

The Tamil Language as More Central than Even the Gods

The Movie THIRUVILAYADAL (IN 1965) Is an Outlier as a Devotional Film

Abstract

The narrow genre of devotional films in India follows a regular template – a combination of theophanic interventions, bhakti (devotional) worship and didactic narratives. THIRUVILAYADAL (THE DIVINE PLAY, Akkamappettai Paramasivan Nagarajan, IN 1965), a film in Tamil (a language spoken across South and East Asia by a large diaspora), was long considered a devotional movie that celebrated the God Shiva. However, a close analysis shows that the movie subverts the darshan concept (viewing) in a Hindu devotional film. Though it may appear to be a film about Puranic (mythic) Hindu gods, the subtle subtext reduces heavenly entities to supplicatory positions in relation to a cornerstone of identity in the post-independence Dravidianist Tamil State – Tamil language. This understanding of THIRUVILAYADAL is all the more relevant in light of the increasing rigidity of Hindu religious beliefs in contemporary India.

Keywords

Religious Films, Tamil Language, Hindu Puranic, Dravidianism, THIRUVILAYADAL

Biographies

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THIRUVILAYADAL –

The Tamil Project in Indian Devotional Films

Prominent global media voices have reported that contemporary politics in India are defined by a Hindu religious-right movement,¹ also known as *Hindutva*.² The fact that Hinduism, with six significant schools of mostly non-theistic philosophies, can even be called a religion is a paradox.³ For a nuanced alternative perspective, there is the recently influential scholarly work of Wendy Doniger.⁴ The Dravidian movement in the south is prominent among the many regional political ideologies in India. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) political party in Tamilnadu adhered to this ideology and positioned itself as Dravidianist.⁵ It defined Dravidianism as a rationalist, anti-Brahminic (against Hindu caste practices), anti-North Indian and anti-Hindi, all woven around Tamil sub-nationalism. It is in this context that we review the Tamil devotional film THIRUVILAYADAL (THE DIVINE PLAY, Akkamappettai Paramasivan Nagarajan, IN 1965).

Intermittently, mainstream Indian cinema has produced devotional films based on Hindu Puranic stories. These revolved around avatars (divine terrestrial renditions) of the supreme Puranic Hindu trinity,⁶ though mostly Vishnu.⁷ The first Indian-made film, PUNDALIK (N. G. Chitre / P. R. Tipnis /

1 Reynolds 2022.

2 Sharma 1982

3 Sharma 1982.

4 Wendy Doniger, University of Chicago, Divinity School, <https://is.gd/oUvXww> [accessed 12 July 2023].

5 Dravid means “land surrounded by water on three sides”, i. e. South India. Dravidianism or Dravidian ideology promotes the concept of a separate identity for southern Indian ethno-linguistic races, distinct from the dominant North Indians. First popular in the 1930s, the movement claimed that Brahmin and upper-caste Hindus had Aryan origins and imposed their hierarchical, non-inclusive Vedic and Puranic Hindu culture, language and exploitative caste beliefs on the egalitarian Dravidians.

6 Parrinder 1997.

7 The Hindu trinity of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer) of Puranic Hinduism. Hindu gods evolved from the Vedic era (3rd century BCE) to the 17th century CE and have many different traditions. The Hindu concept of god also varies from a personal god (Hindu philosophy) to several major deities (as in the Vedic tradition) and on to several thousand (as in the Puranic tradition). Present-day Hindu religious practices largely revolve around Puranic gods, mostly Vishnu, Lakshmi, Shiva, Parvati, Brahma and Saraswathi. Of these, Vishnu inspires the Vaishnavism stream, while Shiva inspires the

Ramchandra Gopal Torney, 1912),⁸ had a devotional theme, though it is not easily categorised.⁹ Indian religious films can be identified as “histo-mythological”¹⁰ and “bhakti” (devotional) oriented.¹¹ Bhakti films have a more contemporary impact with a god, goddess or saint¹² and are characterised by a *deus ex machina*, where divine entities come down to earth to resolve human issues.¹³

While research has identified a regular template for devotional films,¹⁴ THIRUVILAYADAL diverges from this template in significant ways. Although apparently a film about gods, the nuanced narrative in this movie reduces astral entities to being subsidiary to a sacred cornerstone of identity in the post-independence Dravidianist Tamil State – Tamil language.¹⁵ The thespian Sivaji Ganesan, selected to play the role of the God Shiva, had been acclaimed since the early 1960s for *ucharippu* (pronunciation) and was known as *Nadigar Thilagam* (Doyen of Actors)¹⁶ in light of his formidable reputation for cinematic histrionics and exceptional oratory (*vasanam*) in the Tamil language¹⁷.

During the 1960s, the DMK used its Dravidianist plank to defeat the north-based national party the Indian National Congress in Tamilnadu state. The DMK framed the ability to speak in pure Tamil as a part of the people’s identity by co-opting the pure Tamil movement (*tanit tamiR iyakkam*).¹⁸ The

Shaivite stream. The Puranas developed around extensive and richly varying mythologies associated primarily with Hindu deities like Vishnu, Shiva and Devi.

8 Rajadhyaksha/Willemen 1999.

9 Dwyer 2006.

10 SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN (THE COMPLETE RAMAYANA, Babubhai Mistry, IN 1961); KARNAN (B. R. Panthulu, IN 1964).

11 JAI SANTOSHI MA (Vijay Sharma, IN 1975); BHAKTA KUMBHARA (DEVOTEE KUMBARA, Hunsur Krishnamurthy, IN 1974).

12 SHIRDI KE SAI BABA (Ashok V. Bhushan, IN 1977); JAI BABA AMARNATH (B. R. Ishara, IN 1983); MERE GHARIB NAWAZ (G. Ishwar, IN 1973).

13 Ramnath 2015.

14 Madhava Prasad, Philip Lutgendorf, Rachel Dwyer and Usha Brugabandhu have written extensively on Indian devotional films and the concept of darshan.

15 Tamil is pronounced as *Tamizh*.

16 Tamil film journal *Paesum Padam* (Talking Picture) was the first magazine to mention this.

17 Shivaji is famous for his oratory in films like MANOHARA (L. V. Prasad, IN 1954), VEERAPANDIYA KATTABOMAN (B. R. Panthulu, IN 1959), KAPALOTTIYA THAMIZHAN (B. R. Panthulu, IN 1961), THIRUCHERUVAR (A. P. Nagarajan, IN 1967) and RAJARAJA CHOLAN (A. P. Nagarajan, IN 1973).

18 Although Maraimalai Adigal is credited, U. V. Caminataiyar is equally responsible for the rediscovery of the Tamil classics and *Cangam* literature, in 1881.

DMK's "contestatory" strategy required a visible enemy,¹⁹ and this association positioned the movement as a southern Tamil revival against dominant Hindi "northerners".²⁰

THIRUVILAYADAL, widely popular on platforms like YouTube,²¹ is based on the 64 stories featuring the God Shiva²² from the *ThiruAlavAykantam*,²³ as well as texts from the thirteenth century CE.²⁴ The movie was directed by A. P. Nagarajan – who also wrote the script and played Nakkirar's role – famous for making Tamil films based on myths and social themes²⁵ and for contributing to the resurgence of devotional films in the state.²⁶ Little else is known about Nagarajan beyond that his movie THIRUVILAYADAL (produced by a Muslim, Shahul Hameed) can be seen as a symbol for the dilution of northern Puranic Hindu divinity.²⁷

In Puranic myths, the God Shiva resides in the Himalayas with his wife, the Goddess Parvathi, and sons Vinayaka (Ganesha) and Murugan (Karthikeya). The movie removes Lord Shiva and Murugan from the Puranic Hindu pantheon in the Himalayas and places them in the real Tamil world, in the city of Madurai in the state of Tamilnadu – something of an ethnocultural appropriation of religious symbols for the Tamil project.

By bringing the gods from the North to real towns in Tamilnadu, Nagarajan was only following the concept of a demarcated sacred space,²⁸ a Tamil tradition evident in the ancient *Cangam* era.²⁹ It also links to the ancient Tamil belief that the God Murugan, unlike in Puranic lore, originated in the

19 Schiffman 1996.

20 Zvelebil/Gonda 1974.

21 See e. g. <https://is.gd/a9GJcY> [accessed 12 July 2023].

22 Masalaaddict 2012.

23 The narratives can be traced to the 6th century CE (Thirunavukkarasar, Thiruganyana-sambandar, Paranjothi Munivar), see Aravind 2017.

24 *Tiruttondar Tiruvandhadhi* was written by Perumparapuliur Nampi in the 17th century CE court of Thirumala Nayak, it showcases the "playful actions" (*Vilayadal*) taken by Shiva to test the devotion of his devotees, see Fisher 2017. There is a version also attributed to Paranjothi Munivar (Bala 2010).

25 Thiruvilayadal, Kudalkantam, <https://shaivam.org/scripture/English-Translation/1477/thiruvilaiyadal-puranam-the-sacred-sports-of-siva> [accessed 12 July 2023].

26 Raman 2012.

27 Nainar 2018.

28 Temples in pockets of South India have a geographically demarcated *kodi maram* (flagpost). Unlike Vedic gods, who live in the sky (heavens), the gods for Tamils are on *terra firma*.

29 Shrikumar 2015. *Cangams* were scholarly meetings which, according to traditional Tamil literary accounts, were held from 200 BCE onwards. Though there is limited evidence of

Kurunji (hills) as a tribal god. The Dravidianist contention was that Murugan was appropriated and added to the Vedic Hindu pantheon as the son of Shiva during the Bhakti movement, just as Parvati was syncretised from the *Tamil Atha* or *Mari* into *Durga* and *Kali*.³⁰ Nagarajan was recapturing Murugan and Shiva for the Tamils.

This argument is supported by sources in the *Cangam* texts (200 CE), where Sudalai Madan (literally “cremation ground chief”) was worshipped in Tamilnadu and later co-opted as the son of Shiva and Parvati.³¹ Even Mayon (the dark one), seen as the supreme deity who creates, sustains and destroys the universe, was worshipped during the *Cangam* period, before becoming an amalgamation of Shiva and Murugan.³²

THIRUVILAYADAL was a commercial success, running for over 25 weeks, and received widespread critical acclaim, being recognised with a Certificate of Merit at the 13th National Film Awards in India.

The Temple and the Theatre: Darshana in Context

The typical Hindu devotional bhakti film is constructed around a vicarious faith-based experience in which the “performing devotee” is divinely rewarded after several trials and much tribulation. Such celestially induced cinema, with special effects, offers awe-inspiring experiences to the devout against the background of bhakti *bhajans* (religious songs). Gods’ theophanic appearances are the next best thing to the temple deities’ physical darshan, or divine gaze which is represented by the large and elongated eyes of the idol.³³ This “exchange through eyes” that devotees attempt in the Hindu temple is an essence of worship³⁴ and is more accessible in a movie

earlier meetings, there is some proof of later *Cangam* conferences, discovered by Kamil Zvelebil.

30 Xavier 2009. Mentioned in *Cangam* literature poems in Paripāṭal and the Pattuppattu anthologies are said to be between 300 BCE to 300 CE, as well as mentioned in the ancient Tamil literary work *Silappadikaram* (c. 200 CE).

31 Mahalakshmi 2011.

32 Zvelebil/Gonda 1974.

33 Lutgendorf states that this “is similar to being seeing or meeting powerful people, like royalty and god men”. Cinema superstars Amitabh Bachan and Shah Rukh Khan, even today, make appearances in front of fans on their birthdays. They are often called out by name, to seek their attention, to “see and be seen”; see Prideaux 2022. Lutgendorf, 2006, 227

34 Lutgendorf 2006.

theatre, where access is not restricted as it is for a temple,³⁵ prioritising the experience.³⁶

The significance of the divine gaze is why devotional films present the deity frontally on the screen, replicating the Darshan gaze with the help of the shot-reverse-shot. Here, a shot of the deity is followed by a shot of the ecstatic devotee who is being “seen”, before returning to a shot of the deity.³⁷ Another shot is the “human avatar emerging from the deity”,³⁸ which in a song sequence in *JAI SANTOSHI MAA* (Vijay Sharma, IN 1975) and in a hand reappearance sequence in *BHAKTA KUMBHARA* (DEVOTEE KUMBHARA, Hunsur Krishnamurthy, IN 1974) is centrally framed within a static tableau.³⁹ There is a reciprocity where the “look” from the god is captured by the camera’s looking as if from the deity’s eyes at the devotee,⁴⁰ a deployment of film techniques in the micro-narration of a scene.⁴¹

This aim is further supported by the “fetish of cinematic eyes” in repeated facial zoom shots (popular in films of the 1980s and indeed in TV serials today) for dynamic effect and to stretch time.⁴² The viewer is assured of the “look many times over”, which is a difficult task in an actual temple. In fact, the viewer-devotee can experience long and arduous queues in prominent temples in order to catch just a brief glimpse of the deity, which Madhava Prasad terms a feudal tradition with hierarchical criteria.⁴³ This designation is supported by the actual experience of the devotee, who receives, through the priest, the *prasad* (offering), *aarti* (fire worship) or a *teertha* (*tulsi*-soaked holy water) even as the Brahmin priest adheres to “caste purity” when interacting with the devotee.

In contrast, devotees-in-the-theatre are released from such restrictions of access to the deity. They engage as a social group, cheering on or even praying aloud when noble deeds are performed.⁴⁴ The Darshan experience

35 Prasad 2021.

36 Shaikh 2017.

37 Prasad 2021.

38 Lutgendorf 2006. A popular theme involves the god emerging from the temple and taking human form.

39 Kapur 1987, 80.

40 Prasad 2009. See, for example, the first song sequence in *JAI SANTOSHI MAA* (IN 1975).

41 Vasudevan 2011.

42 Kapur 1987.79

43 Prasad 2009.

44 Lutgendorf 2006.

in the theatre removes devotees from the physical and sacred rigidity of the temple and makes them a part of a more secular group. THIRUVILAYADAL further shapes the narrative by “Tamilising” this secular audience by making Tamil language a common thread. THIRUVILAYADAL was therefore neither a histo-mythological nor a bhakti devotional film in the pure senses of these terms. It had other cinematic agendas to pursue.

Divine Play: Tamil Language versus the God Shiva

THIRUVILAYADAL opens with a 1960s-style studio setting in mythical Mount Kailasha (the Himalayan abode of the God Shiva). Narada, often an instigator for Puranic stories, walks in to offer the “fruit of knowledge”. Shiva mischievously declares that the fruit will go to the son who is the first to circumnavigate the three worlds. Murugan promptly sets off on his travels, but his brother Vinayaka just goes around his parents and says, “My parents are my world.”⁴⁵ He receives the fruit! A livid Murugan leaves Kailasha. On his way to the Palani hills, Avvaiyar, the legendary woman devotee (played by the veteran singer K. P. Sundarambal), stops the tantrum-throwing young Murugan.

Here, Avvaiyar appears to be a stand-in for the Goddess Tamil Tai, a symbol for the atheistic Dravidianists that parallels the Puranic Hindu Goddess Saraswathi of knowledge. Unlike the Hindu goddess, the matronly Tamil Tai has “only two arms”,⁴⁶ convenient for the motherly Sundarambal to play as a real-life proxy.⁴⁷ Avvaiyar implores the young Murugan not to leave his home. She first sings in praise of the warrior god of the Hindus and the adopted god of the Tamil language (due to the belief that he headed a *Cangam*), before giving him a stentorian dressing down,

You have a Mother and Father who love you. My Tamil has the right to tell you ... your logic is wrong!

Let your anger go; **this is Tamil asking**. Don't you know, young man

45 *Mata, Pitha, Guru, Deivam* (Mother, Father, Teacher and God) is widely mentioned as a popular adage in sacred texts. Vinayaka's action justifies this in the “Fruit of Knowledge” episode, see Sadhguru 2017.

46 Ramaswamy 1998.

47 Sundarambal was an elderly and devout singer of devotional songs with a real-life reputation for social and cultural work.

When your anger dissipates, the race is united, don't you know that,
Muruga?

Get up on your peacock and go to Shiva; you will have to accept; I will
take you, come running to me.

The scene of Avvaiyar's demand that Murugan *listen to Tamil* (to a personification of the language and to the Tamils, as a people) while the principal gods of the Hindu pantheon watch from high up in the clouds is striking. All are watching: Shiva/Parvathi, Vishnu/Lakshmi, Brahma/Saraswathi (the Puranic holy trinity of the Hindus). They watch in disbelief as a human being gives a disciplinary scolding to one of their own. The incredulity is captured by quick mid-close-up zoom-in shots of each god pair. In the Indian devotional film world, gods are not told off!

The chiding Avvaiyar, not part of the original story in *ThiruAlavAykantam*, is referred to historically as an "old wise woman",⁴⁸ and in THIRUVILAYADAL she emerges as a contemporary palimpsest.⁴⁹ When she says "this is Tamil asking", she is referring to the Tamil language as both a pronoun and noun (*Tamizikku, Tamizh*) superior even to the gods. This is a concept similar to the Tamil *Vituthuhtu* (Messenger) poems of the post-*Cankam* period⁵⁰ that were discovered by Swaminatha Aiyar in 1900:

O pre-eminent Tamil! I exist because of you!

Even the ambrosia of the celestials, I do not desire!

— *Madurai Chokkanathar, Tamil Vituthuthu, 151*⁵¹

The three parts of a *Vituthuthu* poem – the dispatcher, the addressee and the messenger – are all persons. The messenger is Tamil, the language; the addressee is always Shiva.⁵² The messenger is pristine and of superior character – *cankatamil* (Tamil of the *Cangam*).⁵³ The *Vituthoothu* placed Tamil language at the centre of the known universe, of the political, economic and moral order. It is superior to the king, almost an ethnolinguistic challenge

48 Ramadevi 2016.

49 For Tamil audiences who have read about Avvaiyar since childhood, the character in the film would have been closest to the real thing.

50 Jayaraman 1965; Varadarajan 1988.

51 Ramaswamy 1998.

52 Peterson 1989.

53 Krishnan 1984, 136.

to the royal economy of that time – that of the Telugu-speaking Nayaka kings of Madurai.⁵⁴ Tamil is the absolute sovereign of the land of the Tamils (*tamilakam*) and the world of Tamil (*tamilulakam*).⁵⁵ It had suzerainty over the *muventar* (the three Tamil-speaking kingdoms Chola, Chera and Pandya), bowing to no one as a true emperor of the Hindu-Indic-Tamil world.⁵⁶ Tamil bows to none, king or god!

***Kutram Kutrame* – A Mistake Is a Mistake**

The second and more dramatic episode contains the face-off between the poet Nakkirar and the God Shiva, from which the line *Kutram Kutrame* (a mistake is a mistake) became popular.⁵⁷ Here the Tamil language and caste⁵⁸ move centre stage. The story is set in Madurai city, where King Shembaga Pandiyan offers a reward to anyone who could answer his query – *Does a woman's hair have a natural fragrance?* The God Shiva, playfully testing, gives a poor poet, Dharumi, a poem that answers the query. But when Dharumi goes to present the poem in the king's court and is about to win the reward, the court poet, Nakkirar, steps in to find a *kutram* (mistake) in the poem. When informed, Shiva is clearly incensed, but even when confronted with the divine form Nakkirar stands his ground. Shiva responds by burning Nakkirar with his third eye. There are various versions of the narrative, most notably Nīlakanṭha Dikshitar's, in which Nakkirar even claims superiority over the almighty.⁵⁹

In THIRUVILAYADAL, the narrative is nuanced at multiple levels. There are incendiary back-and-forths between man and god. In the court, the God Shiva glowers contemptuously at Nakkirar and demands to know the mistake in the poem. The exchange is as follows:

54 Ramaswamy 1998.

55 Sanjeevi 1972, 2–3.

56 Ramaswamy 1998, 75.

57 Luqman 2017.

58 The exploitative concept of *varna* in the Hindu caste system places the Brahmin as the superior among men and the subjugated Sudras/Ati Sudras at the very bottom.

59 Nilakantha's version has Nakkirar claiming that the god is famous because of poets. In it Nakkirar says to the God Shiva: "your work has attained the greatness of being a 'scripture'... only because we describe another intentionality, apply suppletion, inversion, contextualiaation, extraction, and conjunction, keep this in mind... don't look to find fault with my poems, O Paśupati!"

NAKKIRAR: There was no issue in the Chol; it is the Porul that has a problem.⁶⁰ Why did you write the poem and send it through someone? Poets should not lie.

SHIVA: Talk about the present and not the past. I know about comprehensible, incomprehensible; known, unknown; delivered, undelivered; I know all and do not need your advice. I know everything.

NAKKIRAR: The meaning of your poem? What does it claim? What is the message?

SHIVA: O bee, with your hidden wings: you have lived a life searching for honey. So tell me honestly from what you have seen: among all the flowers you know, is there one that smells sweeter than the hair of this woman, with her peacock gait, close-set teeth, and ancient eternal love?⁶¹

When the God Shiva explains that it means that a woman's hair has a natural fragrance, Nakkirar rejects that claim.

NAKKIRAR: That can never be. Use of perfumes and continuously sporting flowers causes the fragrance in the hair. I can never accept that woman's hair has a natural fragrance from birth. Even the purest of all women will have only artificial and not natural fragrances in her hair.

SHIVA: What about women of higher birth and celestial goddesses? How about Goddess Bharathi, who resides in your tongue and helps you write poems?

NAKKIRAR: Even the entire women folk in all the fourteen realms of the world do not have it. Not only Goddess Bharathi, but this also holds good for the consort of my Lord of the Lords Shiva.

SHIVA: Really? With certainty? Can you swear on your Tamil?

NAKEERAR: Sure, certainly, and I swear on my Tamil.

SHIVA warns: Nakkera [a less respectful form of address] – carefully look at me. Is the poem I wrote wrong?

60 In a Tamil tradition of peer review, the *Pulavan* (poet, philosopher) had to defend his work in the presence of an assembly of experts presided over by the king. Review parameters were (a) சொல்லு (Sol), for structure, grammar and context and (b) பொருள் (Porul), for meaning, metaphors and rationale.

61 Ludden/Pillai 1976.

When Shiva says this, the screen turns red and his third eye appears to twitch in rage.⁶² Nakkirar recognises the God Shiva and bows to pay obeisance. Then he looks up and stares at Shiva and says,

Oh, poet, even though you reveal who you are... and I can see your third eye... and even if you burn me... a mistake is a mistake. **Even if you open your forehead eye a mistake is a mistake** (*Netrikaan therandalum Kutram Kutrame*).

The scene becomes grimmer when a furious Shiva uses a slur that belittles Nakkirar's low-born caste, the Vellap Parppars:

SHIVA: Someone who survives through cutting [*kir kir*] is finding fault in my poem [*kir kir endru saivano kutram solvadu*].

Here Nakkirar is being referred to as a low caste person, typically employed in making bangles with a saw (hence the term *kir kir* in the slur, to denote the cutting action).⁶³ Precisely at this moment the narrative turns to a sensitive topic. Does God sanction the *varna* system, which makes Hinduism unjustly hierarchical? If God created all life equal, would he differentiate between higher and lower human beings? This point is an apt placement for the DMK's atheistic and its anti-Brahminic ideology.

Then comes what is clearly the denouement of this stand-off between human and god – the riposte by Nakkirar, looking back at the god in anger and contempt, mocking the god:

NAKKIRAR: At least we live through such proud work. We do not survive through alms as you do [Nakkirar mimics a begging Shiva].⁶⁴

Understandably, the God Shiva burns him down. But soon all is well again, as Nakkirar is brought back to life, and another episode of the divine play is added to the list of myths. However, after the event it is clear that Nakkirar, the man, had come out looking better than Shiva, the god.

62 The God Shiva's destructive third eye on the forehead is part of his role as a Destroyer in the Puranic Hindu holy trinity.

63 Hanumanthan 1977. Nakkirar's low caste Vellap-Parppar profession was to saw/cut conch shells/leather to make bangles/ornaments. The word *kir* also means "cut/saw" in Tamil, see <https://www.ilkogretim-online.org/fulltext/218-1647498435.pdf>, page 13.

64 Shiva has also been known as *Bhikshatana* ("wandering about for alms, mendicancy") in the Shaivaite tradition and is depicted in literary sources as a nude, four-armed man adorned with ornaments and a begging bowl and followed by demonic attendants; see Sivaramamurti 2004.

The Tamil agenda in THIRUVILAYADAL

THIRUVILAYADAL contains a subtle and yet impactful reinterpretation of the relationship between the Tamil people, their language and Puranic gods. With Avvaiyar, there is a personification of the Tamil language as an entity that is above even Hindu divinity. With Nakkirar, there is a validation of Tamil scholarship that cannot be compromised even in the presence of the supreme god. THIRUVILAYADAL dismantles what we know of the bhakti film, weaponising a social perch for the audience-devotee in the cinema hall where a Tamil agenda can be constructed. Also, the movie does not have the typical trappings of an Indian devotional film. There is an absence of frontality, miracles, rituals and group bhajans. The devotee does not undergo any trials and tribulations before being rescued by a *deus ex machina*.

Nagarajan felt Nakkirar important enough⁶⁵ for him to play the role himself, but he also sets up Dharumi's character as an alter ego of the audience, especially in the scene where Dharumi is venting his frustration about his humiliation at the royal court. There is no one around except the audience and the God Shiva. Dharumi does not know that the rich poet who gave him the poem to present at the royal court was the God Shiva. With only the audience at hand, Shiva would be expected to be the all-knowing divine entity that he is. After all, the god would know how this "divine play" will play out. The audience would expect him to treat the situation patronisingly. The god would know there was a fault in the poem and that Dharumi would come back humiliated. Instead, the God Shiva is furious and red-faced.

This is a defining moment because the god should be aware of the complete arc of the narrative. After all, that is the essence of the devotional film. In that scene, not only does Shiva get angry, but he also takes Dharumi and walks furiously through the real Madurai temple corridors to confront Nakkirar, his hands clasped behind his back to control his rage. He walks for a full 32-second three-shot sequence. He does not disappear and then reappear in the court as gods are supposed to do in devotional films.

When the poor poet Dharumi first meets Lord Shiva to receive the poem, he perceives him as a rich poet, not a god. Dharumi is in awe of the rich man before him, admires his majestic personality and even touches his *pattu* (silk) garments in wonder. Then Dharumi observes Shiva closely and actually goes down on his knees. The viewers may at this point expect that Dharumi,

65 Raghavan 2015.

even if has not recognised the god, would appreciate that this charismatic person was special. Someone to be respect or worshipped. That is the initial impression. Instead, Dharumi looks Shiva up and down, as if sizing him up. He then lets out what we recognise as steam vapour from his mouth in *vayiru erichal*, or burning stomach, a Tamil metaphor for jealousy.⁶⁶ Dharumi then sarcastically states, “You seem to be a prosperous poet.” When Shiva laughs, Dharumi responds, “You must have had a stomach full of food; that is why you are laughing.” Dharumi treats the god like a wealthy village landlord, displaying the “sizing-up gaze” of a rebellious *serf* (Dharumi) to the *feudal master* (God Shiva).

For Nakkirar’s encounter with the God Shiva at the Pandiyan court, Nagarajan constructs a fascinating *mise-en-scène*. At the point when Nakkirar realises Shiva’s identity, he joins his palms in a *namaste*⁶⁷ and bows like a blessed devotee deeply grateful for the divine revelation. But when he lifts his head to behold the God Shiva’s gaze, his eyes are steady and firm. He is not in a temple in front of an almighty. He is now a Tamil scholar representing a language bigger than the biggest god in the universe. He actually turns his back on Shiva with a dismissive wave, making a point to an increasingly incensed Shiva (all captured in a three part tracking shot without any frontality). It is a shocking act in a devotional film.

The profoundly passionate Tamil scholar with pride in his language is juxtaposed with a rather peevisish almighty who is framed in profile, looking sideways at the human character. Such irreverence towards a god cannot be in a devotional film. Even in other moments when human characters return the gaze, they do not always look the gods (Shiva with Dharumi and Murugan with Avvaiyar) in the face. Instead, their gaze is directed towards the camera or at a corner, as if they had a point to make to the audience or expected a better experience with gods than they had just encountered.

In THIRUVILAYADAL, Nagarajan presents mythical gods as petulant. They are bothered about “knowledge fruits” (in Murugan’s case) or “entitled scholarship” (in Shiva’s case) and exhibit an upper caste bias in relation to scholarly lower castes (in Nakkirar’s case). The film is worth revisiting today, given the current socio-political climate in India’s Tamilnadu state. The Bharatiya Janata Party, a largely North India-based, Hindi-language biased

66 There are even 1960s-style special effects showing smoke emanating from Dharumi’s mouth.

67 *Namaste* is used both as a greeting and in paying obeisance before a deity in a temple.

and rightist Hindu political party, has started challenging the Dravidianist parties in the state. What stands in their way is the emotive role that the Tamil language plays in the life of an average Tamilian. THIRUVILAYADAL is located in a Tamil space, interpreting Puranic Hindu divinity through the spectrum of its language. It explores the duel between the Tamil language and the gods in such intricate detail that the *porul* (meanings of the dialogues) reverberate long after the movie ends. *Kutram Kutrame!* A mistake is a mistake whoever makes it, and “Tamil” knows best. *Tamil Vituthootu!*

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