

Cinema of the Eighties

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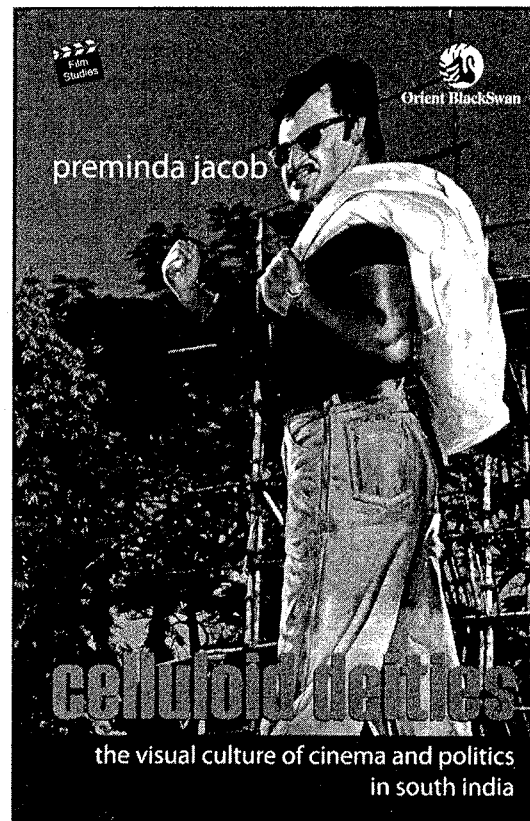
CELLULOID DEITIES: THE VISUAL CULTURE OF CINEMA AND POLITICS IN SOUTH INDIA

By Preminda Jacob

Orient BlackSwan, 2010, pp. 304, ₹365.00

The city of Chennai was remembered until the early 2000s for its huge banners lining most of the arterial roads. Huge hand painted film hoardings battled for prominence with equally massive ads for consumer products. And then suddenly the denizens of Chennai felt that these hoardings were not really aesthetic and were also a great source of distraction for motorists. The rise in road accidents was placed especially on the cinema banners and not on poor road traffic management or the sudden increase in car sales. The colossal film hoardings were the city's 'Satans' and had to be exorcised immediately. The wrath was so strong that they actually disappeared in a jiffy although accidents and fatalities kept increasing exponentially on the Chennai roads. Preminda Jacob chooses to call these hoardings 'Celluloid Deities' and the book has all the ingredients to inspire a young doctoral student in the USA to commence work on another thesis about Indian cinema. There is no doubt that this book is written almost exclusively for the South Asian Studies departments sprinkled over a variety of colleges in North America with a perfect combination of quotes from the venerable Roland Barthes and conversations with the subaltern painters in the painting studios of Chennai. The book talks about a time which is dead and gone; the cinema of the late 80s which survives only as music video clips and FM radio songs; and with opinions of Indian film studies scholars who are completely removed from the harsh realities of film production in India and poster painters. In her attempt to cover as many aspects of Indian film studies Ms Jacobs briefly touches upon melodrama, Dravidian Politics, Fan clubs, studio systems, the economics of production and exhibition centers etc. I wonder if it was necessary at all.

Jacob's descriptions of the various hoardings are very vivid. Describing a hoarding of actor Vijayshanti she writes, 'And there was an unusual twist to her body, as if in the process of her retreat, something had caused her to turn her upper torso toward the viewer and direct her gaze upward to some person at a higher level. The twisted portion of her body succeeded in emphasizing her hips and breasts, while her upward gaze emphasized her long hair sleekly knotted at the nape of her neck'. The most significant chapter in the book is the seventh one dealing with the idea of 'Darshan' and the idea of the syncretic gaze. In fact that chapter should have been the whole book because it would have motivated Jacob to wander into the interiors of Tamil Nadu to live with the amazing world perception of the average Tamilian and see how Tamil cinema coalesces with their pantheistic visual and performative cultures. The celluloid deities become part of the ubiquitous temple processions as they merge with cacophonous harmony of the devotees accompanying a variety of 'utsav murthies' (idols for public display) around the temple or church precincts. Yet again, if they were truly the celluloid deities of the Tamil people, why were they so unceremoniously banned throughout Tamil Nadu and thereby bringing so many painters to the streets? Any other modern urban culture would have capitalized on this unique sales proposition and brought international recognition to these craftsmen. One look at Singapore and Malaysia's endorsement of their equally gaudy cultural spectacles will explain a proven strategy. The fact that the influential decision makers in Tamil Nadu had nothing but contempt for this cinema culture which they regarded as vulgar, indecent and even hazardous proves that they were never seen by them as 'Deities'. This contradiction in whose 'Darshan' we are referring to could have been the primary focus of this book and helped the readers generate a debate. E.g., the ministerial beauracracy in the health department now wants all films to ban actors smoking and drinking or keep displaying statutory warnings on the screen since they are convinced that it is the



satanic influence of cinema which motivates the people to take up such 'evil' products which are, however available, legally in plenty and their sales even contribute in substantial ways to the government's exchequer. Are Tamil films empowered by 'Celluloid Deities or Satans'?

I would have loved to see more comparative studies of temple iconography, both mythical and sculptural, with the various ways that these painters went about deconstructing their methods to do these giant hoardings. The fact that they executed these works

with such ease speaks a lot about a pre-existent visual style and their graphic nature. A comparative study of the colour schemes that adorn the temple deities and the colours manifested in the posters would have illuminated this discourse further. Her chapter on the 'Political Cutout' is an interesting juxtaposition. In this section she analyses how the same political parties running the government have a completely different perception when displaying massive hoardings of their political strength in the post MGR era. There is no doubt that the political leverage of Tamil cinema after the Emergency and the death of MGR has actually become problematic for whichever Dravidian party comes to power. And this definitely has a major impact on how the perceived significance of the big banners play on the minds of the audience. The celluloid deities have actually become satanic for the ruling parties. In this context it is interesting to see how Jacobs reveals the way Jayalalitha blatantly deifies herself by having her face replace the image of the Madonna with baby Christ in arms. 'Jayalalitha is a Raphaelesque Madonna clad in a flowing pink gown and blue robe. Crowned as the queen of heaven with the blue surface of the earth as her pedestal, she grasps the scepter of royalty in one hand while supporting the Christ Child on the other arm'. How does the governing system become so ambivalent when it comes to managing their image as 'Political Deities' but treats the celluloid narrative as counter-cultural and satanic? Political banners and hoardings continue to deface the landscape but they are not supposedly a traffic hazard! How can the Tamil politician be so Janus-faced when it comes to perception about political control as opposed to their seductive celluloid images?

The strength of Jacob's book is the description of the mundane realities that occupy the daily routines of the various artists in Swamy or Jayaram Arts. I have known some of them personally and even introduced them to some museum and film festival curators from the UK and US who wanted to bring them over to showcase their amazing craftsmanship to the art lovers in their countries. Most of the enquiries and promises were duds as they were unable to convince their bosses about saleability of such a demo. Probably it was not orientalist enough!

Last but not the least, this book would have had the chance of being historically significant if only the illustrations had been in colour. It is so obvious that the original pictures are in colour seeing the high contrast nature of the B/W pictures in the book. I don't understand how this very simple yet significant point missed the publishers. Were the publishers also seeing this craft and their craftsmen with prejudiced eyes like all others?

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