminent poet and playwright of Indian classical literature, and was revered as a “great poet” and “great dramatist.” After his representative work *Shakuntala* was translated into English by Sir William Jones in 1789, he became famous in the West and was especially loved by Romantic literary figures such as Goethe.

Indian classical theatre had already started its decline along with the vicissitudes of the Guptas before the infiltration of Islam into India in the 11th century. Of course the great Hindu culture developed in association with the imperial court. Here one should not forget that of course it was the imperial court that was the center of urban culture during the pre-modern age. On the one hand, the traditional Hindu theatre was declining, and on the other, Islamic culture under the reign of the Muslim imperial court was prospering. The hybrid dramatic theatre of both cultures that had fused together under modern urban circumstances produced a new form of urban entertainment with the influence of western popular theatre and that form moved into the cinematic world as well. The classical play theatre theory formed the underlying plots as a *basso continuo*.

### Parsee Theatres

The tradition of classical theatre represented by Kalidasa declined together with the vicissitudes of the sovereign power, although the tradition of folk music and drama did survive and continue and was eventually inherited by the cinema. Between the tradition of folk plays and the cinema, however, there was something of a medium or filter. This was the influence of Western modern theatre in the 19th century. Music hall, then a popular attraction in England, had a particularly great impact on popular theatre in India. In the 1880s it entered the famous Drury Lane Theatre, and was further inherited in the slapstick of Charlie Chaplin.

The great change that occurred during the 19th century in the field of opera was grounded in urbanization and modernism. In particular, theater halls had emerged, enabling “drama” to acquire independent status. Its distinctive feature was that the distance between the audience seating and the stage was clearly maintained. Conversely, in the folk art that had hitherto prevailed the audience had enveloped the actors, making the difference between the two unclear, and the plays’ beginnings and endings had also been unclear. It is in this context that the construction of modern theatre halls in 1842 in Bombay and in 1854 in Pune became very important.

In addition to the change in the staging, what decisively changed was the attitude of the audience. The audience of the initial period used to heckle and curse when the villain appeared, not content to remain only spectators. Now, however, the audience gradually became the spectators; not only did they not intervene into the stage, but they also desired reality in the drama itself. The language became colloquial, the backgrounds and costumes became more realistic, and consistency in plot was demanded.

This is because this new staging developed in the cities, where members of the middle class were not only the audience for the new theater but also became its sponsors. It is not incidental that the modern Indian theatre movement arose around the so-called colonial

cities like Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), and Madras (Chennai). This was the result of the movement toward modernism in art schools, music schools, and other institutions that had arisen in every city. The modernization of the Indian dramatic theatre thus took place in an urban atmosphere.

The greatest impact of modern popular theater was seen in Parsee theatres. The Parsee theatres, in which music, dance and action are combined, is said to be the immediate predecessor of the typical Indian popular cinema. The creation of entertainment movies packed with music and dance had its origin in the hybrid plays of Parsee theatres which included all these in plenty. Intellectuals despised it, but it was valued as a tradition rooted in Sanskrit drama based on *Natya Shastra*.

Those responsible for the Parsee theatres were the so-called Parsees. The Parsees were the descendents of Zoroastrians who had been driven away from Parsa in Persia by the Muslim invaders in the 8th century, and who landed at the small port of Sanja in the neighborhood of Bombay. They presently number around 100,000 and are influential in the Indian heavy industry and business worlds. They are particularly superior in shipbuilding and navigation around the western coastal region, and since the 19th century had teamed up with the British traders, acquired wealth and became a powerful group controlling the Bombay Government. Furthermore, as industrial capitalists in the initial period in India they also entered the financial world, and established the Bombay Business Association in 1836. The Tatas, one of India's giant industrial families, are Parsees.

The Parsee theatre was a theatre movement supported by the mighty Parsee capitalists. This movement began in 1835 when the famous Parsee businessman Sir Jamshedjee Jeejeeboy acquired the Bombay Theatre. The Bombay Theatre was established in 1776 on the lines of London's Drury Lane Theatre. It mainly staged English dramas for British soldiers and East India Company employees. In 1857, Jeejeeboy started the Sir J J School of Arts to train young people.

In 1846 the powerful Parsee Jagannath Shankar Sheath acquired the Grand Road Theatre and staged plays in English, Marathi, Gujarathi and Hindi with amateur troupes. Here they enacted romantic dramas taken from ancient Indian tales, mythological plays, and historical plays in the Elizabethan style. Conversely, Shakespearean plays were staged in the Gujarathi and Urdu languages. The royal poet Saiyad Aga Khan Amanat, who had become the most popular figure in Parsee theater, staged *Indra Sabha* for the first time in 1853, and this story was repeatedly depicted later in the cinema as well.

The Parsees were very powerful in the business field, and with their capital strength they also entered the theatre and cinema industry in a positive manner. They first built a popular commercial theatre in Bombay and then advanced into Calcutta. The theatre invested huge capital in fabulous sets, dazzling costumes and the latest stage technology. The Madan Theatre of Calcutta introduced the rotating stage as well as the vaudeville-show, musical bands, and other innovations. It is said that the Parsee theatres resembled that of the British Tudor Age in terms of matching action, spectacle and entertainment with audience expenditure.

Parsee trade capital supported the Indian entertainment industry, inclusive of the theatre and cinema, until the 1930s. In so doing, Parsees had a hand in running film

distribution companies like the Madan Theatre chain, the Imperial Cinema Company, Minerva Movietone, and Wadia Movietone, which were the major film studios. The Madan Theatre chain held sway over more than half of the cinema theatres in India during the 1920s, and at its peak it became the largest cinema theatre chain managing 172 theatres. The Parsees thus controlled the cinematic world in terms of manpower, production rights, and entertainment industry rights.

The Parsees did not simply nurture the dramatic tradition; they also engaged innumerable people supporting the cinema industry staff, including directors and script writers, and thus sustained the film industry of India in its initial stages from top to bottom. According to Matsuoka (1997), their activities spread from India into Southeast Asia.

The hybrid theatre style of Parsee theatres which enveloped every aspect of theatre, also influenced regional plays such as *Sangeetnatak*, a musical drama in the Marathi language, the South Indian Kannada Tamil *Company Natak*, and Bengal's *Jatra*. Andhra Pradesh in South India also holds rich traditional arts such as *Tollu Bommalu*, *Harikata*, and *Yakshagana Burrakatha*. The Surabhi theatres thus came into existence, which both introduced tradition and were influenced by the modern popular drama of Parsee theatre and this directly developed into Telugu cinema. The Telugu cinema has the characteristic of being superior in the mythological theatre of the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and other traditional dramas, as well as in family melodrama.

The hybrid Indian popular theatre thus came into being by maintaining the primacy of classical theater theory while adopting the pattern of western popular theatre, and functioned as a popular entertainment medium in the religious world. This tradition, the greatest form of entertainment, was succeeded in the 20th century by the cinematic world. This greatest entertainment medium of the 20th century played a particularly important role in Tamil Nadu, South India. It functioned as a political medium, and those responsible for it were actors who suffered from poverty during their youth.

## From Stage to Screen

### The Popular Theatre of Madras

It was during the second half of the 19th century that modern theatre appeared in South India. The theatre was the only entertainment at the time, as neither radio nor cinema existed. It was not only entertainment, but also functioned as a medium for sending messages to society. In 1870 Parsee theatres and Marathi troupes toured South India and had a great impact. Immediately thereafter, T. R. Govindasamy Rao formed the Mohana Theatre troupe.

While interest in Shakespearean plays and Sanskrit classical theatre was growing, there was also a drive for real theatre. In 1891 Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar established an amateur theatre in Madras, and theatre groups were formed one after another in other places like Tanjavur and Tiruchirappalli. Moreover, V. K. Suryanarayana Shastri of the Madras Christian College borrowed Shakespearean plays and Sanskrit classics in order to translate them into Tamil.

In contrast to orthodox theatre, which was accepted by the urban elite, the hybrid plays of touring Parsee theatres were more widely popular. The Mohana Theatre troupe of Govindasami Rao lived like a family and became a model for succeeding touring theatre troupes, and the number of similar troupes was increasing rapidly. These were the origin of the special Boys’ Companies. The attraction of such troupes was their low cost factor as they engaged only boys below the age of 12. From the 1910s such troupes appeared in every region, establishing their own special dramas as a form of entertainment. These were plays taken from myths, with each actor specializing in a single role in which he appeared over and over again. Three different forms of popular theatre therefore continued to be accepted until the 1920s, and were enjoyed as almost a single medium of entertainment.

There were three special features of popular theatre at that time. The first was the application of music; the second was the description of social reform; and the third was a political theme, whether direct or indirect. These three factors also corresponded to political applications, from songs to social reform and then to nationalistic themes (Baskaran 1981: 30).

The plot of the plays in popular theatre functioned solely as a vehicle for introducing the songs. The theatre groups recruited lyricists and composers from classical and folk music artists who could quench the thirst of the public, and supported them. These lyricists and composers were known as *vātiyar*, and their job was to write songs and teach them to actors. The *vātiyars* composed songs pertaining to the Rowlatt Act, Amritsar Massacre, and Non-cooperative movement that were of political concern and thus educated the people politically. The Tamil nationalist poet Subramanya Bharati in particular used such folk songs for political education. Bharati’s composition of songs on the Tirunelveli Sedition Case, the confrontation of radicals and moderates in the National Congress, and other subjects became a model for later poets (ibid.: 30-1).

Among the artists who used songs for political purposes were the singers known as *pin-paṭṭu* (back-stage). The *pin-paṭṭu* played the harmonium and sang, literally at the back of the stage, in accordance with the progress of the play and the movements of the actors. These people were well versed in the songs and at times performed on stage between acts. Their acts gradually became independent of the plays, incorporated political activities, and eventually transformed them into political singers. The *pin-paṭṭu* created a new form in terms of the relation between songs and the people’s movement. They participated in political meetings to inspire the audience, and the composers published small booklets containing their songs. Choolai Manickam Naicker’s *Mahatma Gandhi Arrestu Pattu* (1928) is the first such compilation of songs (ibid.: 32-3).

As the next step following the introduction of songs, Tamil writers had been seeking the possibility of creating dramas to promote social reform since the end of the 19th century, and started writing scenarios dealing with contemporary issues. *Dumbachari*, written in the 1880s by Kasi Viswanatha Mudaliar, is the earliest of this variety. Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar and Kandasami Mudaliar shifted from orthodox theatre to commercial theatre and played the role of mediators with the masses. Kandasami Mudaliar added a “social faction” to popular plays which had until then taken only myths as their themes, resulting in a new wave. This was widely welcomed, and a new direction became visible in



popular plays. Reformists also reconfirmed the possibilities of popular plays. Venkalathur Swaminatha Sarma, who was in sympathy with the ideology of reform of divine society, staged the Tamil version of Tagore's *Kyogi* as *Jeevabalan* at his headquarters in Adyar, Madras in 1924, and it is said that both Annie Besant and Arundale of the Theosophical Society advised him to take it to the villages (ibid.: 33-4).

Finally, political commentaries, symbol of nationalism, and other such elements were incorporated into popular plays. At first, speeches dealing with contemporary political situations were incorporated into the myths. For instance, the tyrant king in the tale of Rama was depicted as British rule, whereas the tri-color of the National Congress fluttered during the scenes set at the royal palace of Ali Badshah. Renowned writers and journalists accepted the power of popular drama, and after facing the stage expressions the direct political propaganda age began (ibid.: 34-5). This type of parody was the main feature of *Kabuki* plays during the Edo (Tokugawa) period in Japan.

### Boys' Company

Historically, Tamil cinema has an extremely strong connection with politics, and especially after Independence one section of the Tamil cinema and politics became two sides of the same coin. The cinema was widely viewed as a medium to convey political messages, and a large number of political films were produced. Importantly, many male actors who participated in both the cinema and political activities in the 1950s and 1960s had belonged to Boys' Companies during their boyhood.

Boys' Companies came into existence as a reform movement of the popular theatre. At that time, plays and dramas were viewed with suspicion, mainly because of disorderly relations between male and female actors. Actresses had the image of being prostitutes, and it is said that most of them virtually were.

Shankaradas Swamigal (1867-1922) was a reformer who entered the theatre world as an actor, and planned to improve and resurrect the theatre from its disreputable state. Shankaradas planned to form a troupe consisting exclusively of boys in order to eliminate the moral disorder. This was exactly like a male version of the



Plate 1 Shankaradas Swamigal

Takarazuka Opera troupe in Japan, with its slogan *Kiyoku Tadashiku Utsukushiku* (pure, right, and beautiful), and the boys played the roles of females. Drama during that period was packed with songs and dances, and was the direct predecessor of the popular cinema.

The Boys’ Companies expanded during the 1920s into every region of Tamil Nadu, particularly in Madurai (Table 1). Of the various companies, the Shankaradas Troupe and the Gandhian P. Krishnaswamy Pavalar Troupe prospered with their social and political dramas. The impact of these two led the TKS Brothers and Madurai Bala Gana Sabha also to adopt a strongly political orientation, and those young actors who belonged to these companies were trained to form the core of the subsequent Tamil political world.

**Table 1** List of Boys’ Companies in Madurai (Guruswamy 2000)

Madurai Tattuva Minalocani Vittuva Bala Gana Sabai (Sankaradas Swamigal)
Madurai Bala Gana Sabai (Segannataiyar)
Madurai Balamina Ranjani Sangita Sabai (Segannataiyar)
Madurai Original Boys’ Company (Saccidanandam Pillai)
Madurai Devibala Vinoda Sangita Sabai (Navab Raja Manikkam Pillai)
Madurai Bala Sanmugananda Sabai (TKS Brothers)
Madurai Bala Gana Sabai (T. P. Ponnusami Pillai)
Madurai Sri Mangala Bala Gana Sabai (T. P. Ponnusami Pillai)
Tiruchi Bala Barata Saba (Rajibagu Pillai)
Bala Nadaka Company (S. Verunayar)
Ariya Gana Saba (P. S. Velu Nayar)
Bala Manohara Saba (De. Po. Krishna Sami Pavalar)
Bavalar Boys’ Company (De. Po. Krishna Sami Pavalar)
Desigananda Boys’ Company (K. T. Marimuttu Pillai)
Madurai Balavinoda Sangita Saba (Pakkiriraja)
Sri Balavinoda Nadaka Saba (S. S. Sankaralinga Nadar)
Bala Gandarva Gana Saba (Sinivasa Nadar)
Sri Ramabala Gana Saba (Vairam O. A. A. R. Arunacalam Cettiyar)
Muttukrishnan Boys’ Company (M. S. Muttu Krishnan)
Sri Minalocani Bala Sarguna Nadaka Saba (Balaniya Pillai)
Tattuva Minalocani Vitva Bala Saba (Cinnaiya Pillai)
Guruswami Nadaka Sabai (S. Guruswami)
Priya Managar Krishna Reddiyar Boys’ Company (Krishna Reddiyar)
Sri Bala Mohana Ranjita Sangita Saba (Nagalingam Cettiyar)
Alandur Boys’ Nadaka Company (Aringasami Nayudu)
Suggan Patti Boys’ Company (-)
Sri Sami Bala Gana Sangita Saba (T. S. Balaiah)

The TKS Brothers were the four sons of T. S. Kandasami Pillai, the actor who managed the troupe. Because the third son, T. K. Shanmugham, was the central figure, the troupe took its name from his initials. The brothers started their career in 1918 with Shankaradas and established their own troupe in 1925. They initially inherited the Shankaradas tradition but gradually established their own TKS style with an increasingly political hue.

In 1935 they formed Shanmugham Talkies; this meant that members of the troupe first appeared on stage and then took an active role in the cinematic world as well. *Menaka* (1935) was the first production under the direction of the famous Raja Sandow, with the



participation of super-star comedian of the time, N. S. Krishnan. The TKS Brothers were responsible for producing actors such as S. S. Rajendran, who is active even today and who became the first cinema actor to become an MLA, and Kamala Hassan, who is also still currently active.

N. S. Krishnan (1905-1957), known as the “King of Comedians,” was the star comedian of Tamil films and dramas. He made his debut in 1935 in *Menaka*, and also achieved stardom in the cinematic world. Initially a Marxist, after working with the TKS Brothers he participated in the formation of the Tamil nationalist party DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) in 1944, being their star political representative. In that year, however, he was sentenced to 30 months’ penal servitude in connection with the murder of cinema critic C. N. Lakshmikantan. After his release from jail he resumed his activities as a producer and director, but met a sad and lonely death in 1957.

Madurai youth troupes staged socio-political plays, and M. G. Ramachandran (1917-1987), known as MGR, belonged to this troupe. Great actors such as M. K. Radha and P. U. Chinnappa (1915-1951) also belonged to this troupe, which was active in both the cinematic and political worlds.



**Plate 2** The cover of the programme for *Sivakāmiyin Sabadam* by TKS Brothers (courtesy: Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai)

However, the lives of the young actors in this troupe must have been miserable. Most of the young men who joined the troupe had begun life in unfortunate circumstances. They generally belonged to poor families where the father was a drunkard, and their homes were therefore places of poverty and cruelty. There are many stories that wayward, selfish stepmothers had their own way in bringing up the boys to join the dramatic or cinematic worlds. In fact MGR was born in Sri Lanka and brought to India by his poverty-stricken mother when his father died, while N. S. Krishnan had suffered doubly from poverty and his drunken father.

Moreover, theatre owners and managers exploited the young men, at times subjecting them to sexual harassment. Stories abound of letters from families being inspected or thrown away. If the actors failed to entertain, they were forced to beg on the street as they were not given food. Randor Guy, a historian of Tamil Cinema, singles out such actions as “child labour and exploitation under the name of art” (Guy 1997: 5). The politicians and film stars who once belonged to the Boys’ Companies came up from such unfortunate circumstances, and their success stories attracted public sympathy that translated into popular support.

## **From Screen to Stage**

### **Scenario Writers of Cinema and Politics**

It was the politicians-cum-playwrights who motivated the stars of the Boys’ Companies with their scenario writing. Periyar (E. V. Ramasami Naicker, 1879-1973), the central figure of Tamil nationalism, formed Dravida Kazhagam in 1944, and most of the actors and people concerned with cinema and drama joined. In 1949, C. N. Annadurai (Anna, 1909-1969), who was Periyar’s right-hand man, formed his own independent party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The DMK grew with support from the illiterate masses. Its motivating power was not literary media such as elite newspapers and journals, but cinematic propaganda.

Two DMK leaders, C. N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi (b.1924), who later became chief minister, produced scenarios that combined films and politics. We may call these DMK propaganda films “DMK films.” Such films harshly criticize Brahmins, reflecting the DMK’s ideology of atheism, Tamil nationalism and anti-Brahmanism. They depict feeble Brahman priests, graceless gods, and villain Brahman usurers, and some scenes made fun of the unique table manners and manner of speech of Brahmins.

Annadurai entered the political field in 1936 under the influence of the Justice Party. In 1944, Periyar and Annadurai established Dravida Kazhagam (DK), which split in 1949 when Annadurai founded the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). He started writing scripts for drama in 1943 and for films later on. Along with M. Karunanidhi, M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) and other film personalities, including actors, directors and writers, Annadurai used dramas, films, journals, pamphlets and other mass media to reach out to the illiterate masses, particularly to youth and women with rural backgrounds.

American films of the 1930s such as those by Charlie Chaplin and Frank Capra influenced Annadurai’s DMK films. He was strongly in sympathy with the combination of

Frank Capra (1897-1991), the director, and Robert Liskin (1897-1955), the scenario writer. Annadurai's *Nallathambi* (1949), which was honoured as the first DMK film, was inspired by Capra-Liskin's *Opera Hat* (1936). His *Velaikkari* (1949) and *Sorgavasal* (1954) were typical DMK films.

Karunanidhi established the first student wing of the Dravidian movement, the Tamil Nadu Tamil Manavar Mandram, at the age of 14. His political activities brought him close to Annadurai. Karunanidhi started script writing after the independence. The *Parashakti* (1952) was an epoch-making DMK film in which Sivaji Ganesan starred as the hero. Once Karunanidhi and other leaders of the DMK started using films as a tool of social protest and political propaganda, they did so with amazing success. The impact of cinema on politics led to the far-reaching consequence of the DMK eventually capturing political power (Guy 1997: 263-6).

### **M. G. Ramachandran**

The star politicians who had belonged to the Boys' Companies had escaped from unfortunate circumstances, and their success stories aroused public sympathy that translated into popular support. The secret of the awe-inspiring popular support for MGR lies in the fact that a boy who had been trampled by poverty in Sri Lanka and brought to India managed to attain so high a position as chief minister of a state. MGR himself implemented benevolent policies for continuously improving the situation of the poor, and thus lived up to their expectations.

MGR distinguished between the fiction of the cinema and reality, but maintained his image. His supporters had the illusion that the hero of the cinema is actually a real man and, therefore supported him ardently as a politician as well as worshipping him as a star. During his most prosperous period, his fan club, the World MGR Fan Association established in 1954, had 10,000 branches that simultaneously functioned to support him as a politician. MGR himself has said that "the fan association and political party is one and the same." The cinema itself came to represent the DMK ideology: atheism, Tamil nationalism (anti-North, anti-Hindi), and anti-Brahmanism, all of which were reflected in the medium of cinema (Pandian 1991).

The position of MGR in Tamil cinema emphasised realism, in contrast to the main current prior to that. The impact of dramatic theatre was strong in old fashioned enactment and he had the direction of rather superseding the border of reality. This was not solely due to a devotion to modern realism, but may be described in other words as the characteristic of making reality into myth. His immense popularity meant that he was not just metaphorically but actually deified, with temples actually built after his demise to worship him as a god.

This genealogy continues with Rajni Kanth, MGR's current successor. He is highly popular among his audience, who long for his entry into politics. His film *Baba* (2002) clearly indicates his dilemma in the choice between politics and religion. At least in Tamil Nadu, religion is a powerful ideology, and moreover the lineage from medieval temples to modern films signifies how both have played the role of being the most effective medium.

### **Conclusion: Cinema as Alchemy**

The Boys’ Companies in Tamil Nadu introduced a political aspect to dramas on the subjects of mythological themes in the latter half of the 20th century. Not only the Boys’ Companies but numerous other troupes staged plays with political themes, particularly in South India, and at times the colonial government enforced their prohibition. Guntur, in the present Andhra Pradesh, was a particular centre of political theatre where anti-British propaganda plays were staged, thus confronting the colonial government. The Boys’ Companies reflected the affinity between theatre and politics in South India, and two groups in particular, the TKS Brothers and the Madurai Bala Gana Sabha, continued to issue strong political messages. In addition, those who were concerned with theatre but did not enter the cinematic world during the silent period rushed into it once the talkies started in the 1930s, and continued to produce films full of music, dance and political messages.

Most of the actors from Boys’ Companies who entered the cinematic world in the 1930s gradually became politicians after Independence. Just boys during the 1920s, they grew into outstanding adults aiming for political careers. Particularly when the DMK took power in 1962, many of those earlier poor boys were able to occupy important government posts, including those as ministers and chief minister. They now rule the political world as its senior members and are respected by the masses.

The Boys’ Companies provided the alchemy in the trend – from theatre to cinema – that transformed these poor boys into well-known persons. This is a special characteristic of India (particularly Tamil Nadu) where theatre and cinema share a close affinity. This is strikingly different from North Indian theatre and cinema, where nobody, including Gandhi, thought of applying the cinema to political ends.

In North India the relation between cinema and politics in the 1920s was not very close, with the exception of one short period. After the Amritsar massacre in 1919, anti-British feeling peaked throughout India, and films depicting anti-British, anti-colonial themes were produced in reflection of this. With the appearance of the talkies, however, once again the Hindi cinema returned to escapist entertainment and did not by and large deal with social or political themes. Since the elite politicians of the Indian National Congress also did not value the cinema, the distance between the cinema and politics remained.

Many of the actors and musicians who belong to lower social strata, however, joined the Indian Peoples’ Theatre Association (IPTA, founded in 1943), the cultural wing of the Communist party of India. Its radical activities were initially in accordance with Communist principles, but after Independence its members gradually started to follow a more realistic path, obtained public support, and thus became the main current of the Hindi cinematic world. They were particularly close to Nehruvian socialism, and as film people occupied the position of men of culture.

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