Compared to Bollywood, the Tamil movie industry (Kollywood) has received much less international and scholarly attention. With its detailed analysis of five movies and their respective stars, Pongiyannan’s study Film and Politics in India (2015) provides valuable insights into the entanglement of movies and politics in Tamil Nadu, India.

In 2012, the Tamil film song ‘Why This Kolaveri Di’ became a worldwide success and has been viewed over 130 million times on YouTube since. The song was written by lead actor Dhanush, star of the psychological thriller simply titled ‘3’, to which the song was integral. Literally translating as ‘Why this killing rage, girl?’, its meaning or relevance to the film was not much of a factor in its familiarity. Even if Dhanush, a well-known actor who has performed in over 25 movies so far, was central to a hit of epic proportions, his name is unlikely to elicit much of an ‘ahah’ across India’s borders. The fact that he is the son-in-law of Rajinikanth, one of India’s most revered stars, is probably even less known.

Rajinikanth (often shortened as ‘Rajini’) is one of the five ‘Tamil’ actors that Dhamu Pongiyannan discusses in relation to their political aspirations in his informative and scholarly Film and Politics in India (2015). Pongiyannan’s main argument is that a clear link can be drawn between the way Tamil actors star on-screen, the role depicted, the social issues touched upon, and his or her political ambitions. For this the book builds on Sara Dickey’s seminal work (1993) in showing how these actors are not merely entertainers but in their portrayal also ‘saviours of the oppressed, protectors of the poor, messiahs of the malnourished, and deities of the downtrodden’. As such they “inform the audience, educate the spectator, address various social problems, provide them with solace, and secure them with hopes through warrior heroes” (p.12).

Bollywood vs. Kollywood

Any person who has ever seen a Tamil movie will immediately recognize the relevance of the argument made above. It is also what sets apart Tamil movies, and in broader terms ‘South Indian’ cinema (including the Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu movie industries), from Bollywood. While the latter generally revolves around story-lines high on glamour, with meticulously choreographed studio-filmed dance routines and a focus on the upper-middle class and elites, the former puts ‘ordinary’ Indians much more central, with scenes set in market places, people’s homes, and simply on the street. While Tamil movies also abound in musical scenes in which the hero and/or heroine take center stage, they are more generally set ‘out in the open’, in real life, and are as such less divorced from daily reality than the ones central to Bollywood movies.

Pongiyannan argues that “the relationship between Tamil cinema and politics... mainly revolves around the actors’ potential to project their superhuman qualities and fans’ faithfulness to the charisma of their favourite actors” (p.29). Two factors are crucial here. While actors set themselves apart from ordinary men by projecting themselves as exceptional and ordinary on-screen, the audience is ‘encouraged’ to perceive their stars as superhuman with divine powers (ibid.). In relation to fans, there have alternatively been known to display their devotion to their particular film hero through religious practices and open worshiping. It is another further example of what it appears that a “fan’s allegiance to cinematic stars grows stronger as the popular democratic state remains corrupt and continue to fail the masses” (p.33).

MGR – Nadodi Mannan (1958)

For his analysis Pongiyannan focuses on five iconic movies, each one clearly connecting with the lead actor’s political ambitions and views. The author kicks off the analysis with perhaps one of Tamil cinema’s most iconic movie stars, Manurud Gopalamoondan Ramachandran, generally referred to as MGR. The founder of the All India Anna Dravidil Progressive Federation party or Anna Dalitha Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), he was the chief minister of Tamil Nadu for ten years, from 1977 till his death in 1987. MGR continues to be worshipped as a god by the state’s poor, and temples have been built in his veneration. The movie that Pongiyannan pays special attention to here is Nadodi Mannan (1958), which was not only MGR’s 100th movie (he would make roughly 150 during his lifetime), but also the one that propelled him into politics and secured his political superstar status. While it does not lie in the scope of this article to provide a proper synopsis of the movie, nor of any of the other discussed in this book, what stands out in this movie – which was also written, directed and produced by MGR – is the way in which corruption, nepotism and injustice are exposed by the two main characters (a double role played by MGR). Besides being the first color movie in Tamil Nadu, the film is a clear example of one that puts ‘Tamil-ness’ central through its layering of cultural values and moral lessons.

As in the book’s subsequent chapter, which focuses on actress Jayalalitha, Pongiyannan notes the importance of MGR’s fair skin as part of his appeal to fans. Yet while this may have made him stand-out as a person hailing from a well-off and upper-castes (Brahmin) background, the actor never failed to point out his humble upbringings and his early days of poverty, in order for the masses to be able to identify with him (p.16). Unlike Rajinikanth, arguably Tamil cinema’s most powerful and a Marathi speaker by birth, MGR was not a native Tamil speaker, something which at some point also became a political issue (p.16). But MGR simply argued that any person who spoke Tamil was a Tamil, though himself of Malayali ancestry. He promoted himself as a pan-Tamil leader, and due to his association with the All India Anna Dravidil Progressive Federation party Movement also made a determined effort not to be seen as religious, thus refusing to play religious film roles (p.17).

Jayalalitha – Adimaip Penn (1991)

Pongiyannan continues his analysis by zooming in on MGR’s hair-apparent and partner Jayalalitha whose ‘whiteness’ or ‘fairness’ added considerable charisma to her popular appeal. Also hailing from an upper caste (Iyengar/Brahmin) background, like MGR, Jayalalitha’s popularity also crossed caste lines and had a clear unifying effect on the masses. Born in 1948, she passed away recently in 2016 and was at the time still Chief Minister (CM) of Tamil Nadu. In total she would serve six terms as CM for a total of fourteen years. According to Pongiyannan, her career can be divided into three phases, the first...
of which (1965-1973) is the time she made her mark across the state's political stage, while in the case of the other actors mentioned above. Padayappa (1999), one of his most iconic movies, for instance, is also one of the rare occasions Hindu deity Lord Murugan. Rajini's religious avowals associate him "with right-wing nationalism, and Tamil Nadu Janata Party" (p.116), currently in power in India. Furthermore, as the author argues, "The way in which Padayappa's success is built on the feudal social structure, caste hierarchy, and the inferior status of women, is a strong message to the "bodybuilder" audience" (p.131). Rajini's dark complexion and characterization as a smoker and drinker, though a morally upright man, may convince the audience that he is one of them, but his films at the same time suggest that his aum, "proving everything to be the hybrid of god, embrace superstition, and accept the feudal social structure." (Ibid)

Newcomers Vijayakanth & Sarathkumar

In the first two chapters Pongiyanan moves on to relative newcomers Vijayakanth and Sarathkumar. Again the focus is on the political views of both. Vijayakanth's Captain Prabhakaran (1991) and Sarathkumar's Naatamai (translated as The Village Headman, 1994) are explored in greater detail. Like Rajinikanth, Vijayakanth is a dark-skinned action hero who is also somewhat perceived as an alternative to the former (p.131). At the same time the actor styles himself as a black MGM, imbuing his movies with strong political messages and skillfully and cunningly portraying himself as a charismatic force that swaps more so than in MGR's case, he is particular known for countering lawlessness and taking up arms against notorious criminals. Captain Prabhakaran in that sense, justifies violence, something the actor does so with the following words: "I need to become a beast to destroy the beast," (p.138) the letter referring to corrupt politicians and bureaucrats.

Interestingly, many of Vijayakanth's movie titles are different references to MGR's nicknames and song titles. Vijayakanth also makes a deliberate effort to communicate to MGR fans while at the same time positioning himself as an unyielding action hero who "seems to channel Rajinikanth's angry young man's image" (p.140). Here the author argues that: "The narrative structure of Vijayakanth's films revolves around this tension between the anti-heroic or antagonistic violent act, and the heroic violent act, violence, and rescue." (Ibid) What makes Vijayakanth particularly unique is his lengthy discourses that "inserts in movies, highlighting "the deplorable plight of the ordinary people when dealing with bureaucratic red tape, corruption and violence against women." (p.115)

Like Vijayakanth, Sarathkumar is an action hero who does not shy away from violence, but much more so than with the other actors discussed, the persona he depicts on screen can be directly linked to his own (Nadar) caste background. Born into a low-caste position, his caste has witnessed upward mobility through his iconic leader K. Komara, who was both also points out, was a contemporary of Gandhi (p.159-160). Like actors such as Stallone and Schwarzenegger, Sarathkumar is a bodybuilder and the actors of the discussed in this book is he perhaps the most prominent for displaying and confirming a particular muscularity and acting notions of hegemonic and 'rural' masculinity. Through Naatamai (1994) he established his character as an "ordinary man" with extraordinary integrity and revolutionary vision in term of ideals such as, egalitarian justice ..." (p.151). He continues to do so and portrays himself as a Rural Rambo, both conforming to the feudal system and confronting the elements that threaten to disrupt the caste hierarchy. Again the poor are a crucial focus in his movies, particularly informed by growing disenchantment over the divide between rich and poor, while also challenging new forms of consumption and materiality, in particular the actor's charisma builds on his "cinematic characterization as superhuman with extraordinary qualities that can redeem people from their daily problems." (p.10)

Tamil films in perspective

Pongiyanan's analysis is revealing for the political undertones of many Tamil films and the way Tamil actors make use of their movies to propel their own political careers. In MGR and Jayaalalitha's case this led to a long-lasting and determining presence on the political stage, while in the case of the other actors discussed their political influence and ambitions are less easy to pinpoint. A notable omission in Pongiyanan's study is one of Tamil cinema's widely known actor, Sarathkumar (1954), an avowed atheist who has always remained rather aloof about his political ambitions, but has more recently hinted at entering Tamil Nadu's political arena himself, With its sequential focus, moving from MGR, Jayalalitha and Rajinikanth to more recent actors, the author could have also paid more significant attention to the preferred shift from fair to darker skin tones, the changing role caste plays in the identity formation of its actors and depictions in movies, as well as the more prominent role of violence. Differing from Bollywood, it is clear that Hollywood movies are much more politically layered, and function as political vehicles for their actors. In its keenness to contrast Tamil movies with North Indian ones, Pongiyanan has little to say about other South India movie industries that also have strong political connections, most notably the Telugu one. Besides that, the book makes some claims that lack a sound basis or reference, such as the one where the author argues that Tamil Nadu is the second wealthiest state in India (p.5), or where he mentions that the South Indian languages Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu all have their roots in Tamil (p.8). Both Tamil and Telugu did originate from the same proto language, but Tamil developed from Proto South Dravidian while Telugu emerged separately from Proto-Central Dravidian. As such it has never quite been conclusive which is the state of two languages is older. Yet what makes Pongiyanan's study a stand-out one is the fact that it is one of the few that directly focused on "by projecting himself as a Rural Rambo, both conforming to the feudal system and confronting the elements that threaten to disrupt the caste hierarchy. Again the poor are a crucial focus in his movies, particularly informed by growing disenchantment over the divide between rich and poor, while also challenging new forms of consumption and materiality, in particular the actor's charisma builds on his "cinematic characterization as superhuman with extraordinary qualities that can redeem people from their daily problems." (p.10)