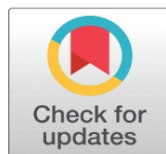
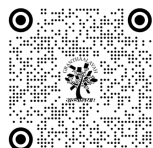


# FROM FAN CLUB TO PARTY: MAPPING AND ASSESING THE POLITICAL JOURNEY OF ACTOR VIJAY

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## ABSTRACT

Following in the footsteps of movie stars who become politicians, Vijay, the highest paid actor at the moment with a massive fan base, has entered mainstream politics. With the introduction of his party, Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam (Tamil Nadu Triumph Federation), the actor made his political debut on February 2, 2024, eliminating any and all uncertainty. This essay tries to trace preparedness of the actor for his political journey. It attempts to analyse whether an actor's large fan base is sufficient for them to succeed in politics. This article examines actor Vijay's political actions both on and off screen in an attempt to predict how successful the actor will be in Tamil Nadu politics. Actor appears to be taking progressive politics seriously in a three-page formal statement that opens with the party's slogan, "Pirapokkum Ella Uyirkkum" from Thirukkural, which roughly translates to "All are equal by birth." However, will he be able to create an ideology that will rival Tamil Nadu's deeply ingrained Dravidian ideology?

#Tamilnadu #cinema #politics #MGR #Vijay #Dravidianpolitics #SocioPolitical #popularculture

**Keywords:** Fan Club, Tamilnadu, Cinema, Politics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tamil cinema, since its inception, has continued to exert a significant influence on the cultural and political landscape of Tamil Nadu. Cinema is seen as a powerful political tool in Tamil Nadu, especially after the Dravidian parties started using cinema to carry their ideologies to the masses. So far, C. N. Annadurai<sup>1</sup>, M.

<sup>1</sup> C. N. Annadurai, "Anna," founded the political party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam known as DMK, championed Tamil rights, became Tamil Nadu's first non-Congress Chief Minister, and left a lasting Dravidian political legacy.

Karunanidhi<sup>2</sup>, M. G. Ramachandran<sup>3</sup>(MGR), and J. Jayalalithaa<sup>4</sup> have served as Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu in the film industry. Among them, MGR was the first actor to become the chief minister of Tamil Nadu with the star image that he gained from the tinsel world. Following MGR, other prominent stars in Tamil cinema, such as Sivaji Ganesan<sup>5</sup>, K.Bhagyaraj<sup>6</sup>, T Rajender<sup>7</sup>, Karthik<sup>8</sup>, Vijayakanth<sup>9</sup>, Sarathkumar<sup>10</sup>, and Kamal Hassan<sup>11</sup>, ventured into electoral politics with their stardom, but no one has succeeded as much as MGR. This can be attributed to the fact that these actors lacked the ideological clarity that MGR had in his political journey that he gained from *Dravida Pattarai* (the Dravidian School). MGR politicised his mass fan followers through films and reached the epitome of success in the Tamil political arena. However, none of the actors mentioned above have been able to politicise their fans enough through their films.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Pongiyannan (2013)** contends in his doctoral dissertation titled "*Cinematic charisma as a political gateway in South India: the case of Tamil Nadu*" that the actors' ability to project their superhuman qualities and the fans' loyalty to the charisma of their favourite actors... basically revolve around the relationship between Tamil cinema and politics." The author supports this assertion by adding, "A fan's allegiance to cinematic stars grows stronger as the popular democratic institutions remain corrupt and continue to fail the masses."

**Sivathamby (1981)** emphasises how Tamil cinema, especially in Tamil Nadu, can be a powerful tool for political communication. According to his research, films have had a significant role in both public mobilisation and the cementing of political views. Sivathamby draws the conclusion that Tamil cinema has an affective quality that can successfully stir up public opinion and have an impact on political outcomes.

According to **Pandian (1992)**, MGR's portrayal in the movie was painstakingly constructed to closely conform to the political and cultural expectations of the Tamil people. This persona was used for more than just entertainment; it was a means of promoting political identity and representation among the general public, particularly among the less fortunate segments of society.

<sup>2</sup> M. Karunanidhi (1924–2018), a prominent Dravidian leader, served five terms as Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister and was a key figure in shaping DMK's political legacy.

<sup>3</sup> M. G. Ramachandran, popularly known by his stage name MGR, was a well-known Tamil Nadu politician and actor who formed AIADMK, or Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. R. He left a significant influence in his capacity as Tamil Nadu's chief minister.

<sup>4</sup> J. Jayalalithaa (1948–2016) was a prominent Tamil actress turned politician, serving six terms as Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister, and was a key leader of the AIADMK party.

<sup>5</sup> Renowned Tamil actor Sivaji Ganesan (1928–2001) is renowned for his strong performances and adaptability, making a lasting impression on Indian film. In 1988, Sivaji Ganesan made a brief foray into politics by establishing the "Tamizhaga Munnetra Munnani" political party.

<sup>6</sup> In February 1989, renowned Tamil director, actor, and playwright K. Bhagyaraj entered politics as the founder of the Tamil Nadu political party MGR Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (MGR Popular Progressive Federation).

<sup>7</sup> Actor, filmmaker, and politician T. Rajendar is well-known in Tamil for his exuberant stage presence and political activism. He has collaborated with a number of Tamil Nadu political parties. In 2004, he started the All India Latchiya Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam political party.

<sup>8</sup> Tamil film actor Karthik entered politics in the early 2000s, joining All India Forward Bloc as Tamil Nadu Secretary and later founding Ahila India Naadalum Makkal Katchi in 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Vijayakanth is an Indian actor and politician, known for his roles in Tamil cinema and as the founder of the political party DMDK and served as an Opposition Party leader.

<sup>10</sup> Sarath Kumar is a celebrated Tamil actor and politician, founder of the AISMK party, and has served as a Member of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly.

<sup>11</sup> Kamal Haasan is a legendary Tamil actor, filmmaker, and politician, known for his versatile roles in cinema and his political activism with the Makkal Needhi Maiam party.

Also, he adds that MGR's films gave spectators a sense of hope and agency by tackling issues like injustice and the victory of the underdog, enabling them to perceive themselves as participants in the political process.

Hardgrave (1973) argues the influence of the movie as a potent political tool in Tamil Nadu is discussed. It also looks at how the movie stars are seen in the political sphere. It describes how the impact of "stars" on Tamil politics has turned those who would try to understand it into political astrologers. There has been a significant impact of films on Tamil Nadu politics. According to him, M.G.R. is a South Indian symbol of hope for the underprivileged, also going by the names Vadiyar (meaning "teacher"), Puratche Nadigar (meaning "revolutionary actor"), and Makkal Thilagam (meaning "idol of the masses").

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study tracked actor Vijay's political actions off screen using news articles using solely a qualitative methodology that included integrated descriptive content analysis. A methodical approach to study, content analysis counts and examines the occurrence of particular terms, ideas, or topics in a variety of content formats. It entails classifying and coding text in order to find trends and patterns. Also, this article analyses the films of the actor, which contain political elements, in order to assess where the actor will place himself in the political galaxy of Tamil Nadu.

### 4. STAR IMAGE AND POLITICS

To some extent, Vijayakanth has expressed his political views through his films, but it doesn't work out well as his fan base is smaller when compared to MGR. As a result, in the 2006 state assembly election, out of 234 constituencies contested, his party secured a single seat, which he contested from Vridhachalam. However, he attained significant success in later years, even reaching the level of an opposition party in the state, which happened only after having alliances with AIADMK. This evidently remarks that, in the political landscape of Tamil Nadu, there is no space for star-image-driven politics without proper ideology. In this lineage of star politics, actor Rajinikanth<sup>12</sup> had several momentums to plunge into politics. An actor with a mass fan following like MGR, actor Rajinikanth was widely anticipated when he announced his imminent entry into politics in 1996. But his long-term idea of political entry culminated in 2020 as the actor withdrew entirely from politics, citing the COVID-19 pandemic and his health illness.

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<sup>12</sup> Rajinikanth is a legendary Indian actor known for his iconic roles in Tamil cinema, charismatic screen presence, and significant influence on Indian pop culture

of political entry culminated in 2020 as the actor withdrew entirely from politics, citing the COVID-19 pandemic and his health illness.

## 5. OFF SCREEN POLITICAL ACTIVISM OF VIJAY

In that vein, actor Vijay, fondly called Thalapathy, who has a fan base and popularity similar to MGR and Rajini, has now entered politics with the announcement of his party name, *Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam*. Prior to this, for more than a decade, the actor manifested political hints by showing his support and solidarity at various social and political events. Tamil actor Vijay has been hinting at his entry into politics for a decade, and he silently tested waters in the recently concluded rural local body elections, where members of his fan club won 115 of the 169 seats from where they contested, according to results announced by the state election commission. In the very next month, he met the members who succeeded in the local body elections and congratulated them. On November 11, 2008, actor Vijay went on an eight-hour fast with his fans for the Sri Lankan Tamil issue, which can be observed as his first political move (Refer Figure 1).

Figure 1, Figure 2



Figure 1 (Credit: Tamilguradian.com)



Figure 2 (Credit: reddit.com)

In the next year, on July 26, 2009, the actor converted his fan clubs into *Vijay Makkal Iyakkam*, which means Vijay Peoples Movement (hereinafter VMI), a fan club-turned-welfare organisation aimed at philanthropic activities. He also introduced a flag for the VMI with the slogan *Unnal Mudiyum, Uzhaithidu Uyaranthidu, Unnal Mudiyum*, which means "Work hard and rise...you can". Vijay's political moves in reality are inevitable. He has expressed his political stance in real life at every possible time. Also, through his VMI, he has started various welfare initiatives like *Vijay Payilakam* (Vijay Study Centres), *Vijay Vilaiyilla Unavagam* (Vijay Free Food Services), *Vijay Kuruthiyagam* (Vijay Blood Donation Camps), etc.

Vijay made a strong remark condemning the Union Government's demonetisation measure in a video that was broadcast in 2016 (see Figure 3). Additionally, he personally met Anitha's family in 2017 (see Figure 4) and gave them Rs. 1 lakh in assistance. Anitha was a class XII student who committed suicide because she failed the NEET.

**Figure 3, Figure 4**

I wish it was planned well. People are finding it difficult to even buy medicine, which is a basic necessity. As many as 80% of people are suffering because of wrong committed by 20% of the population. I really felt bad when I heard that an old man died because he couldn't conduct the wedding of his granddaughter. In another case, a baby died in a hospital because her family didn't have new currency for treatment. People who make a living with daily wages are suffering a lot.

-Thalapathy Vijay's bold statement on Demonetisation



**Figure 3**

**Figure 4**

When the Jallikattu issue broke out in the very same year, he released a video supporting the protest and also participated with a kerchief covering his face in the Jallikattu protest, which happened in Marina. Also, he released a video condemning the act of PETA trying to ban Jallikattu. (Refer Figure 5,6).

**Figure 5, Figure 6**



**Figure 5**

**Figure 6**

On May 22, 2018, 13 people were killed in the Sterlite shootout in Thoothukudi when police opened fire on demonstrators calling for the closure of the Sterlite Copper plant. Concerns over the plant's effects on the environment and public health led to the protests. Widespread indignation was generated by the occurrence, which also increased scrutiny of Indian police operations and industry standards. Vijay responded right away, visiting the families of those killed in the Sterlite massacre that rocked the nation and compensating each family with one lakh rupees.

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7 Credits:** Movie crowd

Vijay, who has been active in politics, started lauding the class 10 and class 12 government school students who secured the top three ranks in their board exams across 234 constituencies since 2023. At the first facilitation event in 2023, he asked for a ban on NEET, and he also brought up Ambedkar, Periyar, and Kamaraj during his remarks at the Education Award Ceremony, which is reasonable to believe that he may pursue progressive politics himself (Refer Figure 8, 9). In 2024, when Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi were heavily affected due to an abundant amount of rain, he helped the affected by distributing relief materials. Also, in the party's declaration statement, Vijay entered politics with the promise of a corruption-free state and a ruling without any divisive politics based on caste and religion. Vijay's involvement in these major problems in ethnic Tamil Nadu can be said to have created a good influence among the people (refer to Figure 9). Other than these activities, Vijay addresses political and social issues at the audio launch ceremony of his films, which is trending at that time.

**Figure 8, 9**



**Figure 8**



**Figure 9**

## 6. CONTROVERSIES AND QUARRELS

After revealing the flag of the VMI, Vijay became an attractive political partner for a number of Tamil Nadu political parties. But the very month after reforming his

fans clubs into VMI, Vijay met Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Congress party, in Delhi. Also on August 15, 2011, Vijay flew to Delhi to extend his support for Anna Hazare's Lokpal Movement (refer to Figure 10). All these activities of the actor infuriated the DMK, the ruling party at the time. Following this, the DMK blocked Vijay's 2010 film, *Kavalan*. Due to friction with DMK at that time, Vijay met J. Jayalalithaa, the general secretary of AIADMK, who was then in opposition, along with his father, and announced that VMI would support AIADMK in the 2011 assembly elections. He announced that the VMI would support the AIADMK in the 2011 assembly elections. Subsequently, a list was sent to Vijay from the AIADMK side saying that Vijay fans are needed to do fieldwork in 50 constituencies. After that, Vijay worked vehemently on the field with his fans, aiming to defeat DMK in all 50 constituencies. As a result, AIADMK won 43 out of 50 constituencies.

**Figure 10**



**Figure 10** Vijay at Anna Hazare's Lokpal Hunger Strike

While talking about the victory to the media, the actor's father, S.A. Chandrasekhar, said that VMI' helped AIADMK win, like a squirrel that helped Lord Ram build the Ram Bridge in Sri Lanka. This interview enraged the then-Chief Minister, J. Jayalalitha. Due to this, in 2013, Vijay's film *Thalivaa* got into big trouble with the ruling party, AIADMK. The *Thalivaa* movie was released eight days after the specified date, which resulted in a huge loss that was later settled by Vijay himself. It should be mentioned that Vijay decided to use the title "*Thalivaa*" to declare his political aspirations after only tangentially discussing politics. Additionally, the tagline of the title, "Time to Lead," confirmed his political desire. Following this, Vijay's films kept running into issues of one kind or another. A 2G-related dialogue criticised the DMK in the 2014 film *Kaththi*; a GST-related dialogue in the 2017 movie *Mersal* questioned the Union BJP Government; and the 2018 film *Sarkar* criticised the Dravidian party's freebie initiatives. Additionally, the AIADMK attacks *Sarkar* movie cinemas, claiming that the antagonist in the film was given a pseudonym of late former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa. All the above-mentioned films, "*Kaththi*, *Mersal*, and *Sarkar*," faced many problems during the release time. Even after the release, the theatres showing these films were threatened by the respective parties. The worst case was happened for the *Sarkar* movie; theatres where *Sarkar* was running were attacked by respective party followers, and Vijay's banner was torn apart (Refer figure 11).

Figure 11



Figure 11

## 7. MGR AND VIJAY: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Whenever a film star plunges into politics, they are compared with the popularity of MGR in an inevitable culture in Tamil Nadu's political environment. More than a character on the screen, MGR is shown and represented as a man of the commons. Sivathamby (1981) acknowledged the statement that MGR films dealt more with the social dynamism needed for the underprivileged man, to what extent he could go up the social ladder, than with a criticism of the entire society. MGR declared that he will act only in those films that are consonant with his social and political views. All the films in which he worked with Karunanidhi in the early period established him as one of the prominent Dravidian leaders through various socially and politically rich narratives. But in the case of Vijay, only in the early 2010s, Vijay's films took a political stance and addressed a range of problems that afflict Tamil society, from farmers' challenges to corruption. Before that, he had acted in entertainment-orientated films. We might conclude that rather than politicising his fan base, Vijay's film career has been more entertaining.

But as far as Vijay is concerned, in real life, like MGR, Vijay also does welfare schemes and helps poor people, but he could attain the image that MGR created through cinema. MGR, who built his charisma and popularity by representing him as one of the socially depressed classes of society, also projected politics in his films right from his initial days in cinema. Narayan (2018) argues that in the early days, songs representing the party ideology were written and incorporated in films. M.G. Ramachandran has utilised the MGR. Utilised every craft in cinema like dialogues, songs, etc. But in terms of songs, MGR took a special concern on the lyrics, which should be very simple to reach his political ideology and also build up his image. As compared with MGR, Vijay has not much utilised the songs in the film. There are very few songs like "*Pokkiri pongal, vetri kodi yethu, oru viral puratchi*," which bluntly addressed the social problems. Even in such songs, Vijay never expressed his opinion much. Vijay has addressed social problems through dialogue in the film. That too, in the later part of his acting career. It can be said that "*Tamizhan*," released in 2002, is the first film by the actor with a socio-political narrative. Vijay did not choose a complete social and political narrative like MGR except "*Sarkar*". Though there are space in the movie "*Sarkar*" to express the political views of the actor, it ended as an another commercial film with political subtexts. Political subtexts in

mass and commercial films alone may not be enough to appeal to the audience at the grass-roots level. Vijay's political trajectory is completely different compared to MGR's. In a similar vein, Vijay's political beliefs remain unclear. Vijay, who has attacked and highlighted the errors committed by the political parties in the film, doesn't appear to have made clear where he stands on politics.

In the Tamil Nadu political arena, where Dravidian ideology is rooted, the Naam Tamizhar party, which came with an alternate ideology of Tamil nationalism, has a certain percentage of votes. After MGR in the cast, Shivaji Ganeshan to Kamal Haasan, no one who started the party with an alternative ideology to Dravidian ideology has dabbled in electoral politics. At the same time, it is to be noted that actor Vijaykanth is an exception in the cast. He started a political party with Dravidian ideology, named the party *Desiya Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*, and succeeded to the level of leader of opposition.

## 8. SUGGESTIONS

Now that Vijay is in politics, he takes all of these things into account and makes the party's policies and ideologies fit the political climate of Tamil Nadu in order to compete in the state's elections. Will he retain the momentum gained in the local body election? Will Vijay's welfare contributions through VMI and the star image he has gained through the screen give him a hand in politics? And it is important to note that Vijay didn't take a stand for the Parliament election in 2024, which confused the people of Tamil Nadu as well as his fans. Everything will have answers only when he unwraps the policies and ideologies of the party. As the political ground of Tamil Nadu is entirely dominated by Left-Centric Dravidian ideologies, Vijay should keep these into consideration while framing the party's policies and his political ideology.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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