**Ethics, Affect, and the Mahabharata: Karnan as the Hero in Tamil Political Mass Movie**

Sowparnika Balaswaminathan, Concordia University, Montreal

Mahabharata Seminar, American Academy of Religion, 2023

No character from the Mahabharata has captured the popular consciousness of Tamil culture more than Karna, the misbegotten son of Kunti, elder brother to the Pandavas, child of Surya, and the dear friend of Duryodhan. From erasures to explanations, the character of Karna has been unproblematized in various iterations of Tamil texts, and brought to represent debates around sociological issues of caste, nationalism, love and kinship, justice and violence, and the individual and social, which are all themes relevant to the Mahabharata itself. In this paper, I explore three Tamil films that center the character of Karna in diverse ways and produce ethical arguments rooted in the particular historical formation of the time of their making. Additionally, I examine how the aesthetics of Tamil cinema impact the narrative of Karna, reinforcing contemporary and vernacular values. By framing these works in the context of their culture and media, I argue that the films are concerned with two aspects of Tamil culture, as glorified in its literary tradition: *aram* (ethics) and *inbam[[1]](#footnote-1)* (love). I posit that the films differentially apply the framework of *aram*, the Tamil moral principle unanchored from caste, rather than *dharma*, which has predominantly been contextualized by varna. Secondly, I contend that the predominance of affective orientation towards love, broadly defined, in all Tamil creative works including film, as well as the cultural significance accorded to it in society, not only allows for the vernacularization of the *Mahabharata* epic, but also allows for a radical reinterpretation of what can be called a just society.

In the following pages, I will first review how Karna has been explained in the Sanskrit Mahabharata attributed to Vyasa, especially through the tribulations of varna and dharma, followed by a generalized overview of the same in the Tamil context. I will then analyze Tamil cinema in its historical and political context, followed by an analysis of each film.

**Karna, Dharma, and the Sanskrit Mahabharata**

Alf Hiltebeitel ((2007, 25) characterizes Karna’s death as “the most overdetermined event in the Mahabharata war—indeed, in the entire Mahabharata.” As a character destined to die, Karna offers the interpreters of the epic a foil for the Pandavas, as well as an illustration of dharma gone wrong. To summarize the plot of Karna briefly, he is born to a maiden and unmarried Kunti and Surya, the sun god, through a magical verse bestowed upon the future Queen by a grateful rishi Durvasa. Abandoning the child to the river (and goddess) Ganga, Kunti continues on her path to becoming the mother, through the same means ironically, to the five Pandavas. Born with an armor and earrings that grant him protection, Karna is adopted by a charioteer and his wife, and brought up as a “suta,” a progeny of a Ksatriya father and a Brahmin mother entitled to work with chariots and horses[[2]](#footnote-2), inheriting the varna of his adopted father. Having received instructions in the martial arts from several teachers including Drona and Krpa, Karna challenges Arjuna at the martial demonstration, in which his lineage is questioned, to his chagrin, resulting in his lifelong alliance with Duryodhan, who sees in him a neutralizing adversary to Arjuna. Although praised as a courageous warrior and giving to a fault, in several episodes Karna is shown to be spiteful, cruel, and cowardly, such as during the dice game when he questions the chastity of Draupadi, and the battle with the Matsyas during the cattle raid when he beaten by Arjuna four times, and with Gandharvas who have kidnapped Duryodhan when he is beaten and unable to save his king who has to be rescued by the Pandavas. Having given away his magical accessories to a disguised Indra, refusing a Pandava alliance from Krishna, and promising his newly revealed mother, Kunti, that he will not harm any of her children but Arjuna, Karna enters the battle on the eleventh day, and dies on the seventeenth, killed by Arjuna with assistance from Krishna.

In the Sanskrit Mbh, Karna is not narratively central and is not accorded linearity, and is presented in what Hiltebeitel (Hiltebeitel 2007, 27) has called a “fragmented countertext,” citing David Quint’s (1993, 11) “episodic dismemberment of narrative” which the audience has to piece together. However, David Shulman (1986, 381) considers Karna and his story to be “one of the central narrative reliefs” of the text. Everyone agrees that Karna is one of the most popular heroes from the Mahabharata. Karna is a foil to Arjuna, demonstrated in multiple ways in the text, including both characters choosing each other as their arch-rivals. Both are master archers and warriors, handsome and resplendent, semi-divine, half-ksatriyas, not to mention the various relations born from being half-brothers. Their similarity as difference is not only embedded in their narratives, but also carried structurally in terms of their relations with others. Kevin McGrath (2004, 75) points to how “conflict is often simply a matter of mirroring or repetition rather than of outright difference” in his examination of the character of Karna, especially through his relations with Arjuna, Bhishma, and Duryodhan. McGrath argues that there is a triangulation of character and affective forces between these four wherein Karna’s affinity for Duryodhan is paralleled by his enmity with Arjuna, with Bhishma occupying an interstitial point. During the cataclysmic scene when Arjuna and Karna finally clash at the Kurukshetra, all divine beings stand audience and “[t]he while cosmos divides on the basis of this relationship between the two heroes” (McGrath 2004, 94). This is also because of the text’s internal argument about the ideal ksatriya, as I will describe in the following section. The quality of repetition is also noted by A.K. Ramanujan (1991, 421), who called Mahabharata a “*structured* work” (emphasis in the original) that is a tradition rather than a text, where the structure takes the form of repetition. He elaborates that these repetitive stories which travel back and forth in time “make the heroes’ lives not singular but representative, tokens of a type.” (Ramanujan 1991, 427). Thus, Duryodhan and Bhima and Karna and Arjuna represent particular archetypes of warriors and their associated moral drives.

Karna represents the ideal ksatriya warrior who can only claim ksatriya-ness through his words and actions, since he was never claimed or ritualized as one by his mother. It is this quality of an “archaic” heroism which McGrath finds interesting in Karna, who unlike the Brahmin-king Yudhistra, the obedient and destined victor Arjuna, and the non-divine and envious Duryodhan, embodies the articulate valour of a warrior. According to McGrath, Karna of the Sanskrit Mahabharata seeks to be the best ksatriya through the pursuit of fame obtained through valorous acts and generosity, and through his eloquent poetic speech which Karna considers and manifests as truth. It is also these very things that bring his downfall. Through aggressive speech, Karna attracts the enmity of the Pandavas, Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, among others, and through acts of merit, he gives away the earrings and the armor that give him invincibility, and the effective use of weapons that could have brought him victory against Arjuna. Following Duryodhan’s avowal of friendship, Karna vows an undying loyalty, for which he commits deleterious acts of deceit (with Rama Jamadagnya) and dishonor (with Draupadi). His observance also causes him to refuse Krishna’s offer of kingship and relations with the Pandavas. These qualities of Karna are translated in the Tamil movies I will be discussing, into generosity, a propensity for just violence, and a desire for community coming out of a sense of displacement. Fame and glory, which McGrath argues as primary motivations for the Sanskrit hero are unintended consequences for the Tamil hero.

In the reading of the Sanskrit Mahabharata as a Brahminical text advocating for a varnasrama dharma-based society led by Brahmins and Ksatriyas in a mutually supportive relationship (Fitzgerald 2004), Karna appears to be a ksatriya of the old mold who needs to be eliminated so that the semi-divine ksatriya progenies can begin a new, better ruled, peaceful kingdom. Karna offers an allegorical opportunity for the authors since he is not only a ksatriya who does not get along with Brahmins, but is also a bastard child brought up in the incorrect varna. Thus, Karna is doomed to fail not only because of the numerous curses he accumulates, but also because he is a symptom of the disorder. Scholars have also pointed out that unlike the Ramayana, the Mahabharata does not present a clear path to dharma, and elucidates the difficulty of achieving it, although the profit is worth the effort. On the other hand, A.K. Ramanujan (1991, 435) argues that it is “not dharma or right conduct that the Mahabharata seems to teach, but the *suksmata* or subtle nature of dharma-its infinite subtlety, its incalculable calculus of consequences, its endless delicacy.” This is elucidated in how the characters are ambiguously formed in terms of their morals, intentions, and actions; “good” characters perform heinous acts of violence and cause suffering, and “bad” characters are virtuous, kind, and act as per dharma. But these are short term fluctuations, according to Ramanujan (1991, 436), who considers the “total destruction” of everyone to be the structural certainty of the text. This annihilation is linked to the change of *yugas* which has to occur in the passage of time, and is usually presided over by an avatara of Vishnu, which in the Mahabharata is Krishna.

A different reading is provided by Emily Hudson (2013), who argues that the central theme of the Mahabharata is not dharma, but the relationship between suffering and dharma. In her reading of the Sanskrit Mahabharata, Hudson considers how the narrative framework privileges the presentation of an aesthetics of suffering which disorients the empathetic reader from established norms, and reorients them to a new perspective, one that argues for a dharma that is non-violent and non-cruel that leads to tranquility and the ability to accept that suffering is unavoidable in the world. Hudson adopts Fitzgerald’s (2003, 104) juxtaposition of the legalistic dharma rooted in varnasrama dharma against the ascetic philosophy of equanimity, rejection of materiality, and acceptance of the ephemeral nature of existence. The former allows a person to act as per their social position to acquire heaven, while the latter offers a liberatory emancipation from the cyclical world of suffering. The Mahabharata, Hudson (2013, 40) argues, “provides an “aesthetic” argument for the untenability of the first sense of dharma,” and demonstrates that performing dharma does not necessarily bring happiness or peace, as the entire Kurukshetra is fought for the sake of dharma. Thus, the only way forward, according to this reading, is to perform dharma for the sake of it, asking for nothing in return, which will inculcate a countenance of tranquility.

Thus, dharma in the Sanskrit Mahabharata, specifically in relation to varna, justice, and affect, appears to advocate for the performance of duty without attachment to consequences, but raises concerns about its protective possibilities, especially with regard to varna. Acting as a ksatriya did not accord Karna protection, which he himself acknowledges before dying. However, the text is also not against the performance of dharma, especially in keeping with one’s varnasrama, but merely points out the futility of expectation.

***Aram*, and Affect, and the Tamil Karnan,**

*Aram* is often considered to be a calque of dharma (Kampan, Hart, and Heifetz 1988, 28), but there have also been scholars who have challenged this equivocation. *Aram* as value in Tamil literature is usually traced to the Tirukkural attributed to Tiruvalluvar, dated to around the fifth century CE, wherein it operates as a general sense of value that should be aspired to by both the individual and the society. The Tirukkural is a difficult test to classify in terms of religiosity as it features some mentions of god, an emphasis on asceticism and egalitarianism which reflects Jain tendencies, while also featuring a section on *inbam* (pleasure), which runs counter to the more conservative inclinations of Jainism and mimics the extant Sangam tradition of love poetry (Blackburn 2000, 453). *Aram* has been theorized as a “single all-pervasive umbrella concept […] under whose command and protection, religion, the state, trade, agriculture, charity, and other manifestations of public and private life functioned” (Ananthanathan 1994, 318). In this reading, the king implemented *aram* and was responsible for its maintenance in the state, but could not dictate it. *Aram* was also the responsibility of each individual, and took precedence over any other legal code. As a quality, *aram* appears to simulate Aristotelian virtue ethics prioritizing goodness in behavior and thought. Jason Smith’s (2020) detailed analysis of the narrative structure of the Tirukkural also demonstrates a prescriptive tendency centered around cultivating virtue in a world of human and non-human relations. The fostering of relations of love, empathy, and compassion will allow individuals to “envision their lives in relation to others,” and this in turn leads to the “cultivation of virtue” (Smith 2020, 67). Affective relations and virtuous becomings are interconnected values under this framework.

While scholars such as R. Nagaswamy (2019) still consider the Tirukkural to be derivative of Sanskrit texts and ideas such as from the Dharmashastras, Arthashastra, and Kamasutra, others such as Maharajan (2017, 48) argue that the lack of a contextual *aram* rooted in varna or caste, universalizes and democratizes *aram*, and makes it a “purely Tamil concept which has little in common with the Sanskritic concept of Dharma.” Nevertheless, at some of point of time, these terms converged in meaning, and varna and jati have been integral components of social organization in Tamil society for a long time. Thus, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make any argument about the nature of *aram* as a pristine concept. More importantly, the regional linguistic politics of Tamilnadu has intentionally revived certain concepts and texts as embodying Tamilness, which makes these debates politically potent. In *Passions of the Tongue*, Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) examines how non-Brahminical concerns about Tamil identity during the colonial and postcolonial period enable the construction of a classical Tamil tradition characterized as prior to, and separate from, the Sanskrit tradition, as well as imbued with values of egalitarianism. This took the form of Neo-Shaivism, as Ramaswamy calls it, but also relied on secular sources including the bardic poetry of the Sangam era. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK), the rationalist political party that anointed itself as the protector, preserver, and cultivator of Tamil, added texts such as Tirukkural and Cilappatik*aram* to the canon, “as exemplars of the “secular,” “egalitarian,” and “chaste” essence of true and pure Tamil culture, free from the influences of Sanskritic Aryan Brahmans with their priestly ways” (Ramaswamy 1997, 74). Thus, while concepts such as *aram* are old and intermingled with multiple influences over time, there is also a recent political effort to reimagine Tamil identity as distinct from those values and classifications associated with Sanskrit and Brahminical Hinduism, namely varna/caste, and a dharma that is contextualized by it. In this political milieu, there is a concerted effort to conceive of *aram* not only as distinct from dharma, but also as casteless and universalist. Anand Pandian (2008, 467) explains these discourses and practices as “a series of fragmentary and often anonymous echoes from the past, easily unmoored from the canonical body of literary verse from which they borrow authority.” He states that people encounter these ideas in diverse forms giving them the opportunity to engage with them critically, while challenging “both the possibility and the desirability of a narrative unity of selfhood.” In this paper, I adopt this idea to argue that contemporary Tamil people have an understanding of *aram* as something virtuous, but there is enough space in the vernacular discourse for them to debate what exactly counts as virtuous. Additionally, the anti-caste and anti-Brahminical ethos of Dravidian politics makes it necessary for *aram* to be read as supporting those values.

Apart from *aram*, affective relations are another important component of Tamil identity, which are also emphasized in the Tamil narratives of Karnan. The aforementioned Sangam era poetry dated to the third century BCE to the third century CE are divided between the topics of war and love, often commingling both. As mentioned earlier, this tradition and genre is also seen in texts that follow in time, such as the Tirukkural, and later, the religious poetry of the Nayanmars and Alwars. Characterized by intense emotions that oscillate between joy and pain, these poems and their successors feature “an aesthetic combining savagery and delicacy” in which “most lurid images of slaughter may be linked with refined imagery of cultivated human behavior or of nature in its tropical intensity” (Kampan, Hart, and Heifetz 1988, 8). The engendering of compassionate relations as way of existing in the world is explained in the Kamattupal section of the Tirukkural, which deals with the topic of inbam (pleasure). In the later devotional poetry, these techniques are used to inculcate intense feelings of bhakti towards a god or goddess, exemplified in such works as the Tirumurai and the Naalaayiram Divya Prabandam. Affective relations here is not only a value form, but also form of mediation, especially in performative traditions that depend on the emotional response of the audience. That is, while there is a diegetic orientation towards love and kinship (inbam) in the text, the presentation of the text evokes affective responses from the audience too. Thus, affect exists on two planes – within the text between the characters, and beyond the text between the characters and the audience.

These arguably Dravidianized values are embedded in the shifts of characterization of Karnan in Tamil texts. In these, the notion of heroism, governance, and generosity emphasized in Karnan’s character can also be theorized in terms of the Tamil ethic of *aram* as against the Sanskrit Mbh’s orientation toward *dharma*, and the modality of affect heightens moments of Karnan’s heroism and tragedy.

Tamil textual versions of Mahabharata include the ninth century Pallava period work, Bharata Venpa by Peruntevanar, and the fourteenth century Mahabharatam by Villiputhurar (Villibharatam), not including the Tamil translation of the Sanskrit Mahabharata by M.V. Ramanujacharya and Vyasar Virunthu, an abridged translation by C. Rajagopalachari. The more popular and familiar forms are performative arts and traditions, such as the Karna Moksham play by Pukalentipulavar and performed as Kattaikkuttu, and the various chap books which are used for the local renditions of Bharatha koothu as part of the Draupadi cult rituals. In these works, elaborated upon by Alf Hiltebeitel (1988; 1991), David Shulman (1986), Hanne de Bruin (1999) and [ref from (Chakravarty 2009)] vernacular genres and values influence the ways in which Karna, dharma, kingship, and affect are handled. The differences between the Sanskrit Mahabharata and these works, especially with respect to Karna’s character, demonstrates that it is the latter that have provided the inspiration for the movies discussed in this paper, that center Karna. While exhaustively analyzing these differences is outside the purview of this paper, I detail a few important points of departure for the Tamil Karnan, which also explains the rootedness of his character in Tamil values.

Firstly, Karnan in these stories acquires the character traits of a noble hero, which means his distressing role in the disrobing of Draupadi is either underplayed, or completely absent (Hanne M. de Bruin and Brakel-Papenyzen 1992, 50; Shulman 1986, 387). This is strengthened by an increased visibility given to the “wife” of Karnan, who is Ponnuruvi in the Karna Moksham, and in other performances wherein Draupadi expresses a desire for Karna (Ramanujan 1991, 435–36). Ponnurivi, however, is disrespectful of Karnan because of his low caste status and only comes around when she is told about the truth of his birth circumstances, and even then, her counsel to him is to leave Duryodhan and join the Pandavas. While Karnan’s anger at his mother’s perfidy remains in these versions, there is also an evocation of motherly love when after he promises her not to hurt her sons but Arjuna, he asks her to acknowledge their relation after his death by feeding him the mother’s milk that he never received (Shulman 1986, 397; Hiltebeitel 1988, 314). By being narrated as a victim of his casteist wife’s scorn, an object of desire for Draupadi, and a martyred son to, what Shulman points out is a warrior mother as per the Cankam poetry tropes, Karnan in the popular imagination is not a man who has wronged a woman anymore, but becomes a man wronged by women. His steadfast proper behavior towards women on the other hand builds him in the vein of Tamil heroes who are decent, respectful and protective of chaste women.

Karna’s generosity is an integral character trait in the Sanskrit Mahabharata, but in the Tamil context, this acquires an additional layer of importance because of the vernacular bardic poetry extolling a history of generous kings (Kadai ezhu vallalgal/ கடையெழு வள்ளல்கள்), whose legendary acts of philanthropy to their subjects included giving a chariot to a creeper and an umbrella to a dancing peacock. McGrath (2004, 132) notes that as a Sanskrit hero, Karna’s deportment as a king is not provided much emphasis in the text, as it is his acts of valour and martial prowess that take center stage. “Heroes, unlike kings,” states McGrath (2004, 120), “are only responsible for their reputation, not for any larger dharma that supports the laws of a community.” David Shulman (1986, 381) has theorized this as the difference between kingship and heroism, which mirrors the opposition between Arjuna and Karna. This is tied to Karna’s pursuit of fame, for McGrath (2004, 123), which creates a symbiotic relationship between the king and the hero: “Functionally neither can exist without the other and yet the former’s need for continuity or longevity comes into opposition with the latter’s ultimate need for death.” Thus, while the Sanskrit Mahabharata exemplifies various instances of Karna’s generosity, especially to gods, Brahmins, and his mother, these denote his heroic attributes denoting his loyalty to the king (Duryodhan), and his desire to be immortalized through the glory of the battle, rather than king-like traits of providing for the people and their protection. However, as mentioned above, in the Tamil context, Karnan’s altruism which is often foolhardy, such as the giving away of his armor and earrings of invincibility to an Indra disguised as a Brahmin even though he was forewarned by his father, Surya, mimics the pattern of excessive goodwill which has been historically and lyrically considered as an integral trait of a good Dravidian king. Thus, Karnan is not only heroic in this structural framework, but is also embodying the qualities of good governance.

Lastly, the death of Karnan acquires an emotional and spiritual resonance in the Tamil context and is extended in a few ways to be particularly memorable and rouse the spirits of bhakti. As Hiltebeitel (1988, 410), alongside Aravan and Pottu Raja, in the performative traditions, Karna’s death gives the “fullest expression” of bhakti, raising him to cultic status in Tamilnadu. Even in the texts such as Villiputurar’s, this scene becomes a devotional tableau, as instead of simply being killed by Arjuna, Karnan has an encounter with a disguised Krishna first. In some versions, Karnan’s accumulated *punyam* has been protecting him from death from Arjuna’s arrows and turning them into garlands, and thus Krishna has to intervene as a Brahmin who seeks to ask the dying Karnan one last thing: all of his merit. Karnan is overjoyed to be asked this, and offers it in the form of his blood, which pours from his arrow wounds. Shulman (1986, 392) describes what follows as a moment of transition wherein Krishna, “the all-powerful god moves to embrace his human victim and to bathe with compassionate tears (*karunai*) the wounds that he, the god, has caused.” In the tradition of Tamil bhakti poetry, a compassionate but unreasonable god asks for too much, and the perfect devotee is compliant, delighting the god into providing his *arul* (blessing/blessed sight). Thus, Krishna reveals himself to Karnan in his Mahavishnu form, eliciting praises from a Karnan who finally dies. In performative traditions of Karna Moksham, Karna is then lamented by his mother, his brothers, his wife and son. In the Tindivanam Terukuttu that Hiltebeitel (1988, 412) describes, this theatrical performance shifts into ritualistic performance as the sponsors, who are specialists in funerary services blow conches, and the audience joins in the lamentations. Karna’s death creates the mythic time when the mundane and the sacred overlap (Eliade 1957), with affective devotion playing a particularly important role in this case.

The combination of the vernacular values that contextualize the reception of these texts, as well as the affective modality of inbam can be further extended to the genre of Tamil mass film, which is discussed in the next section.

**Tamilness in Politics, Melodrama, the Mass Movie**

While cinema has always been entangled with the political objectives of the colonized Indian state, the relations between both have been particularly close in Tamilnadu. Film historian Theodore Baskaran (2013, 129) tracks the infusion of anti-colonial sentiments in the early Talkies through the migration of theatre artists and writers into cinema, into which they transferred their talent for and knowledge of patriotic songs from their nationalistic plays. He also notes that almost all early talkie films in Tamil were reproductions of plays, some of which could be typified as the “social” genre that included scenes of the civil disobedience movements in the 1930. Alongside films that indulged in political credos came actors who actively participated in the politics of the state and the country, including K.B. Sund*aram*bal who became the first actor to become a member of the legislature, and the Congress party leader Satyamurti who explicitly argued for the use of film to promote political ideologies. However, there was a shift in the attitude of the Tamilnadu Congress party towards cinema, according to Baskaran, following C. Rajagopalachari and Kamaraj’s derision towards the medium as poisonous for the culture of the masses. Cinema becomes relevant to Tamil politics again in the 1950s with the growing separatist and Davidian politics that grew out of the Justice party and the Self Respect movement of E.V. Ramasami Naicker, familiarly known as Periyar.

The anti-religious Periyar was critical of Brahminical patriarchy and its caste structure, and began the Self Respect movement in 1926. Earlier, the South Indian Liberal Federation, later named the Justice Party, has been established in 1916 in Madras to represent non-Brahmin interests of the Madras Presidency, in the context of a dominant Brahmin representation in the civil service. Its complicated politics include resistance against Gandhi and the independence movement and a Hindi language (and cultural) domination, and the support for an independent Dravidian state. When Periyar took leadership of the Justice party in 1939, he changed its name in 1944 to the Dravida Kazagam (DK) and removed it from electoral politics so that it could perform as a social activist group. C.N. Annadurai who was a member of the DK split from the group to form the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) in 1949, which continued carrying the rationalist and separatist ideologies, while also keeping an eye on electoral politics. The aforementioned development of Tamil values and literature and the conception of a classical Tamil was one of the main projects of the DMK party. Cinema was instrumental for the DMK to capture popular attention, disseminate its party ideologies, and manufacture the movie-star politician persona who became a nodal point of contact between the public and the party.

The DMK party was dominated by writers and actors who skillfully used the medium of cinema to capture the attention and hearts of the masses. This medium provided a seemingly egalitarian space as Sivathamby (1981, 18–19) argues that “[t]he cinema hall was the first performance centre in which all the Tamils sat under the same roof,” wherein the seating was not dependent on social hierarchies, and “[t]hus in the history of Tamilian arts, the cinema has been the first social equaliser.” He continues that this democratization of spectatorship also resulted in the conception of a representational Tamil identity that could be inclusive, since other forms of arts were received in conditions determined by caste, class, place, and gender. Thus, portrayals of the common man possessing a universal set of morals that elevated him as a peoples’ savior (from oppression) abounded, and can be particularly noticed in the films from the 1950s and 1960s. One such film that is also considered the most successful in communicating the ethos of the DMK party to the masses is *Parasakthi* (1952) starring Sivaji Ganesan and written by M. Karunanidhi, a leading member. Sivaji Ganesan was also a DMK member, although he shifted to the Congress party in later years. M.S. S. Pandian’s (1991) analysis of the film reveals how the DMK diluted the rationalist, feminist, and separatist politics of the DK party to appeal to the masses, exemplified in its stringent critique of the social and religious problems in Tamil society without naming specific perpetrators. Yet, the film holds society up to what can be considered a secular moral standard exemplified by the “good man,” who is the protagonist of the film, and who calls out the lecherous, greedy, thieving, immoral men, and systems that support them, including religion and government.

Such films with a partisan political ethos masked as social dramas about the waning morality of the time evolved into hero vehicles for M.G. Ramachandran, an actor and DMK member, who became the face of the party and its values. M.S.S. Pandian (1989, PE63) has analyzed how MGR movies presented him as a “working man combating everyday oppression,” in which he is both the common man, as well as the savior of the common man. While these films deal with systemic oppression, and therefore these sites of inequality are criticized, Pandian (1989, P65) notes that they “offer closure WITHIN the moral economy of the system” and therefore “reaffirms the system itself.” He also describes how stories of local folk heroes were “reconstituted as pan-Tamil heroes through the mediation of MGR, the actor-figure,” while also gentling the subaltern aspect of these political actors to “project a non-subaltern figure as the quintessential Tamil hero.” These worked both ways for MGR and several other actors, as their filmic presence also fed into their real life public avatars. Thus, apart from the intimate relations between Tamil popular films and political ideology, this historically rooted phenomenon is important for a couple of reasons for this paper. Firstly, the Tamil film hero tends to be read as a political actor representing the values and perspectives of the common man, and the persona of the actor-politician is intricately tied to this reception. This is elaborated upon in the works of Madhava Prasad (2017), who analyzes the regional linguistic politics of the south Indian states and how cinema became an avenue to explore this political representation. Secondly, moral rightness as it pertains to social good is a central theme enacted through the valorous deeds of the hero. The history of Dravidian politics which prioritizes values that are considered to be Tamil over Sanskritic particularizes moral rightness in the Tamil film context as *aram*. This *aram* might not be exactly what is present in the classical texts, but it is considered to be innate, universal, anti-casteist, cultivable, and most importantly, Tamil.

Melodrama is a cinematic mode that can be traced to the theatrical tradition of post-industrial Europe, wherein political and social structural change in the context of modernity is represented and experienced through “structures of feelings” as theorized by Raymond Williams (2012), and the individual becomes the mediator between the narrative and audience (Gledhill 2018). While the development of melodrama was primarily studied in terms of genre, its universal presence and malleable applicability, as well as the impossibility of fixing its boundaries has led to scholars such as Christine Gledhill (2018, xiii) calling it modality of “aesthetic articulation distilled from and adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national cultures.” Morality is also an important player in the affective maneuvers, which can take the form of ambiguous propositions instead of parabolic teaching. This morality is always rooted in the figure of the individual and their relations to others, and as such their position in society. Deriving this idea from Peter Brooks, Gledhill and Williams (2018, 5) argue that “the most central function of the mode of melodrama lies in its recognition of the personalized virtues and vices of characters whose actions have consequences for others.”

Writing about melodrama in Indian films, Ira Bhaskar (2012, 163) grounds it in indigenous histories of cultural expressions, especially the sacred, and argues that it is a “form that instantiates the centrality of affect for the embodiment of subjectivity.” Following the entanglement of bhakti with the nationalist movement in colonial India, Bhaskar argues that the modern in India was constructed against the Western secular modern, and was rooted in a revived and “reformed” tradition. Thus, melodrama in Indian films does not eschew the spiritual, and in fact, establishes a continuity between the sacred, the erotic, and the everyday, much like the devotional experience of bhakti (Bhaskar 2012, 173). Additionally, Ravi Vasudevan (2011, 43) posits that in Indian melodrama, there is an involvement of the public in the subjectivities of the narrative, be it an individual or a family, which is “observable in crucial, symbolically charged passages of character conversation, where speech moves into a register beyond the interpersonal.” Affective dialogues engage audiences beyond what is in the narrative, establishing a link between the viewers of the movie and the speaker. The content of such speeches also goes beyond the personal dramas of the characters, invoking moral and political dimensions of the real world. Thus, Vasudevan (2011, 44) characterizes the melodramatic subject as “constituted in and through an address to an audience.” In Tamil cinema, such modes are persistent in all genres, and especially in popular films. The preponderance of moral and political themes makes them especially attuned to the work of melodrama, but additionally, the history of affective literary tradition, including bhakti poetry, makes the Tamil audience a comfortable and cultivated receptacle for such themes and treatments.

Working through these modalities of politics, persona, and affect are what can be called “mass” movies in Tamilnadu, which are films targeted at a broad spectrum of audience, perhaps the equivalent of Hollywood summer blockbusters, but without the seasonal qualification. Usually headlined by popular heroes, and featuring a mixed genre, these films are defined by their “mass” appeal. Michael Christopher (2011) has argued that genre is not a useful category to analyze Tamil movies, since multiple modalities are engaged in a single film including action, song, comedy, romance, and sometimes horror and mystery, and because of the presence of the movie star, there is an intertextual dimension wherein the star persona permeates the character persona within the movie. Tamil mass movies also tend towards cinematic populism, which Karinkurayil (2023) defines as “the modalities through which cinema as an institution codes certain cinematic practices and aesthetics as belonging to the “people,” appraises it positively, and addresses and appeals to this people directly and in opposition to perceived dominant force(s).” While scholars have tried to explain the entanglement of cinema and Tamil politics as a form of political instrumentalism by the Dravida parties, Madhava Prasad (2017, 156) has argued that the initial run of star persona films were a very specific historical formation addressing regional concerns of the South Indian states in the post-independence era. While this explains why there have not been successful actor-politicians in recent times, mass films have continued to carry political content and ideologies (Ranganathan 2008). Thus, the mass movie becomes a vehicle for addressing the moral state of Tamilness, by melodramatically engaging with contemporary political environs through the almost always male hero-protagonist, who stands as the exemplary Tamil man. The next section examines how the character of Karnan becomes this exemplar of Tamilness and *aram* at three different temporal junctures.

**Karnan in Tamil mass movie**

The three films that will be analyzed in this section are Karnan (1964; Dir. B.R. Panthulu), Thalapathi (1991; Dir. Mani Ratnam), and Karnan (2021; Dir. Mari Selvaraj), and each were defined by the historical milieu that produced them. While Karnan 64 could be typed as a mythological film, it still had mass appeal, exemplified by its successful run in 2012 when it was digitally restores and re-released to celebrate the birth centenary of its director (D Madhavan 2012). Thalapathi and Karnan 21 are mass movies with melodramatic address, and include elements of romance, action, politics, and songs. I argue and in the following pages demonstrate that all these movies approach dharma as a universal ethic of goodness, especially towards others, and divorced from any caste responsibilities. Karnan becomes a Tamil hero who is one with the common man, while also being superheroic in their ability to dispense justice and represent the cause of the former. The modality of melodrama is especially resonant in all these films, which unproblematize Karnan through his relations with women. The layering of the Tamil values of *aram* and inbam over the filmic modes of mass hero and melodrama allow for a vernacularization of the Sanskrit hero, Karnan.

*Karnan (1964)*

Panthulu, the director of this film, also directed movies on Chidambaram Pillai (*Kappalottiya Thamizan*), Veerapandiya Kattabomman, and Kittur Chinnamma who were all freedom fighters. His later films featured both Sivaji Ganesan and MGR, and therefore presented the political hero ethos discussed earlier. Sivaji Ganesan, who came from the theatrical tradition, was politically active and participated in patriotic plays and films. However, his political party affiliation fluctuated going from the DMK when he starred in *Parasakthi* discussed earlier, to Congress, and later his own party (Baskaran 2013). Prasad (Prasad 2017, 132) characterizes Sivaji as the “actor-hero” type as against the “action-hero” (such as MGR), because of his “ability to immerse himself in a role” and his theatre background. Thus, political intent and melodramatic mode were both actively represented by the makers of Karnan 64. This Tamil Karnan is vernacularized through local mores, which is also emphasized through place. The Thanjavur Brihadesvara temple is made the background for several scenes including the martial demonstration, firmly embedding this narrative in the Tamil landscape, even if the title card reads Hastinapur. This is a reimagined Hastinapur that has Dravidian temples, and this reimagined Karnan embodies the qualities of the Tamil hero of the post independence era.

Karnan 64 stars Sivaji Ganesan as the titular character and is based on the various versions of the Tamil Mahabharatas discussed in previous sections, which is apparent in the inclusions and exclusions of the plot. By centering Karnan, the film minimizes the role of the Pandavas, beginning with the birth of Karnan and ending with his death. As a biographical approach to Karnan’s story, the film presents Karnan as a heroic martyr, and I analyze three aspects in this narrative, which I find relevant to my argument: Karnan as a political figure, Karnan as a caste victim, and Karnan as beloved.

Although the Sanskrit Karna is crowned the king of Anga in order to make him eligible to fight ksatriyas, there is not much narrative dedicated to his kingly duties. As scholars Shulman and McGrath have noted, Karna is a hero, rather than a king, and thus, it is his martial prowess that is emphasized. Karnan 64 dedicates several scenes to his activities as a ruler, which are shown as vignettes in a song that praises his generosity as a king. In fact, when Sivaji Ganesan, the actor, is introduced in the beginning with a credit, his character is called “*kodai vallal karnan*,” which establishes a continuity with the excessively generous kings of the classical era of the South. After Duryodhanan makes Karnan the king of Anga, Karnan leaves for his kingdom, and as he takes the throne, framed by his courtiers on either side, the song begins, “The rain gifts for two months, the paddy fields for three, the cow for four, but for King Karnan, every day is for giving.” Accompanied by visuals in which Karnan is shown giving various gifts to people, young and old, of all castes and classes, the song continues that Karnan’s hands were reddened from giving everyday, as the camera zooms into Sivaji Ganesan’s red hands, and that Karnan does not require submission from his subjects to give, as even his peft hand does not know of what his right hand gives. The song concludes that Karnan makes poverty poor, and praising his kingship.

This set of scenes culminates in a boy being chased into Karnan’s court for trying to burn a school. When asked who he is, the boy cries that he does not know who his parents are. “They forgot me,” he says, and when asked why, he responds, “I don’t know if it was because I was bad, or if it was because they were bad.” Sivaji Ganesan emotes Karnan’s pain strongly in this scene, as he finds the boy to be his circumstantial twin. “You are my (*inam*),” he says, where *inam* could means ethnicity or type. On inquiring more, he finds out that the boy wanted to join a school to learn but no school would admit him because he did not know his birth (caste), and people of different stations should not be studying together. “I went to burn it,” the boy continues, “because schools like these should not exist in your land. Is that a crime?” Karnan declares “No!” and thanks the child for teaching him about what he should do for children like him in the land. The scene ends with all the courtiers chanting *vaazga* (Long live the king). An act written just for the movie, it emphasizes Karnan being a generous king in the mode of the ancient Tamil kings. Karnan’s interaction with the orphaned child individualizes his generosity through a mirrored character, who combines pathos with injustice to evoke a reaction from the audience. Not only is Karnan a king who dispenses justice to his subjects, he recognizes the inequalities inherent in a system based on birth, and changes it.

Karnan as a victim of casteism is another theme that runs throughout the movie, which is similar to the Sanskrit Karna’s troubled fate, but acquires particular relevance in the anti-casteist political climate of the DMK party during the period when this movie was released. Thus, Karnan reasons that he worships the sun, who is a non-discriminating god who gives to all, and during the martial demonstration, the Brahmin teacher Kripa bears the brunt of delivering casteist dialogues wherein he questions Karnan’s eligibility, decries his “low birth,” and argues that whatever elders like him say is “dharmam.” The issue of caste and birth is mostly played out in the added plot point of Karnan’s romance of a princess and the aftermath of his marriage. When Duryodhanan and his wife, Bhanumathi, both of whom refer to Karnan as their brother find out about his love interest, Subhangi, they approach the girl’s parents for her hand in marriage. When the father, a king, says that they could have just called him instead of coming all this way, they say that they wanted to demonstrate the status of Karnan by coming in person, indicating an awareness that he could be seen as less. However, after the wedding, when Subhangi’s father finds out about Karnan’s parentage (or lack thereof), he returns home with his unwilling daughter telling her that Karnan does not have the status to touch her. Touch is an integral marker of caste in contemporary South Asian culture, and this dialogue points to the way in which what is varna in the epic is translated into caste in the movie. When Karnan comes to take his wife back, father in law and son in law engage in a series of insults, where the former repeatedly makes animal analogies to indicate difference: “like a tiger is not the same as a tiger”; “by caste, I am a lion and you are a horse.” He challenges Karnan’s ability to govern saying that in his blood runs a chariot, not governance, and states that it is *dharmam* for only a ksatriya to marry his daughter. In such sequences, I argue that *dharmam* is correlated with Sanskrit, Hinduism, and the caste system, whereas, Karnan, whose argues that he should be evaluated based on his actions and qualities, is projected to be on the side of *aram*, or an egalitarian justice.

Karnan is also unproblematized in this film through his relations with women. Firstly, the movie removes Karnan from the dice game entirely, thus erasing one of the main accusations of unjust violence that has been laid at his feet. Secondly, the film adds three women in addition to Kunti, whose relations with Karnan not only develop him as a protector of women, but as also beloved of women. It is also in these relations that affective values are centered, and the filmic mode of melodrama is employed. The Kunti of this film constantly think of Karnan even when she is with her own sons, and Karnan only finds out about his adopted parentage as an adult. Played with intense emotions, Sivaji Ganesan laments why his mother left him behind, and oscillates between expressing his love for her and his distress over her abandonment. Throughout the film, whenever he is insulted especially with regard to his birth, he cries, “Amma!” (mother), calling out to his absent parent to defend him. Unbeknownst to him, Kunti has been lamenting him all this while, and she does not find out that Karnan is her son until Krishna informs her of this before the war. Even so, her introduction as an older woman is a scene of her crying over having sent away her son, and when the Pandavas leave for the thirteen year exile, she weeps that her sin of abandoning her son has caused this situation of her sons abandoning her. Not knowing who Karnan is, she defends him as a good man who is with the wrong company to Arjuna, when he criticizes him. When Kunti finally meets with Karnan, the scene is melodramatic excess with Karnan describing the pain he feels in his body because of his mother, and Kunti exclaiming that his mother must have accrued great merit to be cursed by him. After such discourse winding around the maternity, Kunti reveals herself as Karnan’s mother, which he does not believe, saying that a woman as great as her could not possibly be his mother. Once convinced, he screams “Amma!” repeatedly, while they embrace, and smile through tears, as the camera zooms in on their pained faces. Karnan’s calls for mother transform from pain to pleasure as he is cradled by his mother. After acquiescing to her wishes, Karnan asks Kunti for a boon – after his death, she should take him in his lap and call him her son so that everyone will know, which is a storyline from the Tamil Mahabharatas, and is brought to reality in the climax. The scene ends with a punch as Kunti says she will leave, with Karnan responding “Go,” when in Tamil culture you should say “Go and come back,” indicating that Karnan knows he will never see her again. Kunti gasps in horror as the scene cuts.

There are three female characters introduced in the movie, who are not present in any of the Mahabharatas. Subhangi, the wife of Karnan, is a princess who defies her father’s casteism to be with him. Escaping her natal home after her father kidnapping her, she comforts a distraught and angry Karnan, who thought she had willingly left him through a song, which begins, “Eyes cannot see caste, kindness has no religion, there is only one sky, there is no darkness in a lamp.” Strongly anti-caste, the song defines courageous acts as the indicator of character, and Karnan as a giver is high born no matter his birth. Following the genre of social dramas that involve family life, Karnan and Subhangi’s lives as a married couple, and later parents, is developed through domestic scenes of romance, affectionate ribbing, and in-law conflict. Subhangi is paralleled by Bhanumati, the wife of Duryodhanan, who treats Karnan as her elder brother as per Duryodhanan’s direction. The frame of family is used for the relationship between Karnan and Duryodhanan rather than of allies and king-hero. After granting Karnan’s kingship, Duryodhanan brings him home and introduces him as family to his wife. When Karnan is to leave for Anga, Duryodhanan reminds him that while his kingdom might be Anga, his home is here. Karnan and Bhanumati have the joking relationship usually portrayed in Tamil social dramas between brother and sister in laws, which culminates in a scene pivotal for explaining the family framework. Back in Hastinapur, Karnan is enjoying a game of dice with Bhanumati, Duryodhanan’s wife, when she attempts to quit the game seeing that her husband has arrived. Karnan playfully stops her by grabbing her waist ornament of pearls, which shatters, and causes Karnan to realize he has made a major faux pas. He also notices that Duryodhanan has witnessed the entire thing and is ashamed and distressed, but Duryodhanan jokes to diffuse the situation, saying Karnan’s biggest mistake was in thinking that Duryodhanan does not know (and trust) his wife or his friend. Karnan is gratified and calls Duryodhanan his life, and later when Kunti asks Karnan to switch sides, he cites this incident as an example of the love and trust that Duryodhanan has in him, which he cannot break. Bhanumati and Duryodhanan are also instrumental in getting Karnan married to Subhangi, fulfilling the duties of elder brother and wife. Through these characters, not only is Karnan made into a husband and father, a family man, and therefore a common man, his relationship with Duryodhanan is also recontextualized in terms of familial love instead of duty and loyalty.

The last character who is added to the film is that of *Dharma devatai*, or the goddess of Dharma. Clad in white, she protects Karnan when he is being attacked by Arjuna, which results in Krishna adopting the disguise of a Brahmin to empty Karnan of his meritorious karma. Upon Karnan’s demise, when he is being mourned by Kunti, the Pandavas, his wife Subhangi who dies in sorrow, and Duryodhanan, *Dharma thevathai* throws herself upon Karnan’s corpse, asking Kunti why she cries when she has five sturdy sons, when she herself had only one son, who was killed by everyone. She curses them including Krishna and declares that she has only ever had her one son, Karnan, because of whom *dharmam* grew in the world. Krishna chastises her for acting like she is ignorant of *aram*, and states how fate dictates what happens, concluding the scene. If Kunti was the absent mother, it seems that for Karnan 64, dharmam was the present mother, and one whom he cultivates in a loving relationship. Through the character of *Dharma thevathai*, who is also referred to as *Dharma thaai* (mother), Karnan is made the embodiment of dharma, and the concept of dharma is subsumed under an affective relationship between mother and son. Karnan as a promoter of equal rights and anti-caste politics then redefines *dharmam* as a universal value, namely *aram*, expressed through love. Additionally, both Kunti and *Dharma thevathai* are drawn in the tradition of warrior mothers of Sangam war poetry who bravely send their sons to war and lament their death.

*Thalapathi (1991)*

Writer-director Mani Ratnam is renowned in the Tamil film industry for making films that center intimate relations and character arcs through a framework of cinematic realism. While his earlier films had focused on love stories and family dramas, his work in the late 1980s and 1990s became projects that imagined Tamilness in a national scope. *Roja* (1992), *Bombay* (1993), and *Uyire* (1998) explicitly articulate this question and vision, featuring Tamils who are transported out of their idyllic homes into the war zones of national politics. Thalapathi is made prior to these and straddles the line between domestic drama and Tamil nationalism. Starring Rajinikanth, arguably the greatest film star to emerge from Tamilnadu who is considered to be the spiritual successor of MGR, Thalapathi narrates the story of Karnan through contemporary characters and removes all mythological elements, including godly intervention.

The film opens with celebrations of the festival, *bhogi*, which is when the old is burnt in a fire to make way for the new, accompanied by a diegetic song that makes this sentiment known (It is also brought up by this movie’s Karna explicitly repeatedly). Surya (Rajinikanth) is abandoned this day by his fourteen year old mother and is adopted by a slum community in an unnamed city. He grows up to be a generous man who is hypervigilant about justice, acting, often violently, on behalf of those who are vulnerable. He tangles with a local don, Devaraj (Mammootty), for killing his underling, who gets him jailed and tortured. But Devaraj soon finds out that his underling was sexually assaulting women, causing him to regret his actions and free Surya. A thankful Surya is adopted into Deva’s gangster family and becomes his *thalapathi* (Commander).

Meanwhile, Surya’s mother, Kalyani, has married and had another child, Arjun, who is an Indian Administrative Service officer, popular with the people. Kalyani still thinks of her lost son, and her husband knows and sympathizes. Arjun is transferred to Surya’s town disapproves of the gang’s violence. Surya is in love with a Brahmin girl, Subbu, (who reciprocates the love), but her father refuses the match and marries her to Arjun, his boss. Meanwhile, Devaraj, who considers himself responsible for the people he employs is beseeched by the widow of one of his past employees, Padma, who had been killed by Surya, because she is being harassed by the men who see her as sexually available. Devaraj guilts Surya to marry her and be a father to her daughter.

Kalyani becomes aware that Surya is her son, but he refuses her and claims loyalty to Deva. Tension between the police and Devaraj’s gang escalates and a kurukshetra ensues, shown in short scenes of successive violence from both sides. Devaraj is arrested and tortured by the police, but is eventually released when he demands that Surya murder Arjun. Arjun’s police inspector arranges for the assassination of Devaraj and Surya through a rival gang. At this juncture, both Surya and Surya’s mother reveal their secret to Devaraj and Arjun respectively. Devaraj is struck by Surya’s loyalty and declares that Surya’s brother will be his own brother, deciding to surrender. Arjun is struck by guilt that he had been trying to bring down his own brother and orders a halt to assassination, which is ignored. As Devaraj surrenders to Arjun, he is assassinated, and Surya, in great distress and anger, kills the gang responsible. The police refuse to arrest Surya because they have no evidence. Arjun is transferred to another town and leaves, but his parents decide to stay with Surya to be the family he has always wanted.

In this modern retelling by Mani Ratnam of the Mahabharata, the two sides of the Kuru clan become two sets of actors who are both invested in maintaining justice in the kingdom, but through very different means. The postcolonial Indian nation and the duty and limits of the citizen-subject becomes the theme being explored. Similar to Karnan 64, the framework of family mediates between the demands of the state and the individual, although the familial love conquers all. The setting is an unnamed town in India, presumably in Tamilnadu, although since Thalapathi was dubbed into multiple languages, it could be anywhere. This delocalizes and distributes the narrative in contrast to both Karnan 64 and Karnan 21, and nationalizes the context. In an interview, Mani Ratnam, however, admits his geographical choices were based on logistics, finance, and having to avoid Rajini fans in Tamilnadu, who swarm shooting spots and make work difficult (Rangan 2013, 162). Surya’s placement in a slum geographically embeds him as a man of the people, as well as marking him as low caste. His house is a ramshackle tower in the midst of the area and gives the impression of a watchtower – man looking over his people. Devaraja’s house is old fashioned and indexes privilege in caste and class, although he is not marked as Brahmin. The police station is a site where fraught tensions are explored between the male characters, but the temple becomes the locale for love.

Caste and class are also indicated through the actors’ skin color – Rajinikanth who plays Surya is dark-skinned, as is his mother and his wife, Padma; Arjun, his father, and Devaraja are all fair skinned. In a culture where colorism is rampant, these choices communicate context clues for the audience, but they are also explicitly worked out in the text. When Surya’s adopted daughter asks him why his mother abandoned him in an emotionally tense scene, he says when he was born, his mother saw how dark skinned he was and did not like it. So, she swaddled him in a blanket and threw him on a train, from which he fell into rubbish, and then into the canal, which landed him here. While Surya does not actually think this, it indicates a concern that Karnan 64 also had, which is if their mothers saw something dark or bad in their character, which led them to this choice. This scene also demonstrates melodramatic flourishes that Ratnam incorporates periodically, which adds to the audience’s pathos for Surya, a necessary factor since most of Surya’s scenes are of him committing acts of extreme violence. Through analyzing how justice is placed in relation to state and society, caste is handled in terms of love and marriage, and familial love is privileged, I will explore how *Thalapathi*’s Karnan is rendered as a hero of both hope and violence, but is ultimately subsumed under the pacifying structures of family and nation.

The territorial dispute over who gets to mete violence is articulated in a scene where all characters meet: Arjun and his police officer representing the interests of the state, and Devaraj and Surya as challengers of the state’s authority. Arjun accuses Deva and Surya of running their own government, to which Surya responds that only the poor and the hungry can know what justice looks like, which Arjun has no idea about. The officer questions if justice is beating people up in public, but Deva flips the point to ask to if justice is beating people up in a police station. At this point in the story, Surya knows that Subbu has married Arjun, although Arjun does not know about their former romance, and neither knows about Surya’s parentage. Surya had also been tortured at the police department previously, which lends Deva’s question some legitimacy in the story, although third degree interrogation is a common investigative technique in Indian prisons, with custodial deaths treated apathetically in the legal system. Thus, Arjun’s statement that law determines what is justice, and the government gets to enforce it comes across as ignorant. Surya challenges this, arguing that while the government might have the legal authority to mete justice, the people trust only Deva and Surya. The meeting concludes unsatisfactorily where each party reinforces how they perceive the moral character of the other with Surya calling Arjun elitist and naïve, and Arjun responding that they are “rowdies.” What is being interrogated here is what counts as justice, and who has the authority to dispense it. Is it the state’s duty to ensure dharma or should it be the duty of anyone who is capable of it? That justice requires violence is not disputed by either side, although each party feels that the social position of the other prejudices them against knowing what is just. For Arjun, legality determines your role in society, wherein the codes of Sanskrit dharma are replaced by the sovereign authority of the state. For Deva and Surya on the other hand, justice is individualistic and universal, and a state that can only cater to the wealthy and educated is an unjust society. I perceive in these stances an opposition of a postcolonial dharmic duty contextualized by the modern against the universal morals of *aram* on the other. This tension between the local and the national has been observed in other films by the director, who attempts to go beyond the Dravidian nationalism espoused by the previous decades to one that attempts to make space in a “national imaginary” (Devadas and Velayutham 2008, 167). This is done through evoking a cinematic feel that is closer to the Bollywood aesthetic (which is perceived to represent “Indianness” in a way that regional cinema does not) than Dravidian modes. The handling of caste is another way in which *Thalapathi* attempts to establish a continuity between Tamil and Indian imaginaries.

The only characters clearly marked by caste are Brahmins, which includes Arjun and his family, and Subbu and hers. That they end up marrying eliminates any possibility for an anti-Brahminical stance in the film. Subbu, whose name parallels Subhangi, the wife of Karnan 64, is clearly modeled after Draupadi. Following some of the regional versions of Mbh in which Draupadi expresses an attraction for Karna, *Thalapathi* features this relation as a failed romance. Songs and music are used to index affective components, which Mani Ratnam uses as “the space for abstraction, for going beyond the “literalism” that telling the story of recognizable characters and situations demands” (Bhaskar 2018, 267). Thus, with Subbu and Surya, their difference is emphasized in a song which entangles Carnatic (read as Brahmin) music with a percussion based “pagan” song sung around a fire, but taking place in a temple festival. The characters meet through song, and Ratnam considers this to be a link that is established between contrasts (Rangan 2013, 169). While the lovers themselves wish to overcome their difference, society does not allow them to. In a scene similar to Karnan 64, Deva and his wife, Selvi, meet with Subbu’s father, Srinivasan (who is a government official working for Arjun) to arrange the marriage, although Selvi is worried since he is a Brahmin, which Deva shrugs off, saying all that matters is that Surya loves her. When Deva and Selvi visit his home, he is shown as performing the daily morning rituals of a Brahmin, indexing an orthodox household. The scene is tense, with Srinivasan not giving an inch, but Deva calls Subbu asking her directly if she wants to marry Surya, which she admits. But Srinivasan questions Surya’s very identity: “Who is this Surya? Who is his father? Who is his mother? What is his caste?” Deva contends that Surya is not a Brahmin, but he is a better man than both of them, so what else could Srinivasan want, to which he says, “status.” Deva is enraged and questions Srinivasan’s moral character in terms of his societal contribution, that he does his government job but has never helped anyone else out like Surya has, but Srinivasan calls Surya an “ayokyan” (amoral person), which causes Deva to grab him. Subbu intervenes, begging Deva to not hurt him, since he is her father, mother, teacher, and god, asking him to leave. Later, Surya chastises Deva and tells him that Deva is more important to him than Subbu. With the latter, he is accusative, accusing her of only wanting a fair skinned man who can speak English. In this scene, class, caste, and Brahminical patriarchy interweave to demonstrate the ugliness of caste boundaries, while also reifying them. Unlike Subhangi, Subbu does not thwart her casteist father, and in fact rescues him through her submission to Brahminical patriarchy (Chakravarti 1993). Goodness in a man is immaterial within the caste framework, and Surya’s generosity and popularity with the poor is irrelevant to those who consider themselves to be normative citizen-subjects. Srinivasan's objection to Surya is not only on account of his caste(-lessness), but also because Srinivasan is a government official who abhors the extrajudicial violence that Surya claims. The failed romance also dooms the inter-caste marriage that could have posed a radical possibility in line with the Self Respect marriage traditions of Dravidian politics.

The framework of found family is again used for the melodramatic flourishes, especially in scenes between Surya and his mother, Kalyani. The melancholic leitmotif that accompanies their relationship is half dirge half lullaby, which Ratnam cites as the “lullaby that was never sung” and indexes Surya’s loneliness (Rangan 2013, 176). When Kalyani finds out that Surya is her son, she pleads with him to run away with her but Surya refuses saying that it’s only just for her to be with Arjun and him to be with Deva. In an earlier scene with his stepfather, Surya had called Deva the only one who would be there to light his funeral pyre. The commingling of love and loyalty leads these characters to transgress the limits of their epic counterparts, where they do not hide the truth of relations for the sake of a dharmic war. Kalyani does not want her son dead in a just war, and Surya confesses that he cannot kill his own brother. Arjun and Deva are both struck with remorse and call off their violent directives, with Deva deciding to submit to the state out of love for his friend. In line with Ravi Vasudevan’s (2011, 212) characterization of Ratnam’s work as a “politicized melodrama founded on a new economy of individuated romance and middle-class subjectivity, pushing its romance narrative to engage with various orders of political difference, including the conflict between communities, classes, and different constructions of nationhood,” love rescues these characters from their violent agendas, and supersedes both *dharma* and *aram*.

Mani Ratnam considers Karnan to be “one of the best characters in the Mahabharata” and had always wished that he had survived in the epic, which is reflected in his decision to not “even consider the original option, where Karna dies” (Rangan 2013, 164, 166). Even when asked about the character’s father, Ratnam refuses to explore that, saying this story is about the child and the man he grows up to be. Thus, both Surya and Deva are the protagonists and are given the emotional beats of the story, leading the audience to identify with them. However, Deva is killed, which allows Surya to belong to his natal family, and also presumably end his extrajudicial acts of violence. Surya is made happy at the end, with his mother and stepfather choosing him, and with a wife and adopted daughter who have affection for him. Any radicalism that challenges caste hierarchy and the authority of the state are neutralized as Surya becomes a good citizen-subject.

*Karnan 2021*

The most recent retelling of the story of Karnan is by writer-director (and author) Mari Selvaraj, whose oeuvre has emphasized Dalit personhood and narratives, and argues for a political ideology of resistance against and eradication of caste oppression. His first film *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) emphasized the impact of caste violence on innocents, and featured a protagonist who was thoughtful, patient, and hopeful, without opting for violence as his first choice. In *Karnan* 21, the eponymous hero is filled with rage at an unjust world, and is ready take up arms whenever necessary. Based on a real-life event in 1995 when an all-Dalit village called Kodiyankulam was violently attacked by Tamilnadu police causing destruction of property, injury, and death, Karnan 21 takes place in a village called Podiyankulam in the southern district of Thirunelveli. Unlike the prior films which have a loose sense of place, Karnan 21 is emphatic about its rootedness in a particular village, and the notion of what counts as civilization. Another difference as articulated by its maker Mari Selvaraj is that this Karnan demands for his rights unlike other Karnans who give whatever is asked of them (Cinema Vikatan 2021). However, there are also links with the previous Karnan films, such as Karnan’s introduction which features a village ritual involving decapitating a fish mid-air with a machete, which Selvaraj (Cinema Vikatan 2022) admits is partly inspired by Karnan 64’s archery demonstration, as well as several scenes where Karnan 21 and later his lover Draupadi wear a Tshirt with the *Thalapathi* poster and watch the film in the village cinema hall. Dhanush, who plays Karnan 21 was the son in law of Rajinikanth, the Surya of *Thalapathi*, which adds another layer of imbrication.

The film begins with a girl convulsing in the middle of a busy road where buses pass on either side of her without stopping. We do not see her face until she dies, but then the face has transformed into a goddess mask, one that is a common village deity in the Thirunelveli area (Cinema Vikatan 2022). This deified girl, Kaatupechi, becomes a spiritual presence, who communicates to the villagers and to her brother, Karnan, through song, and stands as a symbol of the structural and caste violence present in this world. Although she raises parallels to the *dharma thevathai* from Karnan 64, this is a vernacular deity who stands for a community rather than dharma. The Podiyankulam village does not have a bus stop which causes untold problems for its residents, because they have to travel to the next village, Melur (literally, upper place) to access buses. These are caste-based villages and Melur residents harass Podiyankulam residents when they use their facilities. Karnan, who is introduced as a courageous man, is angry at such treatments and gets into trouble with the village elders for his violent responses. He also has supporters in his older friend and constant companion, Yeman, and his sister.

Karnan’s mother is not happy about his acts of valor and would rather he find employment, which Karnan is attempting through tryouts for the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), under the Indian Army. Yeman is also worries that Karnan might get arrested, which would end any possible army career. Karnan is loved by a fellow villager called Draupadi who is the sister of his harshest critic, but they continue their romance secretly. All these threads interweave into a fraught situation with a bus that would not stop for a pregnant woman, whose child throws a stone in anger, resulting in the bus driver and conductor assaulting them. Karnan intervenes and destroys the bus with help from his fellow villagers.

The town elders become worried about police involvement and attempt to protect the youngsters from the police, but Kannabiran (a Tamil name for Krishna), the officer in charge is angry at what he sees as their arrogance. The issue is settled when the entire village rallies behind Karnan, but Kannabiran demands a report to be filed at the station. The elders decide to go instead of the youngsters, and at the station, they are insulted, made to stand for hours, and then beaten up by a furious Kannabiran. Karnan and others rescue them back to the village, but realize Kannabiran will wreck the village with his police army as retaliation. They decide to fight and prepare all night, as Kaatupechi sings to motivate them. In the morning, however, Karnan receives an employment offer from CRPF, and is forced by the villagers to leave so that he will lead other village youngsters to a brighter future. The village is attacked by the police, who beat everyone up mercilessly, and Yeman self-immolates in a desperate bid to stop the violence. When news reaches Karnan, he doubles back and beats up all the police and beheads Kannabiran. Ten years later, Karnan is released from prison and rejoins the village, marrying Draupadi. The elders who were beaten have died from their injuries, but the village celebrates Karnan’s return. Everyone dances in joy, and as Karnan joins in, Kaatupechi rises from the hills to see her villagers, applauds them, and descends, dispersing into butterflies that fly free.

Karnan 21 seemingly has no links other than the names to the Mbh, Sanskrit and Tamil, if it is taken to be a story of an individual called Karnan. One of the repeated conversations in the film is about community and the individual, where the two are posed to be in a symbiotic relationship with each other. The title introductions are accompanied by visuals of injured people singing about Karnan as not fathered by the sun, having never seen armor or earrings, going from one cradle to many, and as a child who ate famine to grow. This is a Karnan who did not have a divine father to look after him, and was not given privileges that made him invincible. This is also a Karnan who is many, representing a community of oppressed. The lyrics continue, “Temples all over the place, gods in all these temples, but not one idol is of him; he’s one of our family,” as there are scenes of Karnan being tortured by the police. Karnan’s injuries are transferred to the people and vice versa, he becomes the supra-individual who is one with the village. Karnan 21, unlike his other avatars, is the subaltern unconditionally, and is not secretly connected to the divine or a privileged caste. S. Divya (2022), in a detailed exploration of caste and gender politics in Karnan 21 (and also the other Karnan films) argues that this subversion of the epic in which Karnan kills Krishna (Kannabiran) represents a subaltern counter narrative in which the oppressed end the dharmic order.

Although unnamed, this is a community of Dalits for whom violence is a possibility in everyday life. Recent waves in Tamil cinema have explicitly been critical of caste, and the narratives of Dalit oppression have been centered in the works of director Pa. Ranjith, who produced Mari Selvaraj’s first film. In the former’s film, Kaala (2018) starring *Thalapathi*’s Rajinikanth, Karthick Ram Manoharan (2020, 60) reads a version of Ramayana where the epic antagonist Ravana is superimposed onto the film’s hero played by Rajini by the film’s villain, a Hindu supremacist. In this film too, two sides fight over land and dignity, with Kaala representing the struggles of oppressed caste people in Mumbai. This conflict over access to resources is the primary motivator of the struggle of the Podiyankulam village, which takes the material form of a bus stop. This also becomes the criteria for defining what counts as an *ur* (living place/civilization), and what is wilderness, and thus, whether Podiyankulam and its residents are worthy of being treated as humans is tied to how their place is conceptualized by others. The state becomes a contradictory actor here, as it is the failures of the state in not providing infrastructure (transportation here, particularly) that causes Podiyankulam’s problems. The police who enforce the laws of the state are also enforcers of the oppressive caste structure, which has colonial roots and follows the logic of caste as order (Kumar 2021). However, for young men in the village, the government also offers the only way out through employment, which provides security, status, and a possible future. All these come together in two plot points, one where the Podiyankulam villagers discuss Karnan’s actions revealing the tension between individual actions and community’s fate, and the second about who gets to live in an *ur*. I demonstrate how *aram* from the perspective of Dalit consciousness is deployed, and affect operates as community relations as well as in the mode of violence as catharsis in the melodramatic mode.

The first is when Karnan has beaten up some men who sexually harassed a young girl and assaulted her father, when they had tried to board the bus to her college at the Melur village bus stop. Karnan has previously “won” the village sword through the fish cutting ritual, and thus, has a respectable but also perhaps dangerous spiritual status in the village, since in previous years when someone had volunteered to do this act and succeeded, someone in the village had died as *bali*. A village elder chides Karnan about acting irresponsibility when they had trusted him with the village sword, and warns that he will be targeted by the Melur villagers. They lay out the problem of the villages: while they have pastures and water, they do not own cultivable land and have to work for Melur landlords. Karnan argues that as long as the landlords need cheap laborers, Podiyankulam will never get its bus stop, which is literally a way out of the village, especially for youngsters who wish to be educated and find employment in more urban settings. The villagers fear retribution, but Karnan blames the villagers for not having the courage to ensure that youngsters get educated, and instead questioning his acts as unjust. Karnan’s friend Yeman points out that all he had done was defend the honor of our village girl, and the ones in the wrong are the harassers. The importance of the bus stop as a way out is stressed, but the villagers also acknowledge that they cannot passively wait for the bus stop to come, and all their efforts through government appeals have been ignored. Duryodhanan absolves Karnan and declares that children should be able to fly, and not be trapped like the elders. This discussion is repeated when the village is deciding what to do with those who burnt the bus, when someone points out that the stone hurled by the boy was one they had dreamt of hurling. When the elders are hesitant to protect the youths, the women of the village intervene saying that the village is one, and if the elders cannot do the right thing, the women will protect their sons. Duryodhanan once again ends the meeting stating that no one will give up the village, meaning the youths, and whatever happens, the village will take care of it. There is a tangible sense of what injustice looks like for the villagers, but the form and source of justice is a point of contention. Should the community come together to fight back against oppression, or should it try to survive and slowly try to make its way out of poverty? In other words, is justice inevitable, or does it need to be fought for? Once again, there is an idea of justice as anti-caste and universal, and the village eventually decides that fighting for themselves is the only option. This goes in line with how *aram* is conceived, as a moral universe that still needs to be enforced, by kings or good men.

Kannabiran’s wrath against the villagers is not because of their violent acts, although he sees those as indicative of their lack of civility. In the scene where he beats up the elders in the police station, he questions Duryodhanan about his father’s name, which is Maadasamy (a vernacular name), and is enraged that his father named him after a king, asking, what kingdom they were ruling over. Later, when the elders are rescued, the village discusses why they were beaten, and conclude it is because they considered themselves as equal to others, and not because of the destruction of the bus. Whether the village counts as an *ur* or a *kaadu* is a persistent theme, played out through the bus. The bus will only stop at civilization, not in the wilderness. Nitya Vasudevan (2017, 148) explores how three kinds of places – *ooru*, area, and *pettai* – are treated in Tamil cinema over time, wherein the *ooru* (*ur)* is “the hometown or village, a place of origin and belonging” while the other two indicate ownership. The specificity of the ur is also explored by Valentine Daniel (1987, 81) in much more anthropological detail connecting it to a sense of personhood. Thus, in the Tamil sensibility, *ur* determines your belonging spatially but also hierarchically. In the climax fight, Kannabiran and his army attempt to destroy the *ur*, Podiyankulam, and Karnan is not there to help because the villagers have sent him away to pursue a better future. However, can Karnan exist as himself if he does not have an *ur* to call his own? Is not the destruction of the *ur* also the destruction of this Karnan? Thus, Karnan comes back to fight and kills the agents of the state, saving his *ur*, and while he goes to prison, the village thrives and grows, as the young are able to achieve educational and financial success. Karnan 21 employs melodrama, not just through scenes of family and community, but also through the framework of violence. Gledhill (2018, xxi) considers action as “generated by emotion as realize social force,” in the pursuit of a moral becoming and “socioethical values,” which is what is explored through scenes of violence in Karnan 21. The audience’s patience, observing the injuries meted upon the oppressed villagers is rewarded in a climactic battle between Karnan and the police, where Karnan has rejected the escape that the state provides him in the form of army employment. The self-immolation of Yeman, pain of the villagers, and dance of Kaatu Pecchi takes the form of Karnan’s anger, which provides salvation for both the village and the audience.

Drawn from incidents in Mari Selvaraj’s life, Karnan 21 demonstrates the importance of community solidarity and eschews the need for outsider saviors, and in fact, warns against them. Karnan’s critic in the village attempts to establish a conciliatory relation with the police and the Melur villagers and is still almost beaten to death. He admits to Karnan that his way was the only way forward, for the *ur* and its young to prosper. If Karnan 64 was willing to die for his mother and ideals, and *Thalapathi* Surya for his friendship and loyalty, Karnan 21 wants to live for his community.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have explored how Tamilness is explored through the Sanskrit hero Karna who is vernacularized in three films, that use Dravidian values of *aram* and *inbam* through filmic modes. While all three films explicitly index the epic through plot or characters and ask questions about the responsibilities and limits of governance, intricacies of caste and kinship, and the relevance of relational affect, they approach the *Mahabharata* in divergent ways. *Karnan* 64 is a mythological epic that stays true to the Tamil Mbhs while being influenced by the Dravidian political leanings of its time, wherein in anti-caste politics takes the form of a seemingly subaltern, but ultimately privileged hero, who is framed through familial and domestic melodrama. *Thalapathi* modernizes the narrative of the *Mahabharata* by questioning the jurisdiction of the state to dispense justice and violence, while ultimately interpellating its Karnan to become a citizen-subject of the postcolonial nation through heteronormative tropes of caste-based family. *Karnan* 21 eschews an individualistic Karnan with a misplaced caste location to transform him into a symbolic representation of Dalit community, and its position in civilized society. While all films contain acts of violence, Karnan 21 uses them to melodramatic effect in eliciting solidarity from the audience, while the other two films use tropes of love and family to do the same. These differences are not only attributable to the kind of story the films want to tell, but also the political inclinations of their respective writer-directors and the fungibility of their star actors. While Sivaji Ganesan’s Karnan could die, neither Rajini’s nor Dhanush’s Karnan can, for the hope they represent their communities. The relevance of Karnan to the Tamil identity is forged through these interactions between political ideologies, cinematic modes, and the relevance of epic narratives. Ultimately, Karnan stands emblematic for a subaltern consciousness divergently imagined for the Tamil nation.

**References**

Ananthanathan, A.K. 1994. “Theory and Functions of the State The Concept of Aṟam (Virtue) in Tirukkural.” *East and West* 44 (2/4): 315–26.

Baskaran, S. Theodore. 2013. “The Star-Politicians of Tamil Nadu: The Origin and Emergence.” In *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas*, edited by K. Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, 127–36. Oxford & New York: Routledge.

Bhaskar, Ira. 2012. “Emotion, Subjectivity, and the Limits of Desire: Melodraaa and Modernity in Bombay Cinema, 1940s–’50s.” In *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, edited by Christine Gledhill, 161–76. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

———. 2018. “Expressionist Aurality: The Stylized Aesthetic of Bhava in Indian Melodrama.” In *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, 253–72. New York: Columbia University Press. https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.7312/gled18066-018/html.

Blackburn, Stuart. 2000. “Corruption and Redemption: The Legend of Valluvar and Tamil Literary History.” *Modern Asian Studies* 34 (2): 449–82. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00003632.

Bruin, H. M. de. 1999. “Kaṭṭaikūttu: The Flexibility of a South Indian Theatre Tradition.” In *Kaṭṭaikūttu*. Leiden: Brill. https://brill.com/display/title/24031.

Bruin, Hanne M. de, and Clara Brakel-Papenyzen. 1992. “The Death of Karna: Two Sides of a Story.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 9 (1): 38–70.

Chakravarti, Uma. 1993. “Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28 (14): 579–85.

Chakravarty, Kalyan K. 2009. *Text & Variations of the Mahabharata*. New Delhi.

Christopher, Michael. 2011. “Everything Masala? Genres in Tamil Cinema.” In *Genre in Asian Film and Television: New Approaches*, edited by F. Chan, A. Karpovich, and X. Zhang, 101–14. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cinema Vikatan, dir. 2021. *EXCLUSIVE: “நான் மன்னிப்பு கேட்டுக்கிறேன்” - Mari Selvaraj | Karnan*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6FmVy0bnpQ.

———, dir. 2022. *UNTOLD STORIES OF “KARNAN” - Mari Selvaraj Shares | #1YearOfKarnan | Dhanush*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SnFVbfJ\_vc.

D Madhavan. 2012. “Born Again Sivaji’s ‘Karnan’ Nears Century, Keeps Audience Thrilled.” *The Times of India*, June 12, 2012. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/born-again-sivajis-karnan-nears-century-keeps-audience-thrilled/articleshow/14037987.cms.

Daniel, E. Valentine. 1987. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Devadas, Vijay, and Selvaraj Velayutham. 2008. “Encounters with ‘India’: (Ethno)-Nationalism in Tamil Cinema.” In *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India’s Other Film Industry*, edited by Selvaraj Velayutham and Vijay Devadas, 154–71. New York: Routledge.

Divya, A. 2022. “‘Why Can’t the Son of Maadasamy Be Karnan?’: Caste, Gender, and the Rise of the Male Subaltern in Tamil Cinema.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 0 (0): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2022.2150504.

Eliade, Mircea. 1957. “Time and Eternity in Indian Thought [1951].” In *Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks, Eranos 3*, edited by JOSEPH CAMPBELL, Henry Corbin, C. G. Jung, Max Knoll, G. van der Leeuw, Louis Massignon, Erich Neumann, et al., 173–200. Man and Time. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pqp0.12.

Fitzgerald, James L., ed. 2003. *The Mahabharata, Volume 7: Book 11: The Book of the Women Book 12: The Book of Peace, Part 1*. Translated by James L. Fitzgerald. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo3627675.html.

———. 2004. “Mahabharata.” In *The Hindu World*, edited by Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, 52–74. New York: Routledge.

Gledhill, Christine. 2018. “Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama.” In *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, ix–xxv. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gledhill, Christine, and Linda Williams. 2018. “Introduction.” In *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, 1–11. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hiltebeitel, Alf. 1988. *The Cult of Draupadi, Volume 1: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kuruksetra*. University of Chicago Press.

———. 1991. *The Cult of Draupadi, Volume 2: On Hindu Ritual and the Goddess*. University of Chicago Press.

———. 2007. “Krishna in the Mahabharata: The Death of Karna.” In *Krishna: A Sourcebook*, edited by Edwin F. Bryant, 23–76. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hudson, Emily T. 2013. *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kampan, George L. Hart, and Hank Heifetz. 1988. *The Forest Book of the Ramayana of Kampan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Karinkurayil, Mohamed Shafeeq. 2023. “Cinematic Populism.” In *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century*, edited by Joseph Chacko Chennattuserry, Madhumati Deshpande, and Paul Hong, 1–3. Singapore: Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-9859-0\_45-1.

Kumar, Radha. 2021. *Police Matters: The Everyday State and Caste Politics in South India, 1900–1975*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501760877/police-matters/.

Maharajan, S. 2017. *Tiruvalluvar*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

Manoharan, Karthick Ram. 2020. “Being Dalit, Being Tamil: The Politics of Kabali and Kaala.” In *Tamil Cinema in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Selvaraj Velayutham and Vijay Devadas, 52–66. Routledge.

McGrath, Kevin. 2004. *The Sanskrit Hero: Karṇa in Epic Mahābhārata*. Leiden: Brill.

Nagaswamy, R. 2019. *Thirukural - An Abridgement of Sastras*. Chennai: Giri Publications.

Pandian, Anand. 2008. “Tradition in Fragments: Inherited Forms and Fractures in the Ethics of South India.” *American Ethnologist* 35 (3): 466–80. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.00048.x.

Pandian, M. S. S. 1989. “Culture and Subaltern Consciousness: An Aspect of MGR Phenomenon.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 24 (30): PE62–68.

———. 1991. “Parasakthi: Life and Times of a DMK Film.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 26 (11/12): 759–70.

Prasad, M. Madhava. 2017. *Cine-Politics: Film Stars and Political Existence in South India*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan.

Quint, David. 1993. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv182jt7t.

Ramanujan, A.K. 1991. “Repetition in the Mahābhārata.” In *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, edited by Arvind Sharma, 419–43. Leiden: Brill. https://brill.com/display/title/5861.

Ramaswamy, Sumathi. 1997. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rangan, Baradwaj. 2013. *Conversations with Mani Ratnam*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Ranganathan, Maya. 2008. “A Rumble in the Movie Halls: Cinema in the ‘orphaned’ State.” In *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India’s Other Film Industry*, edited by Selvaraj Velayutham and Vijay Devadas, 179–93. Oxford & New York: Routledge.

Shulman, David Dean. 1986. *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*. Princeton University Press.

Sivathamby, Karthigesu. 1981. *The Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication*. Madras: New Century Book House.

Smith, Jason William. 2020. “Tacit Tirukkuṟaḷ: Religion, Ethics, and Poetics in a Tamil Literary Tradition.” Unpublished Dissertation, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School.

Tambiah, S.J. 1975. “From Varna to Caste through Mixed Unions.” In *The Character of Kinship*, edited by Jack Goody, 191–230. Cambridge University Press.

Vasudevan, Nitya. 2017. “Between Ooru, Area, and Pettai: The Terms of the Local in Tamil Cinema of the Twenty-First Century.” *Positions: Asia Critique* 25 (1): 145–72.

Vasudevan, Ravi. 2011. *The Melodramatic Public*. Reprint. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Williams, Raymond. 2012. *The Long Revolution*. Reprint edition. Cardigan: Parthian Books.

1. While *inbam* is considered to be a calque of Sanskrit *kama*, in this paper, I consider it in the broader sense of affect. This, as will be explained later, is a reference both to the feelings of love and consequent relations of kinship and domesticity, but also the modality of affect as a way to create relations between the audience and the character through the techniques of melodrama. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Tambiah 1975, 205) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)