

## “A Leader for All Song”

### *Making a Dravidian Voice*

In May of 2013, throngs of people, from politicians and film industry personalities to vegetable sellers, housewives, and rickshaw drivers, gathered in the streets of Chennai and belted out songs in an outpouring of grief at the death of the renowned and prolific playback singer T. M. Soundararajan (1923–2013). The Tamil newspaper *Tinatanti* ran a banner headline and devoted the first three pages to news of Soundararajan’s passing, featuring condolences from politicians and film personalities. The extraordinary performative power of his voice, one article suggested, was such that hearing it could make “a coward turn brave, a sannyasi feel the pangs of desire, a heart of stone melt” (*Tinatanti* May 26, 2013).

Rising in the mid-1950s from a varied group of male singers in a contested field of vocal masculinity, TMS, as he was known, would become the reigning male singing voice in Tamil cinema for nearly three decades, from the early 1950s to the early 1980s. His dominance has been unmatched by any other male singer in Tamil cinema since, and it is without parallel in other Indian film industries. Remarkably, TMS served as the sole singing voice for both rival hero-actors Sivaji Ganesan and M. G. Ramachandran at the height of their careers. As these actors assumed a particular form of stardom that translated into political power in the later part of the 1960s, and as Tamil cinema began more and more to revolve around their stardom, TMS’s voice sounded a ubiquitous refrain, singing for them, as well as for many other male actors of the period. He was prized for his versatility, his ability to convey a variety of emotions through his singing, and his “manly” voice. In tributes paid after his death, TMS was spoken of as *Tamiḷukku perumai sērttavar*, the “one who brought pride to Tamil” (*Tinatanti*). Lyricist Vairamuthu described TMS’s voice as a *Tīrāvita kural*, a “Dravidian voice” (“TM Soundarajan [*sic*] Dies” 2013).

Such praise, tying a singer’s voice to ethnolinguistic identity and representation, suggests that although playback singing may have initially begun as a form of

experimentation with female voice-body relationships in the 1940s, it took on new meanings and significance when it became a male practice as well. This chapter uses the remarkable career of TMS to explore two sets of questions. The first concerns the ways in which the qualia of the voice itself were given meaning. How did this particular voice get endowed with the affective power to stand for Dravidian identity? To address this question, I examine how ideals of the masculine singing voice shifted between the 1930s, when singing actors were predominant, and the 1950s, when TMS began to find opportunity and fame as a playback singer. As I show, this shift involved a regimentation of vocal sound along strictly gendered lines, in contrast to the wider field of possibilities that had previously existed for the male voice. In the 1950s, leaving behind the varied and ornate vocal aesthetics of a generation of Tamil singing actors, and simultaneously rejecting the Bombay-influenced “Hindi” style, TMS would construct his own middle-range, nonvirtuostic style as a new masculine voice, a normative “everyman” style that would come to be enregistered through its constant use in films and its application to many different characters.

The second set of questions addresses the role of playback singing, and the new semiotic economy of voice and body, speech and song that it created, in constructing the storied political potency of Tamil cinema and its hero-stars. The speaking voices of the male stars of Tamil cinema from the 1950s onward were central to their stardom, but unlike the male singing stars of the 1940s, these actors did not sing. Instead, their singing voices were provided by male playback singers. What was the role of the singer in relation to the fame and cinepolitical power of these hero-stars? How is it that the rival star personae of M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) and Sivaji were able to be combined in TMS’s singing voice? The shift from singing actors to playback, of course, occurred alongside the rise of the new Dravidianist political dispensation. The full realization of Dravidianist political power depended on the divisions of labor that playback set up, not only between the onscreen body of the actor and the offscreen singing voice but, perhaps even more important, between the act of speaking (done by the actor) and the act of singing (done by the playback singer). Both of these became important, and complementary, facets of the project of creating a “Dravidian voice.”

TMS’s phenomenal popularity and the affective power that his voice achieved were also enabled by gender asymmetries that defined the institution of playback singing in the Tamil context. Whereas female voices were differentiated along lines of morality and respectability, as we saw in chapter 1, we will see in this chapter that for male singers the relevant criterion was that of ethnolinguistic belonging. The prominent female playback singers of TMS’s time sang in many languages, to the point that their own ethnolinguistic identity was often obscured and even became irrelevant as their careers progressed. For TMS, however, the process was different. He started as an unknown singer of Saurashtrian Brahmin background and fashioned himself into a “100 percent Tamil” singer who, reproducing the

masculine pattern of the hero-stars for whom he sang, was defined by his exclusive participation in the Tamil language film industry.

Even more fundamental was the fact that being a playback singer meant something different for men than it did for women. Playback singing enabled a form of public life and celebrity for men that was predicated on the male singer’s identification with the actor, in contrast to the female singer’s differentiation of herself from the actress. As we saw in chapter 1, in the 1940s, a borrowed voice for actresses was seen as a way to cover up their harsh or deficient voices, and consistent actress-singer matches were not particularly advocated because too close a connection to an actress could jeopardize a female singer’s respectable reputation. But the pleas that began to be made in the 1940s for *actors* to consistently use the same voice suggest that a borrowed voice could be seen as positively augmenting, indeed adding value to, the male star. As we will see, although TMS himself was not positioned to become a politician in the same way as Sivaji or MGR, his star text and the affective charge of his voice played a central role in consolidating their cinepolitical power.

#### ETHNOLINGUISTIC NATIONALISM AND CINEPOLITICS

Intertwined political and cultural developments in the Tamil context in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century provide a critical backdrop to my discussion in this chapter. The “discovery” of Tamil’s classicism and the emergence of the sacralized figure of “Mother Tamil” (Ramaswamy 1997; Lakshmi 1990), together with the Non-Brahmin Movement that mobilized the category “Dravidian” to describe Tamils as ethnically, culturally, and racially distinct from North Indian and Brahmin “Aryans” (Trautmann 2006), provided the basis for a new imaginary based on the idea of Tamil not just as a language but as an ethnolinguistic identity (Mitchell 2009). The assertion of regional identity in opposition to central dominance culminated in the rise to power and eventual electoral victory of a new political party, the DMK (Tirāvita Munneṟra Kaḷakam or Dravidian Progress Federation) in the late 1960s.

Developments in the domains of language, music, and cinema in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s—the years that TMS was rising to prominence as a singer—made this new imaginary palpable. As Bernard Bate has shown, the rise of the DMK to political power marked a larger communicative shift: a change in the way politicians spoke. DMK politicians developed a new oratorical style that became a powerful vehicle for their charismatic form of political campaigning. A kind of “spectacular literacy” (Bate 2009, 3), it used lexical, grammatical, and tropic elements from ancient Tamil to construct a voice for political leaders. It was described as *centamiḷ*, or “refined Tamil,” in contrast to *koccaittamiḷ*, the “vulgar” or “common” speech of the people. *Centamiḷ* was

used by DMK politicians not only to distinguish themselves from the Congress Party but also to signify a utopian return to Dravidian antiquity (Bate 2009, 17). With its numerous references to “Mother Tamil,” this new oratorical style figured language as essentially feminine, a beautiful and powerful object that needed to be guarded by the men who were its speakers.<sup>1</sup>

An equally important cultural development was the emergence of the Tamil Icai (Tamil music) movement. Launched in 1929, the movement initially was undertaken to redress the predominance of Telugu- and Sanskrit-language, rather than Tamil, compositions in classical Karnatic concerts (Subramaniam 2004; Weidman 2005). In the 1930s and 1940s, the Tamil Icai movement constructed itself as a voice for non-Brahmin interests in reclaiming a musical tradition that was perceived as having been taken over by Brahmins in the twentieth century. These appeals, however, did not find support in the Brahmin-dominated musical institutions of Madras, which stressed the importance of *nātam* (pure sound) over the understanding of words (Subramaniam 2007). Consequently, much of the creative energy of the Tamil Icai movement, and its appeal to emotional connection through language, found an outlet in Tamil film songs and film singers. In film songs, listeners were primed to hear and appreciate a singer’s diction, something perhaps akin to that quality that Roland Barthes famously called the “grain of the voice,” where melody brings out the voluptuousness of language’s sound-signifiers and the singer’s body is made present, or palpable, in the song (Barthes 1977). Cinema became the site where Tamil as an ethnolinguistic identity could be represented in song.

A third key development took place in the cinema of the 1950s–70s: the emergence of a particular kind of male stardom, which took the form of representation of constituencies. Scholars of South Indian cinema history have called this phenomenon—in which a virtual political community is forged between a star and his fan following—“cinepolitics” (Prasad 2014) or “cinematic populism” (Srinivas 2013). These concepts are meant to promote recognition of the cinema-politics link as a durable structure that generates specific forms of affect and political potential, bringing South Indian hero-actors such as M. G. Ramachandran in the Tamil context and N. T. Rama Rao in the Telugu context to political power, and positioning others such as Kannada star Rajkumar in readiness to assume it. Prasad suggests that crucial to the emergence of full-blown cinepolitics was a combination of political conditions (involving the reorganization of states along linguistic lines and the assertion of regional identity and autonomy) and shifts within the narrative structure of the South Indian cinema industries (particularly the turn from mythological to “social” subjects and the increasing dominance of the hero-protagonist over all other characters).<sup>2</sup>

An adequate explanation of the cinepolitical phenomenon, as both Prasad and Srinivas suggest, cannot be confined simply to a reading of the films themselves. Rather, it requires attention to the way the star’s persona exceeded, and

transcended, his role in any particular film (Prasad 2014, 57). Most crucial in this respect was the hero's assumption of a representative position: *speaking for* Tamil ethnolinguistic identity, articulating the political identity and will of the Tamils.<sup>3</sup> The hero did this partly by protecting those things that were Tamil or that were taken to stand for the purity of Tamil culture—language and women—both in his onscreen roles and in his offscreen life. But, most important, the hero could not give himself to languages other than his declared mother tongue. Linguistic exclusivity was central to the persona of the hero-star even as major female stars of the era appeared in all South Indian languages, as well as sometimes Hindi. As Prasad suggests, while female stars functioned as “exchangeable objects,” “male stars were to commit themselves to exclusive linguistic representation, and thereby to the elaboration of a national identity” (106).

The exclusivity of the new generation of hero-stars extended to another realm as well, one that Srinivas and Prasad do not consider but is central to my argument here. That is, unlike the male stars of the 1930s and 1940s, the stars who emerged in the 1950s acted and spoke but did not sing (or dance, for that matter). The playback system afforded a focus on the male actor's speaking voice by delegating singing to playback singers. Assigning speaking and singing to two separate people, it accentuated the distinct forms of address that each entailed, differentiated by the type of language they used, as well as by their production format (Goffman 1981). The hero-star's speech addressed the people as “Tamil people” and invoked collectivities such as “society” or “nāṭu” using *mēṭaittamiḷ*, the high-flown, classicized register of political oratory. But his singing constituted a different register, one that markedly did not use the refined literary speech of political oratory or other signs of classicism but was rather meant to evoke the “common” speech and shared “folk” song of the people.<sup>4</sup> Combined with visuals of his face, the hero's speech became a sign of interiority and of an “articulate, agentive self,” while song—even before playback's division of labor made it literally true—was understood as shared aural public culture originating from a source outside the hero's self (Krishnan 2014, 227–28).

#### CONTESTING VOCAL MASCULINITY

A contested field of vocal masculinity took shape in the first half of the twentieth century, as earlier traditions of stage, drama, and devotional singing were absorbed into the new medial context of cinema and as Tamil cinema worked to differentiate itself from Bombay cinema. In this section, I trace the ways the male voice came to be defined and differentiated, particularly in the two decades between the advent of sound in cinema and TMS's rise to popularity in the early 1950s. In this period, a salient and enduring opposition emerged between so-called Tamil singers and so-called Hindi singers, even as the *qualia* representing “Tamil” vocal masculinity were continually shifting.

As Stephen Hughes has noted, the category of “Tamil cinema” was not self-evident or given when cinema began to include sound in the early 1930s. Before the Dravidian political paradigm made the hero’s *speech* the locus of Tamil identity in the 1950s, it was in relation to *music*—particularly the male singing voice—that the issue of the Tamilness of Tamil cinema was debated (Hughes 2010, 223–25). Within this context, being categorized as a Tamil singer had to do not only with singing in Tamil, but also with the quality and presentation of one’s voice. Two different styles of male singing were classified as Tamil during this time. One was the recitatorial tradition of the *ōṭuvārs*, specialist singer-reciters traditionally employed by Siva temples in the Tamil region to chant the *Tevāram*, a set of sixth- and seventh-century Tamil texts that form the basis of Tamil Saivism (Peterson 1989, 51–75). *Ōṭuvār* vocal tradition centered on the singing of verses in strict rhythmic adherence to their metrical form, as well as a more improvisatory and interpretive style known as *viruttam* (Peterson 1989, 61–67). In the early years of Tamil cinema, this vocal tradition was represented by M. M. Dhandapani Desikar (1908–72), himself from a long lineage of *ōṭuvār* singers, who, after achieving fame in devotional performance contexts, played the lead role in *Pattinathar* (1936), a film about a fifteenth-century Saivite poet-saint.<sup>5</sup> As Hughes has suggested, beyond the story itself the film was intended to evoke a “pre-colonial Saivite devotional past in a musical style uncontaminated by Hindustani or European influences” (Hughes 2010, 225).

Competing with this aesthetic was another more virtuosic style of male singing associated with stage dramas. It was characterized by high pitch (necessary to make oneself heard in a premicrophone context), crisp articulation of words, and virtuosity in quick melodic runs known as *brigas*, a capacity honed by these singers’ training in Karnatic classical music. The undisputed early master of this vocal style was S. G. Kittappa, whose rapid rise to fame when he was still a boy and early death at the age of twenty-eight in 1933 left an ideal to be emulated by male singers up to the 1950s. Kittappa embodied and drew together the two most prominent contexts for generating male stardom in his day: the world of boys’ company drama artists and the world of competitive and highly trained *sangita vidwans*. Kittappa was known for his strikingly high voice and power of projection. On the drama stage, he sang with K. B. Sunderambal, who had searched for a male singer whose voice could match her own in pitch, timbre, and power.<sup>6</sup> Though he did not live to make the transition to cinema, Kittappa’s voice became an ideal for subsequent male singers.

Kittappa’s slightly younger contemporary M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavatar (1910–59; known as MKT) would transform this virtuosic style in key ways. Born into a Brahmin family of jewelry makers in Tanjavur, the young MKT developed an interest in drama and regarded Kittappa as his role model. He was eventually discovered by a talent scout for drama troupes and began acting in stage dramas. He made his

first film, *Pavalakkodi*, which was based on a stage drama in which he had acted, in 1934 and thereafter starred in a string of successful films through the mid-1940s.

MKT developed a distinctive form of stardom based on his voice and persona, coming to be known simply as “Bhagavatar,” an honorific title appended to the names of many male singers of the time that evoked the idealized persona of the singer as devotee.<sup>7</sup> Like Kittappa’s, MKT’s voice was prized because it could match those of his female costars. His voice was described as having “the sweetness and pitch of a female voice with the strength and majesty of a male voice” (Balakrishnan 2010, 139). But he departed from Kittappa’s style, becoming known more for his sensuous melody than for rhythmic feats or recitation of Tamil verse, of which his contemporary singer Dhandapani Desikar was a master. The journalist and critic Kalki Krishnamurthy, reviewing the lineup of singers at the Chidambaram music conference in 1941, wrote that “after listening to the majestic voice of Desikar, it was initially a little difficult for Bhagavather’s [*sic*] fine melodious voice to appeal. Only after ten minutes did the sweetness of Bhagavather’s voice succeed in appealing. . . . There was in fact no need for him to sing. All that the voice had to do was to blend with the tambura sruti and keep floating, and we could keep listening forever” (quoted in Balakrishnan 2010, 141).

All the descriptive terms that Kalki used in this passage—*fine*, *melodious*, *sweetness*—were more commonly used to describe female singers and were meant to differentiate him from other male singers who had, up to this point, defined male singing virtuosity, whether through the rhythmic and melodic intricacies of Karnatic music or through the *ōṭuvārs*’ tradition of Tamil recitation.

In other respects, as well, MKT’s distinguishing characteristics aligned him with the stereotypically feminine. He paid a great deal of attention to his appearance, and his physical beauty was part of his allure. His “golden” complexion was praised as much as his “golden” voice. He sported a distinctive hairstyle, wearing his hair long at the back of his head, a style that came to be known as the “Bhagavatar crop” as it became a fad for young men. In his stage and screen roles, MKT was cast as a romantic lead. His roles were highly emotional; in several films, he played the role of a debauchee who eventually reforms, renounces worldly pleasures, and becomes a devotee. Reviews in cinema magazines of the time lamented the fact that most of the time in these films was given to depicting “vulgar” scenes of the hero’s descent into immoral pleasures rather than his reformation as a devotee, but it was precisely this part of the story that served as a star vehicle for MKT, providing sequences where his physical and vocal beauty could be aestheticized and made the subject of the scene.

The field of cinematic vocal masculinity at this time made room for contrasting aesthetics. These were inflected both by gender politics and by the caste divisions between Brahmins and *Vēḷāḷars* that were becoming amplified in the parallel domain of classicized music and dance.<sup>8</sup> Coexisting and competing with

the feminine sensuousness of MKT's voice and persona was the more muscular masculinity of his contemporary P. U. Chinnappa, who earned a reputation for being both a capable singer and an "action hero" in the 1940s. Chinnappa, who came from a lineage of drama actors in a non-Brahmin Vēḷāḷar family in Pudukottai, had trained in martial arts and performed his own stunts. He was praised for his manly physique, acting, and "natural" way of speaking dialogues, as well as for his "feelingful," if not virtuosic, singing (Vamanan 1999, 37–51; *Kuṇṭūci* 1949, 24–34). His association with "action" was emphasized in *Uttama puttiran* (1940), in which he acted in the first double role of Tamil cinema, playing both the corrupt king and the revolutionary who overthrows him (Eswaran Pillai 2015, 43–57). Unlike Chinnappa, who was praised for his clear pronunciation when speaking, MKT was not considered much of an actor; his beautiful appearance and voice were praised, but his acting was often reviewed negatively (Balakrishnan 2010, 166).

#### THE DECLINE OF THE SINGING STAR

By the 1940s, a widening ideological gulf separated the worlds of classical Karnatic music and popular cinema. Karnatic music was increasingly being redefined by a cultural elite who privileged the intellectual exposition of ragas, conceived as "pure" music, over supposedly "hybrid" musico-lingual genres like the *viruttams* (devotional verses) and songs that were sung in films.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, within the cinema world, an ideologically elaborated opposition between "Karnatic music" and "Hindi tunes" emerged, a newer iteration of the older Tamil/Hindi divide. The phrase "Hindi tunes" generally referred to South Indian music directors' adoption and adaptation of song tunes, influenced by folk, Western, and Latin styles, being composed by Bombay music directors like S. D. Burman. Hindi tunes also came to be associated, in the 1940s, with the microphone-dependent style of playback singers in the Hindi film industry, exemplified by the lower-pitched, lilting voices of Hindi film singers such as K. L. Saigal, Manna Dey, and G. M. Durrani.<sup>10</sup> The contrast between Karnatic music and Hindi tunes thus encapsulated a series of value-laden oppositions: music based on ragas and the principles of South Indian classical music versus hybrid popular music; the singing actor's unity of voice and body versus the fragmentation of actor's body and "ghost" singer's voice; the high-pitched, projected, carefully enunciated, "chaste" voice of singing actors that embodied Tamil masculine heroism versus the soft, romantic voices of Hindi singers.<sup>11</sup>

Adding to these competing pressures on the male voice was the increased value beginning to be accorded to "actors" over sangita vidwans by the late 1940s. The unification of body and singing voice encapsulated in the "Bhagavatar" persona had to be deliberately shed by a new generation of hero-actors who came up in the 1950s, including Tamil actors Sivaji Ganesan and M. G. Ramachandran, Kannada actor Rajkumar, and Telugu actor N. T. Rama Rao (Prasad 2014, 95, 123–25).

Male singers also had to work to shed the Bhagavata image and its associated sound to get opportunities as playback singers. The first male playback singers in Tamil films—including M. M. Mariyappa and Trichy Loganathan, who went directly from singing on the stage to singing playback in the late 1940s, as well as C. S. Jayaraman and V. N. Sundaram, who went from boys’ companies to cinema acting in the mid-1930s and switched to singing playback in the early 1950s—had to lay aside their extensive Karnatic music training and the voice culture they had developed onstage. Though advertisements for the early films Jayaraman acted in mentioned him as “Kittappa’s avatar,” his style later changed from high-pitched belting to a lower-pitched voice suited to the microphone (Vamanan 1999, 83–86). And Sundaram, who was used to bringing out *raga bhava* (the emotion and distinctive character of particular ragas) in his singing, had to make an effort to sing in a lighter style (Vamanan 1999, 105).<sup>12</sup>

TMS entered this field of contested vocal masculinity as an unknown singer in the mid-1940s. Although he would eventually leave behind his Karnatic music training and successfully mediate between the competing ideals of Tamil and Hindi styles, he struggled initially for recognition. Born in 1923 into a Saurashtrian family in Madurai, the young Soundararajan studied in a Saurashtrian elementary school and, at the wish of his father, Meenakshi Iyengar, the chief priest of the Varadaraja Perumal temple, also had classes in Sanskrit and the Vedas.<sup>13</sup> He would accompany his father in singing bhajans and providing background music for hari-katha performances in the temple (Vamanan 2002, 33–36). He also watched stage dramas and films, and like many other young men of the time, he became a fan of M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavata. In 1945, he gave his *araṅkēṛram* (*arangetram*, or debut performance) at Satguru Sangeet Samajam, the major institution of Karnatic music in Madurai. At the same time, he earned some money from singing bhajans in Madurai’s many *bhajanai maṭhams*, spaces for devotional musical performance (Vamanan 2002, 68–71). These also provided a venue where Soundararajan could sing Bhagavata songs for an audience.

In that same year, 1945, realizing that he couldn’t make a living as a vidwan singing bhajans and the occasional concert, Soundararajan sought opportunity in the field of cinema. Through a friend, he was able to get an invitation to Royal Talkies, a studio operating in Coimbatore. Before leaving, he cut his hair, which he had worn in a topknot in the style of Hindu priests, thinking this change necessary before he entered the world of cinema. And, since for several years he had already been a devotee of Murugan, the Tamil god in the Saivite tradition, he changed the Vaishnavite *nāmam* on his forehead, the Y-shaped caste mark that his father and grandfather had worn, to the horizontal lines of *vibuti* (ash) that signify Saivism (Vamanan 2002, 77–83). These were important moments of self-fashioning through which Soundararajan shed both his Brahmanical image and his Saurashtrian heritage, with its connection to North India, making himself at once “modern” and also sufficiently “Tamil.”<sup>14</sup>

## STRUGGLING FOR RECOGNITION

Through the late 1940s and early 1950s, Soundararajan struggled to get opportunities and recognition in the film world. At Central Studios in Coimbatore, he was able to get a role singing for the adult Krishna in *Krishna vijayam* (1946). But although he emulated MKT's singing style, his voice was naturally lower-pitched and didn't have the feminine aspect (*peṇ kalanta kural*) of MKT's voice. When he adjusted the pitch of a song in *Krishna vijayam* to a lower register, the sound technicians grumbled that it "didn't sound like Bhagavatar." Soundararajan was forced to rerecord the song in postproduction after the whole movie had been shot, raising his basic pitch by three whole steps (Vamanan 2002, 106). In addition, unlike MKT, Soundararajan was not able to sing brigas, the fast melismatic passages that marked a singer's virtuosity. This earned him more negative comments and kept him relegated to singing side roles.

In the late 1940s, Soundararajan went to Salem at the invitation of Modern Theatres, where he continued to struggle for recognition. He had thought that he would be selected to sing for the rising star M. G. Ramachandran in *Mandirikumari* (1950) but was instead hired to sing for a peasant character. In a subsequent MGR film, he lost out to Trichy Loganathan, who was chosen to sing for MGR. Soundararajan's voice was thought to have a certain *piciru* (roughness) that kept it confined to characters of low social standing. Unable to get singing roles for heroes, he was confined to beggar and peasant roles. He even acted in the film *Devaki* (1951) as a poor beggar asking for justice (Vamanan 2002, 111–16). The nonvirtuosic sound of his voice apparently made it seem suited to such "songs of conscience."

In the early 1950s, Soundararajan also found himself competing with a trio of singers from Andhra who were then coming into prominence in Tamil cinema. They sang in a lower register, in voices calibrated to the microphone, influenced more by male singers like Mohammed Rafi, Kishore Kumar, and Mukesh, who were dominating Hindi cinema in the same years, than by singers in Tamil cinema. These singers—Ghantasala (1922–74), A. M. Rajah (1929–89), and P. B. Sreenivas (1930–2013)—had not trained on the drama stage as boys and were not trained in Karnatic music. They entered into singing playback directly after being recognized by radio and recording companies as gifted singers of Hindi film songs. In contrast to the Tamil style inherited from the *ōṭuvārs*, *sangita vidwans*, and *bhagavatars*, these singers cultivated a soft, slow, romantic style. This style came to be identified in Tamil cinema with the actor Gemini Ganesan, who, in contrast to the heroic action of MGR or the impassioned speechifying of Sivaji Ganesan, was known for his gentle, romantic roles. In the mid-1950s, as Gemini gained the title "Kātal Mannan" (king of love), A. M. Rajah came to be known as "Pāṭal Mannan" (king of song). P. B. Sreenivas, whose voice was even lower, sang soothing melodies and took over as the singer for Gemini Ganesan after Rajah's career in Tamil films waned. "He doesn't even need to sing," said the director S. S. Vasan of P. B. Sreenivas. "If he hums it's enough—it would melt a stone!" (Vamanan 1999, 489).<sup>15</sup> Sensing

that a Bhagavatar imitator wasn't what the industry wanted, Soundararajan tried for a time to lower his pitch and sing in this style.

After being laid off by Modern Theatres, Soundararajan went to Madras to seek opportunity. Although he had achieved a degree of recognition in Coimbatore and Salem, he had no contacts in Madras. Nevertheless, he managed to meet the music director K. V. Mahadevan, who encouraged him to go to AVM Studios. “They are looking for good male singers,” Mahadevan told him. “Now only Telugu singers that sing soft are available. They want someone who can sing *ganīr* [loudly, with force]” (Vamanan 2002, 138). Soundararajan went to sing for Sudarshan, the music director at AVM, and the owner himself, Meyappa Chettiar. Both commented on the likeness of Soundararajan's voice to Bhagavatar's but noted an extra *nāṭṭupura vācanai* (whiff of folk) in his voice, which they found to be an attractive element, distinguishing it from both the earlier “Bhagavatar” singers and the Hindi-style singers. Soundararajan was initially hired for comedy songs but soon started singing for the new hero-actors of the day.

#### A “100 PERCENT TAMIL” SINGER

Although in the early 1950s TMS had had to work hard to sound like MKT, by the latter part of the decade, tastes had changed. By the mid-1950s, TMS had become a solid vocal presence in Tamil films, pushing aside his competitors. Beginning in the 1950s and continuing for nearly a decade, TMS worked in close partnership with the music director G. Ramanathan, who composed his songs with TMS's vocal capacities in mind. In 1954, TMS sang his first song for hero-actor Sivaji Ganesan, and a year later he finally got his first chance to sing for MGR in the film *Kulebakavali* (1955).

TMS's voice occupied a middle register between those of his competitors: the Hindi-style singer P. B. Sreenivas and the classically trained Tamil singer Sirkali Govindarajan (who, though he sang for MGR in the early 1950s, would later be relegated to devotional roles). Both the low tones of Hindi-style singers and the high brilliant tones of Tamil devotional singers represented characters whose masculine prowess was somehow in doubt—compromised by romantic desire in the case of the former or by love/devotion to the divine in the case of the latter. Telugu music directors who worked on Tamil and dual-language films used TMS's voice when they wanted an *aṇmai taṭumpum kural* (a voice radiating/brimming with masculinity) in contrast to the *lālityam* or *saraḷamāna inimai* (flowing sweetness) of the male Hindi-style voices normally used in Telugu films (Vamanan 2002, 225–26). Rather than expressing desire for or beholdenness to others, TMS's voice came to be considered suitable for expressing singular strength and authority, befitting the new kind of singular, self-sufficient hero that MGR played onscreen (Prasad 2014).

In terms of style, too, TMS's voice occupied a felicitous middle ground, neither too influenced by Hindi singers nor carried away by the conventions of

classicized virtuosity. Although TMS retained the projected quality of voice that had been part of the singing actors' aesthetic, he did not reproduce their virtuosity in performing brigas. Disavowing his earlier training in Karnatic music, he maintained that his voice was a *kārve* (long note) voice rather than a briga voice, suited to lingering on plain notes, which he later described as a product of his own *iyarkaiyāna arivu* (natural knowledge).<sup>16</sup> Whereas in the 1930s and 1940s the virtuosic performance of brigas at a high pitch was a prized sonic embodiment of heroic masculinity, by the later 1950s TMS's unadorned "kārve" voice had come to signify masculine strength. During the recording of the famous song "Kāyāta kānakatē" for the remake of *Sri Valli*, TMS told the music director, G. Ramanathan, that he was concerned that his voice would not shine for audiences who had heard T. R. Mahalingam's briga-ful six-and-a-half-minute rendering of the song in the original movie from 1945. "No," said Ramanathan. "He has put it in a grand style with brigas. But *you* will sing it with a majestic [*kampīramāna*] *kārve*. You don't know the power of your own voice" (quoted in Vamanan 2002, 290).<sup>17</sup>

By emphasizing naturalness over virtuosic training, TMS tapped into a strong current of populism. Essential to the "everyman" persona that his voice projected was a perceived simplicity, a quality embodied in vocal style by an absence of brigas or ornaments. The ringing tones of TMS's unadorned *kārve* voice were often described with the word *veḷḷi* (ringing; literally, silvery or "metallic"). This timbral quality, along with the nonvirtuosity of the voice, was perceived as suitable for a genre of song that was coming into newfound prominence. Initially called *manasātci pāṭalkaḷ* (songs of conscience), these songs pointed out the injustices and suffering in the world and were often sung by auxiliary male characters: beggars, peasants, and *sādhus*.<sup>18</sup> In the 1960s, as hero-stars rather than secondary characters began to sing them, these songs would solidify into a genre—*tattuva pāṭalkaḷ* (philosophical songs)—that presented the secular, rationalist outlook of the hero. The articulation of *tattuvam* (philosophy) through *tattuva pāṭalkaḷ*, authored by lyricists who were prominent, well-known personalities, was a key way in which the Dravidian movement inserted itself into film songs. These songs came to be almost exclusively animated by TMS's singing voice.

*Tattuva pāṭalkaḷ* were a distinctly gendered form, defined aurally by the solo, unadorned male voice singing a simple vocal line that was presented as a forthright expression of the hero's thoughts and his essential humanity.<sup>19</sup> Minimalist melodic lines reinforced the idea of spontaneity and naturalness. For example, in "Vanta nāḷ mutal" (from *Bhavamanippu* 1961), many lines of the song use only alternation between two unadorned notes; the only background music is the hero's own whistling and humming. The reverberant sound quality of the voice in these songs gave the impression of a singular, unmediated voice ringing forth in a public space, an impression that was reinforced visually by picturizations that located the hero in public, open spaces, often alone (common in Sivaji songs) or as a singular man among a crowd of people (common in MGR songs).

Tattuva pāṭalkaḷ addressed questions of life, death, fate, and injustice, locating the characters who sang them as *Tamilans*—defined by ethnolinguistic identity but outside the ties of kin, caste, or religious community—who interpellated an audience of similarly unspecified members of a general Tamil public, unlike *bhakti* songs or love songs, which located the singer/character within spiritual or emotional relationships. Tattuva pāṭalkaḷ presented impersonal, seemingly universal questions and truths, making use of Tamil’s grammatical capacity to construct sentences without stated subjects. The lyrics of these songs never used the simple first-person pronoun *nān*; rather, they used *nām* (inclusive “we”): a pronoun that includes the speaker and the addressee and that, by extension, establishes their membership in a common collectivity—for instance, as in the song “Pōnāl pōkaṭṭum pōṭā” (sung by Sivaji’s character in *Palum pazhamum* 1961).

pōnāl pōkaṭṭum pōṭā	whatever happens, let it go
inta pūmiyil nilaiyai vāḷntavar yāraṭā	who is the creator of the situation on this earth?
vantatu teriyum pōvatu eṅkē	we know those who come but where they go
vācal <b>namakkē</b> teriyātu . . .	<b>you and I</b> have no idea . . .
Vantavar ellām taṅkiviṭṭāl	if everyone who came stayed
inta maṅṅil <b>namakkē</b> iṭam etu	where on earth would the place for <b>you and me</b> be?
vāḷlkai enpatu viyāparam	life is a business
varum jananam enpatu varavāku	the next generation will be the profit
atil maranam enpatu selavāku	their deaths will be the expenditure

Translatable as “you and I,” the use of *nām* creates a distinctive form of address that transcends the diegesis, speaking to the film’s audiences as much as to the characters within the story. It is a generalized address to equals that performatively brings into being a collectivity or public for whom the hero speaks. As such, it constitutes a form of voicing that was also distinctly gendered; female singers could not sing “*nām*” to an unknown mass audience or assume the status of being able to speak for a generalized public.<sup>20</sup>

MGR’s tattuva pāṭals tended toward political awakening and the articulation of Tamil/Dravidian identity. They had a didactic, hortatory quality and were often addressed within the diegesis to male comrades. For instance, “Tūṅkātē tampi tūṅkātē” (Don’t sleep, younger brother) (*Nadodi mannan* 1958) advises comrades to wake up and shed their laziness, to not be like those who simply complain of bad luck. In “Accam enpatu maṭamaiyaṭā” (from *Mannadi mannan* 1960), MGR’s character attaches the informal particle *ṭā* to the end of the words as if the singer is addressing a younger brother or male friend and by extension a general community of Tamils who can similarly be addressed informally as younger brothers. Otherwise, there are no pronouns to deictically anchor the words; they are simply free-floating, aphoristic pronouncements in tenseless noun-noun formation, a “nomic”

calibration that links the singular moment of utterance to timeless, universal truths (Silverstein 1993, 52).

accam enpatu maṭamaiyaṭā	fear [is] foolishness
añcāmai tirāvitar uṭamaiyaṭā	bravery [is] the wealth of the Dravidians
āṟilum sāvu nūṟṟilum sāvu	one may die at sixty or one hundred
tāyakam kāpāṟru kaṭamaiyaṭā	to protect the motherland [is] one's duty

Beginning with a slow, viruttam-like rendition of this refrain that hits its high note on *tirāvitar*, the song also exemplified TMS's selective use of high pitch. Unlike the bhagavata singers who were confined to high registers, TMS was vocally mobile, comfortable in a middle range but able to go higher. Within this context, high pitch was resignified, no longer suggesting devotional fervor or classical virtuosity but rather masculine assertiveness and political will. Ascending into a higher register intensified the importance of the lyrics. It became a hallmark of TMS's style for songs in which the hero was asserting his will and power.<sup>21</sup> What had simply been the unmarked, default mode of singing for the Tamil bhagavatas became a selectively used, and therefore highly charged, affectively powerful signifier of "Tamilness."

These "philosophical" songs were written to stand alone, to be detachable from the film; the songs were considered to articulate timeless, secular-rational, universal truths that did not need to be connected to their picturization or to the films' stories. In a sense, then, such songs belonged as much to the author and animator behind the screen as to the body onscreen. The placement of the songs at or near the beginning of the films also contributed to the sense of their being not really "in," but apart from and larger than, the film. "Accam enpatu maṭamaiyaṭā," for instance, came on as the credits for *Mannadi mannan* rolled, with TMS's voice sounding even before MGR's image is seen on the screen.

The cumulative effect of all these aural, visual, and lyrical characteristics, as well as the sense of their separability from the film narrative, was to place *tattuva pāṭalkaḷ* in a different category from other songs and from "singing" as such. They broke from conventions of singing defined by classical virtuosity and the usual subject positions, bhakti or love, associated with classical and film songs until then. Thus, although these were indeed songs, they placed the singer/character in a subject position more akin to that of a speaker than a singer: one who, within the Dravidianist paradigm that had emerged in the 1950s, could represent Tamils in a political sense. In their aphoristic sparseness, they were a kind of sung companion to and contrast to the hero's lengthy monologues, the eloquent rebukes of societal injustice delivered in centamiḷ oratorical style that had become famous with Sivaji's courtroom performance in *Parasakti* (1952).<sup>22</sup>

Prior to TMS, the only singer who had approached the status of representing Tamilness was K. B. Sunderambal, but she did so by specializing: by conjuring a specific type that was a composite of mythical female characters such as the

poet-saint Avvaiyyar and Tamilttāy, the personified form of the Tamil language. TMS, in contrast, achieved his representative status by literally taking on the voices of both MGR’s heroic leaders and Sivaji’s everymen. Rather than specializing, he quite literally became the singing voice of nearly every male character in Tamil cinema. And, in turn, he came to be considered a “100 percent Tamil” singer. The fact that he had been born a Saurashtrian Brahmin and had grown up singing like a bhagavata was not an impediment to this. In fact, it was part of the appeal of his voice, for what mattered was precisely the transformation—the fact that he had been born something else and remade himself as Tamil.

### STAR POWER AND POLITICS

TMS was one of a fraternity of hero-stars, scriptwriters, lyricists, and music directors who rose together in Tamil cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. According to those who worked with him, TMS was relatively powerful in terms of the social relations among singers, stars, lyricists, and music directors. He was an authority in the studio and would show his impatience with less-accomplished singers. He assumed, and was granted, a high degree of authorial control over the songs he sang by music directors such as K. V. Mahadevan and M. S. Viswanathan and by lyricists, who sometimes changed lyrics to accommodate him (Vamanan 2002, 310, 337–38). In the late 1950s, he advocated successfully for playback singers to begin to receive awards, telling a producer, “remove my song and play the movie, then you’ll realize the value of it” (Vamanan 2002, 267–68). In his live stage shows, when fans asked for MGR or Sivaji songs, he would rebuff them, saying “they are my songs” (Vamanan 2002, 404–11).

TMS’s singing often assumed precedence over matters of casting, even when it came to the two big hero-stars (Vamanan 2002, 299). For the film *Rani Lalitangi* (1957), the music director, G. Ramanathan, composed a Karnatic music-based song and recorded TMS singing it. When Ramanathan played the song for MGR, who was supposed to be the star of the film, MGR rejected it, but rather than change the song, Ramanathan got Sivaji to play the hero instead (Vamanan 2002, 218–19). And by the early 1960s, neither MGR nor Sivaji would accept any other male singer besides TMS. As Vamanan’s biography of TMS recounts, “For the 1963 film *Savash Meena*, there was a song in Hindustani style with lots of brigas. K. V. Mahadevan and his assistant Pugalendi got Sirkali Govindarajan to sing it as his voice was suited to that. But Sivaji did not accept that. He said TMS had to sing it. But TMS[’s] voice is not suited to that, it is a kārve voice, they said. Sivaji did not listen. ‘Even if he sings off pitch TMS must sing for me,’ he said [*sruti sērāmal pāṭinālum enakku Soundararajan tān pāṭavēṅṅum*]” (Vamanan 2002, 299).

The extent of TMS’s status within the industry is clear from stories about his tensions with MGR, which reveal an intimate but highly conflicted relationship, made more tense by the fact that TMS was also singing for MGR’s main rival, Sivaji

Ganesan. In both the political culture of the DMK and the film studios, status and hierarchy were enacted through the idiom of siblingship, a fraternity of *aṅṅans* (older brothers) who should be treated reverentially, and *tampis* (younger brothers) who could be addressed informally and advised by elders (see also Lakshmi 1990). TMS was well-integrated into this milieu and invested in his status as an *aṅṅan*. As Vamanan recalled:

Stars like TMS and MGR expected everyone to fall at their feet and respectfully call them “*aṅṅan*” (older brother). TMS described an incident, in Vahini studio, where MGR was standing in the midst of three actresses. They were trying to get a role in his films. TMS came in, greeted MGR (respectfully, as “*aṅṅan*”) and MGR said, “*TMS sār. Uḷle pō, ivāṅkaḷai anupicciṭṭu varēn.*” (TMS sir. Go [sing. informal imperative] inside, I’ll finish with them and come.) TMS got insulted by this casual greeting, and held up his hands, saying, “*Inta kai tān vaṅaṅkiyatu*” (These are the hands which have always greeted you respectfully). Like that, a prestige issue was there between them. (N. Vamanan, personal communication, May 2013)

Even while singing for both MGR and Sivaji, TMS worked to construct a star text for himself that would be independent. After his tensions with MGR mounted, TMS turned to devotional music as a way to distance himself, recording albums of devotional songs with His Master’s Voice and building up his extrafilmic persona as a devotee of the Tamil god Murugan (Vamanan 2002, 339–40). At the height of his playback singing career, in the 1960s, TMS himself also starred and sang in two films that reinforced his devotional image: *Pattinathar* (1962), a remake of the 1936 film that had starred Dhandapani Desikar, the story of a millionaire who renounces his wealth and transforms into a saint; and *Arunagirinathar* (1964), the story of a debauchee who is saved and becomes a devotee of Murugan (see fig. 5).<sup>23</sup>

Even as a constant output of films like *Madurai veeran* (1956), *Nadodi mannan*, and *Mannadi mannan* cemented the association between DMK Party writers’ and speakers’ idolization of Tamil political dynasties of the past, MGR’s swashbuckling appearances onscreen, and the ringing tones of TMS’s voice, TMS himself refused to join the DMK. Outwardly, he said that he was unable to join any party that belittled the Hindu religion, but perhaps he also recognized that his power lay in appearing to transcend politics. When K. R. Ramaswamy, at the behest of Annadurai, came to ask TMS to join the DMK, he is reported to have said, “*Tan pāṭṭukku pāṭi varum enakku katciyāvatu oṅṅāvatu*” (While I am singing songs, there cannot be any kind of political party for me) (Vamanan 2002, 301). Singing for *both* MGR, who was assuming greater and greater power within the DMK and would eventually become chief minister, and Sivaji, who broke with the DMK and joined the Congress Party in 1961, was also a way for TMS to construct his own voice as above political affiliation.



FIGURE 5. T. M. Soundararajan dressed for his role in *Pattinathar* (1962). Photo from the collection of S. V. Jayababu.

## BODY AND VOICE

TMS came to be known for his ability to convey a variety of emotions through his singing, which he and others described as not simply singing but “acting with the voice.” He described, in an interview, how the singer must “join with the character” and act the song even before the actor does it (“TMS Speech,” part 2). In striking contrast to his female contemporaries, who, as we will see in the next chapter, stressed their own bodily, subjective, and emotional independence from the characters and actresses for whom they sang, TMS described his own process as “*uḷaittu pāṭuvatu*” (working hard to sing)—that is, having to take the song into his own *uḷlam* (insides/heart) and sing from there rather than from his lips (Vamanan 2002, 315).

TMS’s performances in films and onstage regularly blurred the boundary between singing and acting. The middling pitch range of his singing voice enabled him to easily switch to speaking within a song without breaking register. Speaking dialogue in the middle of a song became one of his specialties, as in the song “*Anta nāḷ ṅāpakam*” (the memory of that day), from the 1968 film *Uyarntha manidan*. During this sequence, the song alternates manically between singing, heightened speech, regular speech, and effects such as heavy breathing and laughing. The editing purposely made ambiguous where Sivaji’s voice left off and TMS’s started. TMS also assumed a degree of authorial control through these kinds of songs. Recalling another song in which dialogue was interspersed with the singing, he said, “No one even told me what to say in the dialogue. I just made it up myself” (“TMS Speech,” part 2).

TMS himself emphasized the singer’s role in creating the effect and power of the filmic image and action. In a 1967 article entitled “Pinnaniyin poruppu” [The playback singer’s responsibility], TMS wrote that “in the victory that the actor gets, there is a share for the playback singer.” Describing the famous scene in *Enga veettu pillai* (1965) where the brave Ilango (played by MGR) appears and whips the villain into submission, TMS wrote that “more than the hero’s speech, more than the strike of his whip, the courage-filled song ‘*Nān āṅai iṭṭāḷ*’ is what causes the people to clap” (*Pēcum Paṭam* 1967). The playback singer’s voice, more than the dialogue or the onscreen image, had the capacity to make people feel the hero’s courage:

Say, in a film, the hero, to save his country, to instill courage in his army, speaks to them, shouting with feeling. The courageous army advances. In the background, musical instruments roar. This flood of musical sound pours feeling into men’s hearts. But the roar is not enough. Words imbued with courage need to be heard in their ears. Look! The hero sings: “*Tāyakam nāmatu tāyakam . . .*” [Motherland, our motherland]. Belting this out, we will rise up in bravery. There is a special quality of bravery [*vīram*] in the word *Tamiḷan*. “Raising our heads we will show our courage bubbling up. Retreat!” These words give courage to the actors and quicken their pace. . . . The playback singer’s song will immerse the people in a flood of happiness; it will make them clap loudly. This is where the playback singer’s skill matters. (*Pēcum Paṭam* 1967)

Stressing the performative power of the playback singer’s voice, TMS highlighted its capacity not just to sing of bravery but to make characters, actors, and audiences all at once feel strong and brave. TMS suggested that the playback singer’s voice, in fact, did not just complete the effect of what was presented onscreen; it spoke directly to the actors in the profilmic moment of shooting the scene and to the audience watching the film, bringing them both to life. This was a form of presence that partook of and helped shape what was onscreen but also, crucially, exceeded the screen.

It was not simply the boundary between singing and acting but the very boundary between singer and actor themselves that was blurred. Beginning in the 1960s, TMS’s ability to match his voice to suit either Sivaji or MGR, despite the two actors’ markedly different voice qualities, was repeatedly acknowledged. TMS and the music directors who composed for him accomplished this in part by transposing the different qualities of each actor’s speech into differing singing styles. The high-pitched, nasal, slurred speech of MGR became a high-pitched, legato singing style, while the gravelly, bass voice of Sivaji, with its rhythmic and alliterative oratorical monologues, found its singing equivalent in TMS’s version of classical virtuosity or in the unadorned “philosophical” songs I discussed earlier. In addition to imitating their voices, though, it was TMS’s ability to anticipate each actor’s movements and facial expressions, even before they materialized on the screen, that enabled him to cultivate a “suitable voice for each,” as one magazine article said. “Because of his own skill as an actor, he knows how the actor will sing in a given scene, where he will move, and he will show this in his singing” (*Pēcum Paṭam* 1981, 68).

Unlike female singers who sought to dissociate their singing from the onscreen images of particular actresses, both TMS and those who wrote about him emphasized the bodily communication between actor and singer: “When acting, how Sivaji stands, that is how TMS stands singing in the studio” (*Pēcum Paṭam* 1981, 71). While TMS imitated Sivaji’s speaking voice, Sivaji’s body acted out the emotions and gestures anticipated in TMS’s singing voice. TMS described this as a remarkably intimate process of singer and actor inhabiting each other’s bodies: “There are some actors who will hear the song on the set and, just like speaking dialogue, simply move their lips. But Sivaji—he only acts after listening well to the song and understanding the scene. If I sing in my uppermost register [*uccastayi*], you will see the veins in his neck bulging out in the scene. Whatever changes happen in my body, he is such a genius actor that he can show it on screen” (*Pēcum Paṭam* 1981, 71–72).

Agency lay not in one or the other but in both together; it passed fluidly between them as they existed in a state of symbiotic copresence. The singer’s voice could bring the actor to life because, more than simply accompanying their images, TMS’s voice had in fact helped to create their power in the first place.

## DOUBLING AND STAR POWER

The normalization of playback meant that the new hero-star was a composite, made up of the actor who appeared and spoke in the film and the singer who provided his voice in the song sequences. To speak of “MGR” or “Sivaji” at the height of their stardom would, thus, not be to speak of the individuals themselves, for the hero in the era of cinepolitics is not simply a charismatic single individual. Prasad invites us to think of the onscreen body of the hero as a site of representation and identification—in other words, not the body of an individual but a body that accommodated and encompassed others. In this sense, it served as a site that could represent not only the hero’s own voice but that of the singer as well.<sup>24</sup>

As Neepa Majumdar has suggested, the institution of playback singing constitutes one of several strategies of “doubling” that serve to intensify the star’s presence and add to the value of a film (2009, 136). The matching of an idealized voice with the body of the star produces a composite, a better-than-life body that can only be achieved through the workings of technology. But, unlike the classic double role in which an actor plays two different characters whose attributes explore or represent different or contradictory elements of the same actor’s star text, playback singing introduces a second “star text” alongside that of the actor or actress.

The implications and affordances of this doubling, of course, were highly gendered. While actresses’ stardom existed outside the bounds of respectable womanhood, the female playback singer represented a “double” whose stardom was respectable because it did not depend on being seen onscreen. As Majumdar suggests, doubling solicits dynamics of identification and disavowal, allowing viewers to separate the good and supposedly authentic elements from the negative or disturbing elements of a star’s persona. The female singer’s respectability could be an object of positive identification while the actress’s compromised respectability, although perhaps an object of fascination, was something to be disavowed. The female singer’s respectability canceled out, or at least mitigated, the dubious moral status of the actress.

For actors and male singers, the relationship was fundamentally different. Rather than working at cross-purposes, the male playback singer’s star text could feed into that of the actor, and vice versa. Star status could accrue to both actor and singer through the combination of body and voice because they were understood to be working together rather than doing two fundamentally different things. The singer was almost like a proxy or prosthetic limb, doing for the hero-actor what he could not do himself, extending his “speaking for Tamil” into the realm of song.

Doubling is relevant to the career of TMS in another way as well. Double roles, in which a single actor plays two (or more) characters in a film, allow different aspects of a star’s persona to be displayed. By giving the star more screen time, and displaying his versatility, double roles intensify his presence, lending him a larger-than-life status (Majumdar 2009, 138). Although double roles had been a part of Tamil cinema since the early 1940s, they increased in popularity in the 1950s and

thereafter, as part of the logic of a star system in which star status was concentrated in a relatively few individuals.<sup>25</sup> The same logic worked to concentrate star status among just a few singers who became the chosen voices for the top acting stars, as well as for lesser-status actors. TMS's career, indeed his own star text, was dominated by perhaps the most spectacular and long-lasting "double role" of all: being the singing voice of rival hero-stars MGR and Sivaji Ganesan from the late 1950s on.

But showing an actor's or singer's versatility by giving him double or multiple roles also constitutes a form of regimentation, a narrowing of possibilities. As the actor or singer, through these multiple roles, becomes ubiquitous, he becomes the chosen, and perhaps the only imaginable, way of portraying such characters. "If it is Sivaji or MGR on screen, the voice must be TMS": so the logic goes. As I suggested in chapter 1, the introduction of playback singing, though it theoretically could have experimented with voice-body relationships in unconventional ways, actually led to a greater regimentation of voice-body relationships and gendered vocal sound in the 1950s. One sonic manifestation of this regimentation of gendered vocal sound was the separation in register audible from the mid-1950s on, with female voices moving generally upward in pitch and male voices moving downward. The ultimate realization of this kind of regimentation was the vocal domination of a very few playback singers by the early 1960s. This domination of the field was more extreme in the case of male singers than female singers. Female voices were divided between those of "good," morally licit characters and those of vamps, supported by a division of labor among female singers themselves, as chapters 3 and 4 will show. But for male voices, there was no such clear differentiation; the same male voice could, and often did, sing for diametrically opposed characters in a film. In the 1960s, TMS achieved a remarkable monopoly over male singing roles, cultivating a middle-range "everyman" kind of voice that quite literally became the voice of nearly every man.

#### BROUGHT TO LIFE BY THE VOICE

The formation I have been describing here—not just the outsourcing of singing but the outsourcing of singing to a single male voice—was not merely an incidental fact of industrial pressures or competition. Nor was it simply attributable to TMS's own personal strategizing. It was, rather, an industrial-aesthetic formation that emerged alongside the tight connection that developed between Tamil cinema and Dravidian politics in the 1950s and 1960s. TMS was fashioned into a "Tirāvita kural" by encompassing the different and rival screen representatives of Dravidian political power and Tamil ethnolinguistic identity—M. G. Ramachandran and Sivaji Ganesan—in his own singular voice.

The period from the early 1950s to the late 1970s—precisely the years of TMS's rise and dominance—was one of massive social transformation in South India.

During this time, the people of Tamil Nadu were brought to a new understanding of themselves as Tamils and as political subjects. As Rajan Kurai Krishnan has suggested, the rival hero-stars embodied the twin processes of individuation and the building of collective identity at the heart of this process of political subjectification. Their complementary opposition constituted the new political dispensation: “MGR was the transcendental signifier of Tamil sovereignty and Sivaji was the interiorized enunciatory subject. In order to constitute the modern political subject, they had to operate together as complementary forces” (Krishnan 2014, 239). Their rival personae constituted an “assemblage of power” (240) that was held together by TMS’s voice. The star power of MGR and Sivaji accrued to TMS, but crucially, it traveled both ways. TMS’s singular voice concentrated both of their personae; it worked to amplify, by combining, their star power and transferring it back to them and to others for whom he sang. In fact, TMS’s vocal presence—his clout as a member of the fraternity of hero-stars, scriptwriters, lyricists, and music directors who rose together in the 1950s and 1960s—depended on his not being identified with either MGR or Sivaji but with both.

The idea of a “Dravidian voice” is, of course, a retrospectively given title. No such construct or ideal yet existed in the 1950s and 1960s. What did come into being in these years, however, was a voice that claimed the middle space within a contested domain of vocal masculinity, populated by the already competing styles of the “chaste” Tamil singers, the bhagavatars, and the “soft” Hindi singers. Inhering in the perceived “Dravidianness” of TMS’s voice was a redefinition of vocal masculinity. As I have described, this redefinition happened at the level of pitch or register, as well as style. Both the high, strident voices of “Tamil” singers and the low, soft voices of the “Hindi” singers were equally rejected for being insufficiently masculine. TMS’s middle range was fashioned as normative, but it was also his flexibility (he could go low or high if needed) that enabled his voice to be heard as suitable for nearly any Tamil man. The plain, unadorned quality of TMS’s *kārve* voice was taken as the quintessential expression of masculine strength: a “man voice,” as TMS fans among my interlocutors put it.

This redefinition of vocal ideals worked—that is, it gained resonance and traction—because it was also a symbolic reassertion of masculinity, made in relation to the poetic conventions and performative realization of Dravidian political power. As Bernard Bate has shown, the Dravidianist political paradigm derived not only from the construction of Tamil language as a sacralized “mother” but from the performative space of oratory and other communicative practices where various gendered positions and orientations to classicism and Tamilness could be enacted and thereby produced (Bate 2009). Following Bate’s insight, we can see that TMS’s ability to voice the common man, embodied iconically in his unadorned *kārve* voice, was positioned in complementary opposition to both Karnatic classical singing and classicized centamil oratory, both in their own ways imbued with feminized signs of power and dominated, respectively, by Brahmin

and non-Brahmin elites. The plain, unadorned quality of TMS’s singing voice and its hint of *piciru* (roughness) evoked unspecified subaltern class and caste connotations that contrasted with the “spectacular literacy” cultivated by Dravidianist political orators (Bate 2009).<sup>26</sup> In this sense, it was a revival of imagery and tropes of masculine strength and bravery (*vīram*) that had been prominent in earlier decades of the Dravidian movement but that became overshadowed in the 1950s and 1960s by an emphasis on the capacity of male orators to produce feminized “chaste” literary speech (Rangaswamy 2004).<sup>27</sup> If, as Bate suggests, Dravidianist political orators fashioned a voice that was imagined to be suitable for leaders of high status speaking to the multitudes, TMS’s voice could be heard as representing the voice of the people: a Tirāvita kural.

The formal poetic similarity of TMS’s epithet—*pāṭakar tilakam* (the pride of singers)—to MGR’s *makkal tilakam* (pride of the people) and Sivaji’s *nāṭikar tilakam* (pride of actors) placed him in a class alongside the hero-stars. A tribute poem to TMS written in the early 2000s hailed him as “*Pāṭṭukku oru talaivar*” (a leader for all song), a title that echoes *puratci talaivar* (revolutionary leader), the title MGR was given after he became chief minister.<sup>28</sup> The word *talaivar*, with its strong connotation of political leadership, political representation, and fan following, places TMS firmly within the space of cinopolitics, despite the fact that he never became a politician in a literal sense (see fig. 6).<sup>29</sup>

In proximity to politics, but appearing to be outside of it, and using an affectively powerful modality—singing—that was constructed as a nonpolitical, “natural” act, TMS also exploited the ambiguity that playback singing’s division of labor created between the “I” of the onscreen character, the “I” of the actor, and the “I” of the offscreen, but nevertheless known and therefore present, singer. Many songs ceased to be only about the character or star, referring also to the singer himself. The song “*Pāṭṭum nānē pāvamum nānē*” (from *Tiruvilayadal* 1965) exemplifies the status and dominance TMS had achieved by the mid-1960s (see fig. 7). The song marshaled the technical capacities of cinema and the affordances of playback to present the singing voice as the life-force of the onscreen image. At the beginning of the song, Sivaji Ganesan, who has materialized as Lord Siva, awakens from slumber, literally brought to life by his own (that is, TMS’s) voice, which sings:

Pāṭṭum nānē pāvamum nānē	I am both the song and its expression
Pāṭṭum unnai nān pāṭāvaittēnē	I’m the one who has made you sing.

Though within the story, Siva is addressing a rival singer whom his devotee/disciple will defeat in competition, we can also understand TMS’s voice to be addressing Sivaji, quite literally directing his movements. The voice goes on to claim credit for all the life and movement on earth:

Acaiyum poṟulil icaiyum nānē	I am the music in moving things
Āṭum kalaiyil nāyakan nānē	I am the hero in the art of dance

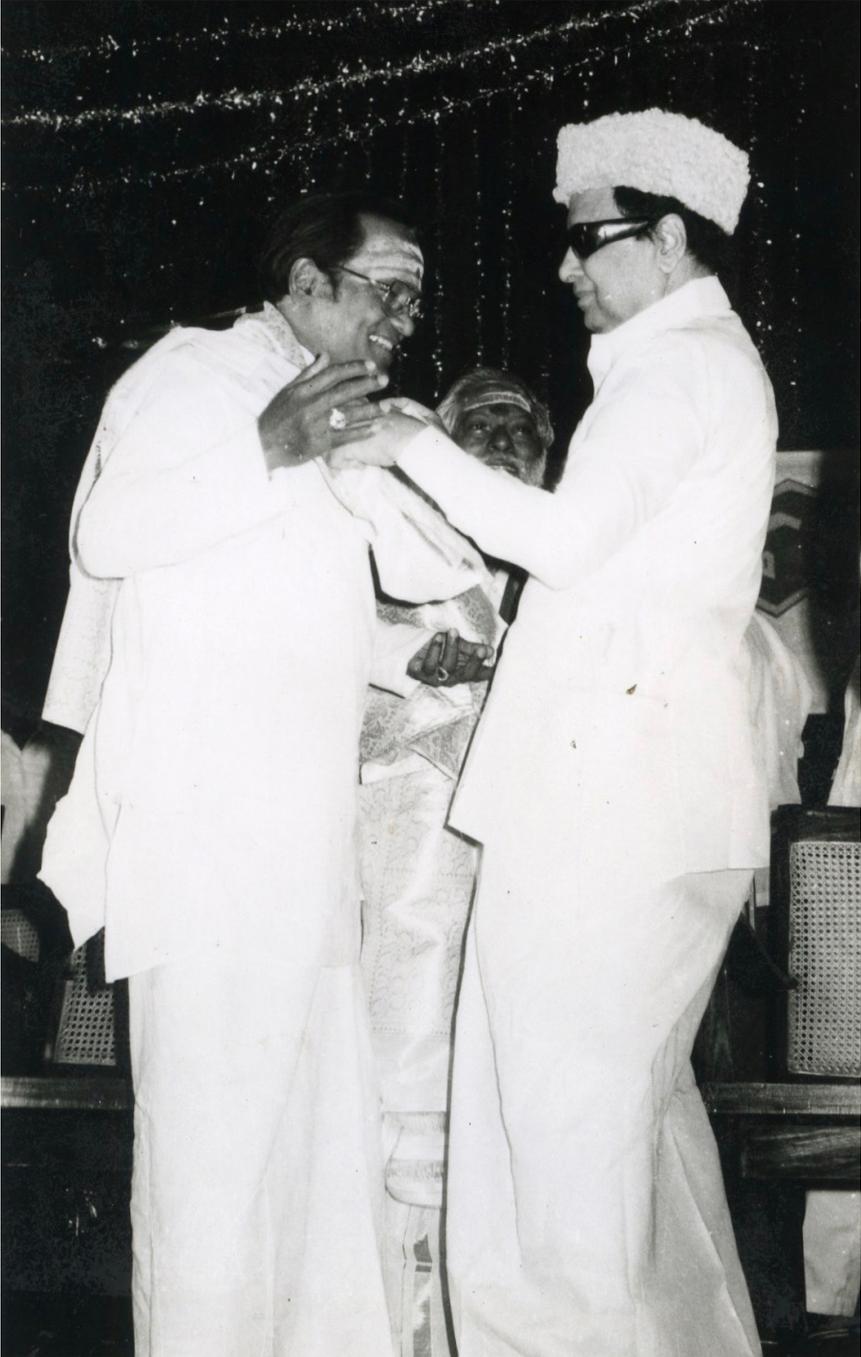


FIGURE 6. T. M. Soundararajan and actor/chief minister M. G. Ramachandran in the early 1980s. Photo from the collection of T. Vijayaraj.



FIGURE 7. Video still and clip of “Pāṭṭum nānē pāvamum nānē” (I am both the song and its expression). Song sequence from *Tiruvilayadal* (1965), featuring actor Sivaji Ganesan and playback singer T. M. Soundararajan.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.104.2>



Etilum iyaṅkum iyakkam nānē

I am the movement in everything that  
moves

En icai ninṛāl aṅkum ulakē

If my music stops, the world grinds to  
a halt.

Here the music stops, and for a moment the moving images on the screen freeze. Only when the voice returns do the trees again sway, the birds fly, the waves crash. Not only does TMS’s voice make the world move; in the next minute, it also materializes multiple Sivajis onscreen, who play in concert with each other as the song reaches a rhythmic climax. In an obvious reference not merely to the dominance TMS himself had achieved but to the aesthetic redefinition his voice had effected, the voice sings, “*pāṭavantavanin pāṭum vāyai ini mūṭa vanta*” ([this song] will shut the mouth of anyone who comes to compete with me).