

Personality Worship and Degeneration of Statehood: Case of Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

Personality worship (Cult of Personality) refers to excessive glorification of a leader, to the peak of idolization and deification. In India, this phenomenon exists from long standing tradition from spirituality, to now in socio-political aspects. In Tamil Nadu it is often shaped by movie-stardom fan-following to politics, capturing the political power of State by Parasocial Interaction (PSI), without having 'Statesmanship' capacities, but only to leverage on concept of social welfare freebies. Using social psychology theories, charismatic leadership, and cognitive dissonance, this article tries to explore the role of movies and their impact on social psyche, creating fan-base, propaganda to political orientation in Tamil Nadu context. And also examines its effect on democratic norms, social cohesion, individual psychology and Statehood-Statesmanship. Article offers recommendations promoting critical thinking in voters' education, voting patterns in Tamil Nadu, strengthening democratic institutions, fostering for diverse leadership to mitigate risks associated with personality worship.

KEY WORDS

Personality worship, charismatic leadership, Statesmanship, Social Identity Theory and Tamil Nadu politics.

INTRODUCTION

In politics hero-worship is sure road to degradation and eventual dictatorship

- Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, 11 Constituent Assembly Debates 972-981 (1949)

The current election results of Tamil Nadu assembly, where film actor Vijay's newly formed Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) has secured 108(-1) seats, become single largest party and yet posing political instability and troubles in government formation. And the past 40 years Tamil Nadu election trends since 1969 M. Karunanidhi, M.G. Ramachandran, J. Jayalalithaa, V.N. Janaki, Vijayakanth and now Vijay, all coming from film industry, forming their own parties AIADMK, DMK, DMDK etc. and succeeding to get elected, shows that Tamil common man and the voters are fervent and deeply captivated behind matinee idols, and the onscreen-cut-edited-directed hero/heroines can lead their politically organized and Constitutionally secured State. It is said democracy without education is knave over fools, and integrated strongest citizens make the strongest State. People of Tamil Nadu believe that, their onscreen hero/heroines are endowed with supernatural powers and are 'set apart' and accept them as their leaders (Charismatic authority). Those fans-matinee idol followers, internalize their hero's image as core part of their own social identity, and such onscreen hero becomes a 'cultural focus' and fan-turned voters feel a sense of belonging to a superior in-group, enhancing their subjective psychological well-being and self-esteem (Social Identity Theory). Further, that huge fan-following fuels the

cult-persona to take one-sided emotional attachments i.e. Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) creating ‘illusion of intimacy’ where brain forms lasting attachment to a matinee-idol as ‘Public-Figure’ as if they are real-life source of comfort and security. These poses for whether such personality worship is good for democracy? Whether such film star-personality worshipping in Tamil Nadu forms defects in statesmanship? And all together leads to degeneration of Statehood? And how to overcome those defects! The paper tries to answer.

RELEVANCE

As of May 2026, Tamil Nadu has just witnessed a seismic shift in its political landscape with the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (**TVK**) led by actor-turned-politician **Vijay**, securing a stunning victory and emerging as Third front. This outcome reinforces the "Celluloid-to-Cabinet" pipeline that has defined the State for over half a century. Tamil people repeated choosing of film-idols as political leaders, instability, number game and going for yet another coalition government, why Tamil voters are not diversifying into choice of leaders from other area/experience? do they lack voting-democratic education? How it has affected the Statehood since 1969 to till date? Where the State of Tamil Nadu stands in indexes of Democratic education? Corruption? And in Political evolution these are all relevant indicators to be studied, thus paper is relevant.

OBJECTIVES

Since the paper deals with political affairs of Tamil Nadu, ideals of Statehood, Statesmanship, Celluloid-to-Cabinet history, the author mainly sets following objectives for the study.

- 1) Whether personality worshipping from filmdom to politics augurs well for healthy democracy and Statehood or not?
- 2) What are the negative factors of ‘Personality worshipping’ as antithesis to democracy?
- 3) Is it good to worship ‘Constitutional Idealism’ than personality worshipping, especially in Indian diversified scenario?

These are the precise objectives set for understanding, as this subject can be vast, study is limited to Tamil Nadu scenario, leaving out patterns of personality worshipping in other parts of India.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts twofold methodology of doctrinal analysis of constitutional and socio-psychological literature with observational research. By synthesizing legal provisions with real-world election data and media reports, the study tracks the intersection of psychological theory and political practice over an extended period.

STATEHOOD AND STATESMANSHIP

While Aristotle defined the State as a "union of families and villages having for its end a perfect and self-sufficing life," essentially viewing it as a natural institution for the "good life." Constitutionally Article 12 defines "The State" specifically for Part III (Fundamental Rights). Its purpose is to identify the authorities against whom a citizen can seek a remedy for the violation of their rights. The definition is wide and inclusive of; 1) The Government and Parliament of India: Executive and Legislative organs of the Union. 2) The Government and Legislature of each State: Executive and Legislative organs of the States. 3) Local Authorities: Municipalities, District Boards, Panchayats, and Improvement Trusts. 4) Other Authorities: This is the most widely interpreted category, covering statutory and non-statutory bodies that act as "instrumentalities" of the governmentⁱ. Thus, any person becoming the Chief of largest seat securing party can claim to form State Government and can have administrative power over Local and Other Authorities as well.

Statesman is a person experienced in the art of governance or versed in the administration of government affairs, dealing with important public issues, exhibiting personal wisdom and ability. Statesmanship is the ability, qualifications or practice of a statesman, wisdom and the skill in the management of public affairsⁱⁱ

PERSONALITY WORSHIPPING

Personality worship refers to the excessive public admiration, devotion, and adulation of a specific individual, typically a political, religious, or social leader. This phenomenon elevates the individual to a status that is perceived as infallible, heroic, or even divine. That is what Dr. B. R. Ambedkar meant in Constituent Assembly, such blind following has attributable characteristics viz; 1) Infallibility; that their leader cannot make a mistake. 2) Narrative where the leader is the only one who can do all the things for them. 3) Iconography; The excessive use of the leader's image in public spaces, government advertisements, and media. 4) Suppression of Dissent; Viewing criticism of the leader as a betrayal of their causeⁱⁱⁱ.

In case of Tamil Nadu, what is observed is that, 'matinee-idols' influence the psyche their fans, to turn them as their political volunteer, because Tamil film fans often engage in 'devotional' practices that go beyond ethical entertainment^{iv}. Such an 'illusion of intimacy' creates where the actor's screen persona like; champion of poor, defender of justice is internalized by the fan as real-life moral truth^v. This kind of devotional worshipping of matinee-idols is there in Telugu and Kannada film industries also, in then Andhra late NTR could achieve the chief-ministry, but in Kannada, late Dr. Rajkumar ethically stood away from entering into politics. But in Tamil Nadu that adulation has reached 'Idealization and Deification' involving the process of apotheosis^{vi} constructing the temples, performing 'Abhisheka' (Kind of Sanatan ritual) etc. these kinds of social acts by fans qualitatively exaggerate the matinee-idol turned politician into further heroic, flawless leader. Altogether, the Social Identity Theory activates into practice as actor's Fan-Fanclubs take pro-active stand, the moment their idol announces his social service mode through political action, fans internalize the leader's image as core part of their own social identity. Associating with such onscreen-idol-leader becomes 'cultural focus'

allowing individuals to believe and feel a sense of superior in-group, which enhances well-being and self-esteem^{vii}. Same is practiced in Tamil Movie-Social-Political sphere.

Here are some earlier researched glimpses; leaders like C. N. Annadrai and M. Karunanidhi used screenwriting and dialogue to embed ‘Dravidian’ values of anti-Brahminism and social justice into mass consciousness causing ideological dissemination^{viii}. Since 1985 ‘Madurai Formula’ films have been found to reinforce caste dominance by equating specific castes with ‘valor, heroism, and violence, directly influencing local caste-based political alignments^{ix}. This phenomenon has revived and continued with contemporary stars, actor Vijay’s TVK party has disrupted the traditional DMK-AIADMK duopoly, achieving significant electoral success shortly after formation by leveraging his massive fan network^x. This time Tamil film star Fanclub fantasy has turned into reality, as by Sunday 10th May, 2026 Vijay’s TVK could get support from other minor parties and swearing-in-ceremony is announced as Chief Minister.

INCIDENTS OF FILMDOM TO STATE POWER IN TAMIL NADU

It is not that, Vijay’s TVK is first one from Tamil filmdom, since 1969 state politics is riddled with many persons-actors forming their own party and securing peoples representative post, following table shows that list;

Name	Film Background	Tenure/Period	Office held
M. Karunanidhi	Scriptwriter & Dialogue Writer	1969–1976, 1989–1991, 1996–2001, 2006–2011	Chief Minister served 5 terms; known as “ Kalaignar ” for his literary and film contributions.
M. G. Ramachandran	Leading Actor (Action/Social)	1977–1980, 1980–1984, 1985–1987	Founder of AIADMK; first film star to become CM in India.
J. Jayalalithaa	Leading Actress (140+ films)	1991–1996, 2001, 2002– 2006, 2011– 2014, 2015– 2016	Chief Minister served 6 terms; successor to MGR’s political legacy. Amma
V. N. Janaki	Actress	Jan 1988 (24 days)	Widow of MGR; first woman CM of Tamil Nadu.
Vijayakanth	Actor	(2006–2016) (2011–2014)	MLA; Leader of the Opposition). Founded the DMDK in 2005.
Kamal Haasan	Award winning Actor		President of Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM), founded in 2018. Contested the 2021 Assembly elections from Coimbatore South, narrowly losing to the BJP candidate.
Udhayanidhi Stalin	Actor and producer before entering active politics.	2021-2026	Deputy CM & Minister for Youth Welfare
Kumaresan Duraisamy	Actor	MLA (2001-2006) MP (2009–2014)	Union Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment.

Khushbu Sundar	Actress		Member of the National Commission for Women (2023–Present). Previously active in DMK and Congress; contested the 2021 Assembly elections for the BJP in Thousand Lights.
Sivaji Ganesan	Actor	1982–1988	Despite being a legendary actor, his independent political party (Thamizhaga Munnetra Munnani) did not achieve significant electoral success.
C. Joseph Vijay	Actor	May-2026...	10 th May 2026 Sworn as Chief Minister, forming his own party TVK

Thus, it is clear that, Tamil State politics is always overcast by ‘Celluloid to Cabinet’ and even the current generational voter-youth, being more educated are going with the age-old trend^{xi}

HERO WORSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC DIFFICULTY

Constitutionally our nation has adopted ‘Indirect democracy’, and it is not perfect because of various problems, illiteracy, no-education (or Macauley-westernized one), difficulties concerning elections are; political groupism, defection, forgetting election objectives, ill effects of propaganda, misuse of money power-corruption, more rejection than election, frequent election, regionality and parochialism, no pragmatic representation, inability of the voter-public to understand common/severe national problem, quest for power by few etc.^{xii} among all these, especially for Tamil Nadu, film-hero worshipping in public is big and considerable problem

While hero worship provides a sense of unity and rapid mobilization, it risks turning the **citizen** into a **spectator**. In a true indirect democracy, the power is supposed to flow from the people to their representatives; in hero-politics, the power often flows from the "aura" of the individual downward, making it difficult for the public to remain objective when the "hero" fails to deliver on real-world complexities. When a screen idol transitions to the ballot box, the relationship between the leader and the led shifts from democratic representation to something more akin to **parasocial devotion**.

In social psychology, the **Halo Effect** occurs when our overall impression of a person e.g., "He is a brave, just hero on screen" influences how we feel and think about their character in unrelated areas e.g., "He will be an efficient, honest policymaker". Fans transfer the "invincibility" of a film character onto the real-world actor. In a democracy, voters are meant to evaluate candidates based on policy and track records. Hero worship replaces this critical evaluation; voters decide based on how much they like the "character" rather than the platform.

The Tamil "Fan Club" infrastructure functions as a powerful social identity. For many, being a fan is not just a hobby; it is a primary source of belonging and self-esteem. The hero becomes a symbol of the fans' own aspirations. An attack on the hero's politics is perceived as a personal attack on the fan's identity. This creates a fierce "us vs. them" mentality, which can stifle the healthy debate and compromise required for a functioning indirect democracy. Tamil cinema often portrays the hero as a saviour of the downtrodden. This taps into the psychological need for a **paternalistic figure**.

Indirect democracy relies on the idea of "public servants." Hero worship flips this, positioning the leader as a "benefactor" and the citizens as "supplicants." The saviour complex discourages civic participation. If the "Hero" will fix everything, the individual citizen feels less responsible for holding local institutions accountable.

In nutshell, in hero-worship politics, focus is on the hero-person while indirect democracy focuses on constitution/institution, accountability is based on loyalty and faith in hero, but indirect democracy is based on accountability on performance and law, succession of office in hero-politics often results in a vacuum or cult of personality, indirect democracy goes with systematic transition of power.

In hero-worshipping organisation of Government/State entirely dependent on one individual's whims. If the leader's judgement is flawed, there are no internal mechanisms to correct the course, which leads to systemic instability. The constitutional idea that power is impersonal and limited by law gets undermined in several core democratic norms. Rule of law and strong institutions get replaced by 'Rule of Man', as hero is viewed as superior possessing the 'will of the people' undermining the accountability, legitimacy to State office is perceived in 'exceptional nature' of hero becoming anti-pluralist, creating monism, beyond reproach, policy via debate is replaced by leader's decree. This symbiotic relationship leads to corruption. This is what happened in late J. Jayalalitha's high profile disproportionate assets case, where judicial scrutiny was viewed as political vendetta rather than an impartial legal requirement.

Jurisprudentially, a 'Person' is viewed as a 'point of convergence' merely a subject of rights and duties, but when it comes to 'The Office Vs. The Man' the law recognises the Corporation sole e.g. the President, the King or simply a Public Trustee the individual-hero occupying the seat is irrelevant as the rights and duties get attached to the office and the individual man is answerable to the public, and not to swallow that office for himself. We must note that Article 329A had sought to place the election of the Prime Minister and the Speaker beyond the reach of any court, was struck down on the reasoning that, 'free and fair elections' and 'equality before the law' cannot be sacrificed to protect the tenure of a single individual, regardless of their popularity- *Indira Nehru Gandhi V. Sri Raj Narain & Anr*^{xiii} the first case which barred against the translation of a cult-persona into super-legal status.

WORSHIPPING CONSTITUTIONAL IDEALS

In the written constitutional democratic governance and jurisprudence, worshipping and adhering to constitutional ideals is the best practice of placing the principles, values, and institutional frameworks of a nation's founding document above any individual. Values such as justice, liberty, equality, fraternity,

institutional supremacy needs to be adhered. It is based on a "Social Contract" where citizens owe allegiance to the collective will be expressed through legal norms and encourages critical thinking, dissent, and the checking of power. It ensures that the State remains a "government of laws, and not of men." In a constitutional setup, the "Right" of the citizen is balanced by the "Duty" of the state to follow the law. Thus, the hero-leader cannot claim "Immunity" from the law, turning the citizens' rights into mere "No-Rights" or making them subject to his "Power" or whim.

Article 18 of the Constitution prohibits the **State** from conferring titles, other than military or academic distinctions. The Supreme Court in *Balaji Raghavan v. Union of India*^{xiv} clarified that Article 18 prevents the creation of a "nobility" or "privileged class." In Tamil politics screen-nicknames like Kalaignar, Amma, Thalapathy etc. are overcasting the 'Constitutional State'. In case of Vijay, the transition of "Thalapathy" from a cinematic title to a political one follows a long-standing tradition in Tamil Nadu. Since the title is not conferred by the Government of India or a foreign power, though it does not technically violate Article 18. **Should He Give It Up?** If Vijay wishes to emphasize Constitutional Patriotism over his "Personality Worship," he might choose to drop that honorific to present himself as a 'First Servant' rather than a "Commander." Further convincing his Gen-Z followers that Tamil society needs to modernize politics moving away from grand titles to take shift toward policy-based politics rather than charisma-based politics, aligning with the "Equality" mandate of Article 14. As per 'John Rawls' 'To Rule is to Educate' and a leader has to be educationist, and Vijay needs to enhance his voters' education and constitutional wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above discussion, the author feels that; 1) personality worshipping in public sphere is not healthy, especially when holding constitutional office, here both person and his worshippers need to change and educate, 2) beyond certain personal and societal limits personality worshipping has negative factors and breeds antithesis to democratic values and 3) it is always good to worship Constitutional ideals in the written constitution.

In the long run, it is Constitution, State which have permanency, not the individual-immortal, as society progresses, literacy, education and the technology get advanced, WE THE PEOPLE need to take this indirect democracy to Direct democracy and then to Meritocracy.

ⁱ Article 12. The Constitution of India

ⁱⁱ Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary, 2008 USA, ISBN 0-517-21921-2

ⁱⁱⁱ Chakrabarti, D. (2019). "More than Leaders: The Systematic Practice of Cult Worship in Indian Politics." *Law School Policy Review*.

^{iv} South Asian Journal, 2009

^v Kishore, Voter Behaviour, 2025.

^{vi} Popan 'A Theory of Cult of Personality', 2013

^{vii} Tajfel 1972, PMC2507864

^{viii} Tirupati R & Kumar A (2025) Political communication of Dravidian Parties in Tamil Nadu. ISEC Working Papers.

^{ix} 'Madurai Formula Films: Caste Pride and Politics in Tamil Cinema' (2009) South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal (Samaj)

^x May 4 & 5 2026, Hindustan Times and Times of India.

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- ^{xi} *Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Secretariat* – Official records of Chief Ministers and MLA terms
^{xii} Rajendra Sharma & Rachana Sharma: *Social Psychology*, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (p) Ltd, ND,2013
^{xiii} AIR 1975 SC 2299
^{xiv} AIR 1996 SC 770



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