



**OUR GODS**  
**PART TWO**

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MGR MEMORIAL, CHENNAI

1916

The **South Indian Liberal Federation** takes issue with the dominance of English educated Brahmins in administrative positions within the Madras Legislative Council. It would soon be renamed the Justice Party. They begin to decline in relevance as the call for Independence grows stronger, mainly because of their pro-British sentiment.

1930s

**Periyar**, the fire brand heretic has already left the TNCC, disgusted by Brahmin bias within. In 1934 he takes over the Justice Party, revamping it to become anti-Brahmin, anti-British, and pro-secession. The call for a separate Dravidar homeland rose from his belief in the Dravidar's distinct linguistic, cultural, and racial identify that the 'Aryan Brahmin oppressor' does not belong to.

1944-49

Renamed the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) and recognised as a social movement. Periyar does not want to contest elections. For this, among other reasons, **C. N. Annadurai** (normally referred to as Anna or elder brother) and other high profile members leave an aging Periyar to launch the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949.

1967-71

**Annadurai** emerges a huge political force by defeating the INC in the 1967 Assembly Elections. The party uses Tamil as a common regional identity to counter-point the Congress' Nationalism. Anna's death (1969) allows M. Karunanidhi to succeed as the interim CM. In 1971 Karunanidhi-led DMK wins Assembly Elections. Cracks begin to form within the party.

1972

**MGR**, by now demi-god to the masses, "matinee idol", MLA, and Party Treasurer accuses Karunanidhi and several others of corruption leading to his expulsion from the party. In the same year, MGR founded the Anna DravidaMunnetraKazhagam (ADMK), creating a paradigm shift in the political landscape of the state.

# the cut out messiah



*Mardur Gopalan Ramachandran was the face that could do no wrong in the public eye. He was the golden poster child of the DMK until his fall from grace. His expulsion triggered a massive backlash from his fan base (aside of being considerable they were primarily from low income groups.) When he founded the ADMK, he insisted that his was the party that stood for the values upheld by Annadurai, therefore undermining the leadership and legitimacy of the then DMK. His fans believed in their infallible hero, he who would raise them from poverty, defend them from oppressors, and fight injustice for them. He remained until death their Saviour. **Bharathy Singaravel** contemplates his legend.*

There is a curious coincidence I could begin with. He had his claim to 'godship' quite early in his life. R. Kannan in his biography of MGR, observes that following the death of the cine star's sister and father when he was only a boy, his mother branded him 'mudikalan' or the 'extinguisher of lives,' which is Yama. In 1967 fellow actor M. R. Radha shot MGR before attempting to end his own life, or at least this was the version of events that were largely believed. MGR miraculously survived. The bullet lodged in his third vertebrae and then moved into his throat, from where the surgeons managed to remove it. He returned to his career in a year's time - his speech slurred and difficult to follow. This resurrectionist act only furthered the depth of his fans' obsession with him, not to mention his own screen affectations. In *Engal Thangam (Our Treasure, 1970)*, he bounds out of a coffin singing 'naan sethu pozhachavenda, yamanai pathu siripavanda' (he is the one who has returned to life, he is the one who laughs in the face of yama). When he steps in front of a statue of what appears to be Bhadrakali Amman he mimics the idol's wide eyed expression of avenging fury.

The choice of god speaks volumes: Bhadrakali or the good Kali is not a high Vedic god. Like most forms of Amman worship she belongs to the lower castes (and classes). She is terrifying and fierce. She is also known by this name only in the South. As he prances around a group of thugs, there is a moment when the

music turns choral and the shadow of a cross and a crucified figure falls across the ground. The camera pans upwards to MGR holding a *silambam* stick across his shoulders while he gently sings, 'siluvaiyil yaesu marainjaaru, makkal siththamellaam vandhu nirainjaaru, gundugal pottu thulaichchaanga aanaa Gandhiyum Lincoln-um nilaichchaanga sandhana pettiyil urangugiraar Anna ..' (Christ died at Cavalry, Lincoln and Gandhi were riddled with bullets but yet they outlived their bodies, and Annadurai rests in a coffin) at which point MGR, quite overcome with emotion, falls to his knees, arms outstretched. Here is the political backdrop: Anna had died only a year ago, M. Karunanidhi was the interim CM and MGR was appointed Treasurer. The DMK was gearing up for the 1971 Assembly Elections in the following year and their main contender would be the INC(O), which had Tamil Nadu's own Kamaraj at its helm.

He goes on to extol the virtues and strengths of the Dravidar. 'Odum railai iddai maraitthu, athan paathaiyil thananthu thalai vaithu' probably refers to a part of the three pronged agitation of 1953 aimed at the INC, when trains were brought to a halt by party cadres (including Karunanidhi) lying across the tracks in protest. MGR applauds the bravery of such an act of dissent. The larger point here seems to be the need to emphasise the State's opposition to the Congress-led Centre's highhandedness.

Even though the film is an elegy to 'dignity of labour' - with Jayalalitha in a starring role and Karunanidhi as its writer - what is critically important is that all the songs referred to in this article and other such ones could stand alone. The songs in several instances adopt a marked change of tone from the rest of the film. Remember that these were played at political rallies, weddings, and in tea stalls. They had to be able to carve a sovereign existence of their own. Perhaps MGR can be seen as the vessel primed and raised up for spreading the DMK ideology. The songs are catchy and are carefully coded through gestures, camera angles, clothes, and objects to reinforce the lyrics. The men behind a majority of the lyrics were Vali and Kanadasan (both of whom had political ties) while MGR looked over their shoulders as they meticulously crafted this larger than life persona. Karunanidhi might have contributed many a script, but my belief is that (and I am not alone in this) this personality cult could not have been accomplished without these songs. Perhaps his creation was the very thing that was the DMK's downfall at the hands of MGR, a rogue god who held the love and respect of his devoted fans to the extent that he swung an electorate his way. One can even insist that insidiously the songs, long before the split, announced the coming of a messiah.

Another hugely popular number is 'Naan Aanaittal' from *Enga Veetu Pilai* (*One of our Own*, 1965). Something that stands out repeatedly (for me) is that MGR seems to be preparing his audience for the day he himself would be leader. I am also intrigued by how the DMK colours and by that extension ADMK colours conveniently appear in this song. 'Ethir kaalam varum, enn kadamai varum, intha kuttathin aatathai ozhipen, pothu neethiyile, puthu paathaiyile ...' - The time will come when he routes the blackguards holding power, an age of universal justice, a new path and so on.

MGR stands conveniently at the foot of a carpeted stairway, arm raised, palm upwards (*opposing page, cutout*). Aana is a royal decree. He wishes that poverty and suffering could be vanquished at his mere command. He successfully employs the questioning pointed finger or outstretched arms, face twisted in empathy and mercy for the poor he 'defends'. He embraces and frolics with the domestic help, but whips the evil master of the manor and his simpering yes-man. He is benevolent and playful with the 'deserving poor', but warns that

be reprimanded. Recall Mark 10:24, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God"

The impunity with which these lineages are established is remarkable. Jesus, Lincoln, Gandhi, Annadurai are flung into a bizarre made-to-order pantheon of established gods and latter day martyrs. It must follow that he, MGR enlists himself into the group - he becomes one of them, God as man, superhuman, pure, irreproachable, and incorruptible. The 'cut-out culture' as the towering 80-100 feet, lurid hand painted canvases of actors, politicians, and gods are referred to seamlessly reinforced the bonds between this triumvirate. The generation I belong to is perhaps the last that can properly recall these structures looming over the busiest roads, very much a part of our skyline. It is amusing that the DMK still regards itself atheist in its party philosophy despite glaring evidence to the contrary.

“The 'thara tickets' is where the low income filmgoers sat on the floor. These gestures, camera angles, podiums or stairways could appear to them even more imposing.

Following the expulsion in 1972, the songs only scaled up their saviour's messianic message. In *Naalai Ulugai Aala Vendum* (*Tomorrow we Must Rule the World*) from *Uzhaikkum Karangal* (*The Hands that Toil i.e., Proletariat*, 1976), the farmhand MGR announces to his fellow toilers 'vidyum vellai varapoguthu, dharmam theerpai tharapoguthu, nyangal saavathuillai' (the dawn is at hand, dharma will give its verdict and the truth will always triumph). Unabashedly his party flag flies high behind him, completely at home in a paddy field. Throughout the film he dons a *veshti* (*dhoti*) with a red and black border. His fans had retaliated violently after the expulsion and the state apparatus answered with unchecked police brutality. Kannan describes incidents of unofficial flags designed lovingly for the new party being torn down by DMK cadres and destroyed. The ADMK's response was crippling. The official flag slapped on the face of Annadurai over the black and red, almost daring the

*Our Love*, 1975) is even more staggeringly over the top. It begins as a proper *vazthu padal* (a manner of music that is an invocation to a higher power) to the Kaveri River. The river's significant role in Tamil history, literature, and economics is sung of.

Unsurprisingly, the river and its bounty has been celebrated in Sangam literature in numerous texts. The verses of this song carry on the legacy (a term that is central to Dravidian politics). The song speaks of her 'conception and birth' in the Kanadiga hills, how she eventually makes her way across the state-border like a demur Tamil maiden entering her marital home, how the paddy belt of Tamil Nadu relies on her, which she mother-like guards and nurtures. This long winded litany was simply to state that like mother Kaveri - their brave 'champion', 'their life's breath', their 'Idhyakkani' - MGR protected them.

The scene shifts to the Sathya Coffee Plantation Workers' Festival, where the workers are waiting worshipfully with folded hands. When MGR finally appears, he stands upon a podium like a suave visitation. Both the ADMK flag and a giant Twin Leaf (the party symbol) flank him. The singer is joined in by a caricature trio of Hindu priest, a pastor, and (what is in their imagination) an *imam*, in a costume that may well have been sourced from the sets of *Arabian Nights*. The message nevertheless is clear. MGR enjoys the benediction of three major religions, two of which would consider this heresy. With infinite grace he descends the podium to accept their offerings, beyond which everything breaks into even more insufferable servility. When it is MGR's turn to sing, it is a call for Revolution. He tells his 'comrade workers' that the world is theirs and to seek the path to a society that is equal and classless, as Anna preached. The irony appears to be lost on everyone. At least for the lyricist Pulavar Pulamaipithan, it paid off. He would become the Deputy Chairman of the Legislative Assembly.

This faulty and clumsy application of Left principles goes much further back. In a film also called *Naan Aanaittal* (1966), MGR returns after serving time in prison to some outlandish dacoit hideout. His beard and hat reek of a discount Che. He embarks on his reformist mission with the song 'Thai Mel Aana' (Upon Mother's Oath). The Tamil Thai Vazthu is a pledge of loyalty to Mother Tamil and is sung even now at august gatherings after the national anthem. MGR swears

podiums, or stairways become even more important in covertly emphasising the power he exudes. This history birthed a most unholy hybrid of two factors that democracy in Tamil Nadu labours under - personality driven and dynastic politics. This fixation with legacies and political aspirations through film continues to this day.

The controversial Vijay starrer, *Meresal* that recently blindsided BJP - notorious for underestimating regional loyalties in the South, illustrates this. I will maintain that I commend the sentiments of the film. It defended the right to affordable healthcare for all, called out the profit machinery of privatised hospitals, and pointed out the flaws in GST rates applied on medicines. It comes out at a time when public spaces of dissent are being plucked away with terrifying precision. What it also does is make repeated references to MGR.

When Vijay makes his first appearance in the film, he saunters in flexing his muscles and turns on the radio. Next to it is a photo of the man and the song that plays is 'Unnai Arinthal', a well known early number from the film *Vettaikaran* (*The Hunter*). Vijay plays three roles. He is himself, his identical brother who is a vigilante, and his own father in a flashback sequence. When a local politician in Father Vijay's village tries to commandeer temple land for his industrial cronies, Vijay storms into the movie shed where the stock-in-trade evil film politician is watching MGR's *Uzhaikkum Karangal* (referred to earlier in the article). Kicking the door down, he stomps in wearing a shirt and *veshti* even as on the screen behind him MGR similarly dressed, descends into a *silambam*-ring to fight his opponents. Later in the film when he is told off by the politician's aid for disrespecting their Thalaivar (Leader), Vijay rounds on them and states, 'Leaders take a lifetime to be made. They are created through the trust of an entire generation. You are squandering that. You do not deserve the title.' *Uzhaikkum Karangal* too features a very similar scene. Rumour has it that Vijay will soon enter the political arena. Kamal Hassan, who needs little introduction, whose *Nayagan* brought him international acclaim, a film world heavyweight, has already announced the formation of new political party blandly stating that both Centre and State governments have failed the people of Tamil Nadu.



'oru thavaru seythal, athait therinthu seythal, avan thevan endral vidamaatein' (he will be unsparing even with a god who knowingly perpetrates injustice). Lamenting over the irredeemable nature of the powerful, he recalls how Jesus and Gandhi 'came' hoping to wipe out the sins of the world, but the world continues its transgressions unheeding of them. He emphatically indicates that there is a god above in heaven whose diktat he is here to uphold. He seems to always - Christ-like - judge who deserves mercy and who is to

DMK to disrespect their own beloved founder. The prophetic lines would become reality a year later. In 1977 the ADMK allied with the CPM and the AIFB (Subasist) and won with a clean majority, the ADMK alone won 130 seats out of the 200 it contested in. MGR became Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for the first time. The DMK lost three consecutive elections as if to atone for their 'betrayal'. 'Neenga Nallalrukanum Nadu Munera' (May you be Blesséd so the Land may Prosper) from *Idhyakkani* (*The Fruit of*

upon her that he will 'open the eyes of the blind'. 'Thani aanalum, thalai ponalum, theemaigal nadapathai thaduthu nirpein' is a lonely cry that even if he had to do it alone, even if it cost him his head, he would fight injustice.

You must keep in mind that many film halls especially in rural Tamil Nadu were basically sheds. The 'thara tickets' is where the low income filmgoer sat on the floor, gazing up at this saviour-figure. These gestures, camera angles,

I watch these developments with deeply conflicted feelings. This continued dependence on personality cults has led to the current disorder of the state government. Jayalalitha's death caused fractures in the AIADMK and the party continues to flounder without leadership material that has public favour. Even if the new entrants manage temporarily to hold the tide of virulent right-wing ideologies that are sweeping across the country, in the long-run it may destroy the bulwark of regional politics. ■