

Reel & Real: The Southern Mix

In South cinema, the lines between the real life of a star and his role on the screen tend to blur, with references that only those in the know can understand and appreciate

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Summary

- The author uses examples from hit Tamil, Telugu and Kannada films to explain how representation of top South stars is often influenced by events and people in their real life
 - The star's family lineage, his past films, his political affliction, popular demands by his fans... all such things find a reference on screen
 - The real-reel mix makes it impossible for those not in the know to comprehend what exactly is going on in the film. But if you are indeed in the know, the 'meta' factor is hard to miss in several big blockbusters from the South
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Earlier this year, Telugu film Uppena shattered box office records and launched debutant Vaishnav Tej into instant stardom. Set in a sleepy coastal village, this film is shot mostly on location in a village near Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh. A barber shop, a prominent location through the film, displays paintings of popular Telugu stars Chiranjeevi and Pawan Kalyan. This may or may not be related to Vaishnav being their nephew.



In the neighboring state of Karnataka, Puneet Rajkumar's Yuvarathna (2021) was filled with references to his past films, to films produced by his banner, and those by his elder brother Shiva Rajkumar.

Telugu film Venky Mama (2019), a story about the bitter-sweet relationship between an uncle and his nephew, stars Venkatesh and Naga Chaitanya, who happen to be uncle and nephew in real life too.

Cinema in South India is known for the demi-god status it bestows on its superstars, and for the crazy fandom these stars enjoy as a result. Often, the lines between the real life of a star and his role on the screen tend to blur, making it impossible for those not in the know to comprehend what exactly is going on in the film. But if you are indeed in the know, the 'meta' factor is hard to miss in several big blockbusters from the South.

The star's family lineage, his past films, his political affiliation, popular demands by his fans... all such things (and more) find a reference on screen. And no, it doesn't really matter whether the information is relevant or contextual to the proceedings in the story.

Sometimes, it could be as simple as calling the 150th film of the star (Chiranjeevi)... Khaidi No. 150 (2017).



In other cases, it could be a more layered idea. SS Rajamouli's Yamadonga (2007) starred Jr. NTR, a popular Telugu star and the grandson of Sr. NTR, a huge star of his time and a former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. In the film, Jr. NTR's character is in a precarious situation in the Yamalok. Yama belittles him and the entire human race. While he is trying to find an apt response to Yama's insults, in a stroke of genius, using visual effects, SS Rajamouli makes Sr. NTR enter the scene, and inspire his real-life grandson.



Not to be left behind, Sr. NTR's son, Nandamuri Balakrishna, popularly known as NBK, uses his father's cut-outs and images generously in his film Legend (2014). His character goes on to mention how politics is in his blood, that the politics of his state started at his home, and if he indeed chooses to enter politics, he will be unstoppable.

Similarly, it's hard to miss the various references to MGR in Mersal (2017), starring Thalapathy Vijay (no relation to MGR). Whether it is through MGR's songs playing in the background, or by using the title of his old films or songs. There's even a scene in which Vijay makes an entry that's perfectly synchronized with MGR's on-screen entry in the background, in a film playing in a movie theatre.

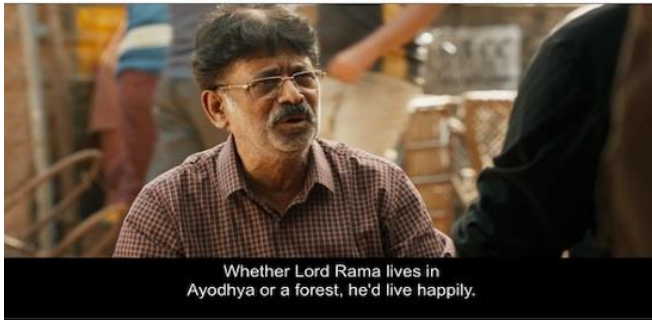


In Bigil (2019), Thalapathy Vijay's grand entrance on screen is preceded by him being referred to as "CM". This is "CM's area", the kid explains. He elaborates that "CM" means Captain Michael. But the political posturing is hard to miss.



Vakeel Saab (2019), the Telugu remake of Hindi film Pink, is packed with such real world references. The film marked the return of 'Power Star' Pawan Kalyan to the silver screen, after a gap of three years, during which he started political journey through his party Jana Sena, contesting (and losing) in the 2019 Andhra Pradesh assembly elections.

His entry sequence in the film addresses his exile from the silver screen not-so-indirectly. "Why do you still keep punishing yourself?", he's asked. "It's because I cannot blame anyone", Vakeel Saab replies. The other character, representing the voice of the common public, tells him: "Whether Lord Rama lives in Ayodhya or a forest, he'd live happily. It's his disciples who are pained when they see where he has to live".



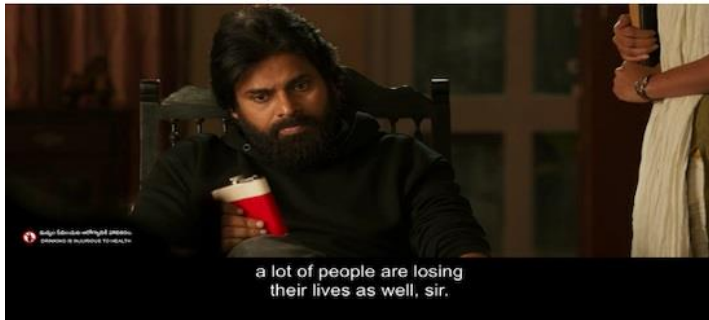
In a flashback sequence in the film, we are reminded of Pawan Kalyan's party, Jana Sena, by a close-up of his belt buckle!



His character in the film gets a detailed back-story. He has left his life filled with luxury, sold all his property for the well-being of poor people, and fought for their cause as a lawyer. But the people he fought for turned their back on him, leaving him high and dry. The interval sequence ends with a high-voltage dialogue exchange between an MLA and Vakeel Saab, taking an indirect view on his political failure. "Even if they (people) are by my side or not, I'm always by their side", he asserts.



Characters in the film keep referring to his 'loss' as a loss for the common public at large.
"Your silence should never become a curse for people like us", he's told in a scene.



And they just keep asking him to stay back. In the film, and through it, on the silver screen!



In NTR Kathanayakadu (2019), the biopic of Sr. NTR, his son Nandamuri Balakrishna (NBK) plays the titular role, i.e., he plays his own real-life father. In a key scene in the film, at a naming ceremony, Nandamuri Balakrishna, the actor, names his eight child... Nandamuri Balakrishna. He proclaims that his son would be the heir to his acting legacy.



My heir in acting too.



Nandamuri Balakrishnu.

Now that's an inception even Christopher Nolan may approve of!