

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## THE DUO, IRUVAR 1997

Mani Ratnam

(Tamil language)

### Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

#### OVERVIEW

*The Duo (Iruvar, literally 'Two People')* dramatises the lives of two men, Anandan and Tamilselvan, loosely based on real-life figures in Tamil history who became famous in the cinema world and went on to shape the narrative of politics in South India. Beginning in the 1950s, the two men, one a poet-cum-scriptwriter (Tamilselvan) and the other an actor-turned-politician (Anandan), take charge of a political party that dominates the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Anandan is the cinema star whom Tamilselvan cleverly manipulates to win huge popularity and electoral majorities. Idealists at first, their human flaws loom large as the story develops, especially in their treatment of their wives. The two close friends also fall out as their political careers soar, with one displacing the other as Chief Minister of the state. After Anandan dies in a freak accident, Tamilselvan attends his funeral in order to show his affection for his old comrade. The film ends with a public celebration as Anandan's corpse is paraded through the streets.

Like its more famous inspirations (Satyajit Ray's *The Hero*, 1966, and Shyam Benegal's *The Role*, 1977), this is a film about films and the cinema industry. This time, however, following the history of south India in the 1970s and 1980s, the theme is the interpenetration of film and politics.

#### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

*The Duo* was a terrible flop when first released in 1997, only a few years after one of the real-life figures upon whom the story is based had died. The film carried a declaration that 'this is not a true story,' but everyone knew that the main characters were closely modelled on the two men and one woman who have dominated Tamil politics and film since the late 1960s. Tamilselvan is based on a Tamil poet and scriptwriter who later became Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu (M. Karunanidhi). Anandan portrays the real-life supremo actor, who later served as Chief Minister twice (M. G. Ramachandran). Kalpana is based on the real-life actress Jeyalalitha, who served as Chief Minister six times and died in 2016.

Due to its controversial subject matter, the film was originally denied a certificate and living politicians threatened law suits against the director. However, now the film is regarded as a masterpiece by acclaimed Tamil director Mani Ratnam and is often included in lists of the best films anywhere in the world. The fact that the film is in the Tamil language was also a hindrance, although that only seems to have guaranteed the accuracy of the story it tells.

#### STORY

*A star is born* The film begins, suitably enough, with an audition, in which Anandan displays his impressive heroic skills in a sword-fight scene and wins a trip to Madras to audition there for the lead role in a big film. Anandan arrives in Madras and meets Tamilselvan, who is himself a struggling writer. From the outset, it is obvious that the two men share a chemistry if not political ideology: Anandan is a traditional Hindu, whereas Tamilselvan is a 'rationalist' who denies the existence of caste and god. Although disagreeing with his friend's atheism, Anandan is impressed with his linguistic talent and persuades him to write some dialogue for his audition. 'With your words and my acting we'll knock 'em dead!' he says with great enthusiasm. And this is precisely what happens over the next two hours of the film.

*Politics and marriage* As the personal rapport and working relationship between the duo deepens, Tamilselvan brings Anandan into the political party of rationalists who are agitating for the Tamil language to have equal status with Sanskrit and Hindi (languages of the north). Anandan then marries Pushpa, and Tamilselvan marries Maragatham, both girls from the village.

*Setbacks* When Anandan returns to Madras, he is told that his film has been cancelled due to a lack of financial backing. Tamilselvan, on the other hand, celebrates a resounding victory in state elections for this party and tells Anandan to forget his little setback and join the great campaign to change society. Anandan is not convinced and becomes depressed, forced to play bit parts in bad movies and to send his wife back to her village. Then his wife dies, and he is grief-stricken, although Tamilselvan make the long journey to his village to console him.

*Success* Before long, Anandan receives the good news that he is wanted for a new film and asks Tamilselvan to write his dialogue. Starring opposite the popular actress Ramani, Anandan gives an exceptional performance and his career is launched. Watching this rising star, Tamilselvan persuades Anandan to use his fame to promote the rationalist ideas of his party. This is a key moment, a declaration that they will use cinema to uplift the common man. Anandan and Ramani begin to grow close (both on and off the set), which angers Ramani's uncle. When the uncle roughs her up, she runs to Anandan, who gives her protection and then marries her.

*Rivalry* Cracks begin to appear in the friendship between the two men when the party leader promotes Anandan to a prominent position and Tamilselvan says that the film-star is using the party to advance his career, when it should be the other way around. Anandan is shot in the neck by accident during a pistol-shooting scene, which wins him more adoration from his fans. At this point, Tamilselvan, who has been elected Chief Minister, begins to view Anandan as a threat to his authority within the party. He goes so far as to block Anandan's appointment as a minister, citing arcane party rules. The aging party leader dies and Tamilselvan takes over total control of the party.

*Bigamy* A flashback shows how Tamilselvan fell in love with Thamarai as a very young man. He lay on railway tracks chanting political slogans as a train approached. His courage impressed her and they later became lovers. Now, in the present, he marries her as his second wife.

*Infidelities* Anandan, happily married to Ramani, begins an affair with a new actress named Kalpana. She initiates the sexual contact but he does not refuse. Then he misleads her into thinking that he will marry her but does not. In a parallel betrayal in the political realm, Anandan is thrown out of the party by Tamilselvan when he reveals some uncomfortable truths about the party's history. Anandan starts his own political party and distances himself from Kalpana, whose fame as an actress would, he thinks, reflect badly on his new party.

*Closure* Anandan eventually eclipses Tamilselvan when his new party wins the next election and he becomes Chief Minister. Now the two men try to undermine each other by spreading false rumours and bribing others; Anandan even orders the arrest of his former friend in connection with a riot. A final tragedy is the death of Kalpana in a car crash, after which Anandan loses his motivation; Tamilselvan similarly ceases his backstabbing after he is released from jail. The two men produce a semi-reconciliation at a wedding. Leaving the event, Anandan trips, hits his head and dies. The film ends as Anandan's body is paraded across the streets, mourned by a legion of film fans and politicians.

## THEMES

***Cinema and politics*** The main theme explored in this film is the symbiotic relationship between cinema and politics. This is not a uniquely Indian or South Indian phenomenon (think of Ronald Reagan), but it is particularly powerful in the southern states of the subcontinent, where there was a revolving door leading from the film studio to the chief minister's residence from the 1960s to the 1990s. Nor is this surprising given the elements common to the two worlds: speeches and gestures gauged to win over audiences, the craving for popularity and the role of one's public image all make it easy to conflate the two. In *The Duo*, we have an aspiring actor (Anandan) who is an ordinary person and a writer who is a committed political activist (Tamilselvan). At first, they combine their talents on the film set, but then Tamilselvan utilises Anandan's stardom to increase the electoral successes of his party. Once the cinestar has entered the political stage (one cannot escape these cinematic metaphors when talking of politics), a debate ensues as to who is manipulating who. Is Anandan using the party to further his acting career? Or is the party cashing in on Anandan's fame to raise its own public image? Which of these manipulations is acceptable? Which is deplorable? Both or neither? Through his close focus on the duo, the director shows how each learned from the other.

The politician is infected by the passion that the actor ignites in the hearts of the common people, and the actor learns that power can be used for social good. In the end, of course, the dual ambitions overwhelm them and engender a destructive competition.

**Sexual politics** Another theme dramatised in the film is the unequal status of women, even among politicians who pay lip service to 'female empowerment.' Both our heroes fail to be faithful to their wives, and one even cheats on his mistress. With one exception, none of the lovers are actresses, as we might expect, but instead 'village girls' who are swept up into the limelight of their husbands' careers and do not adjust easily to the glamorous life of cinema stars. The hypocrisy of the famous men is most pointed in the case of Tamilselvan, the craftier of the two, who early on declares that 'marriage is enslavement' and frequently promotes what he calls 'female empowerment.' Despite, these proclamations, he leaves his wife in child labour in order to attend an 'important' meeting. The public politics are radical, but the sexual politics are feudal.

## CHARACTERS

Pushpa	Pushpa is Anandan's first wife.
Ramani	Ramani is Anandan's second wife.
Maragatham	Maragatham is Tamilselvan's wife.
Thamarai	Thamarai is Tamilselvan's mistress and later his wife.
Ayya Veluthumbi	Ayya Veluthumbi is the older political leader who inspired both Anandan and Tamilselvan.
Kalpana	Kalpana is an actress and later a leading politician.

**Tamilselvan** Tamilselvan is a writer, who leads Anandan into politics. Tamilselvan is a passionate poet and a committed political activist. He is a talented writer, who pours all his talent into a party that supports the rights and language of the Tamil people. He is articulate, confident and ambitious, so much so that power goes to his head and he loses his way. Nevertheless, at least in the beginning, he believes that he can and should improve the lives of the ordinary men and women.

**Radical** During his first scene in the film Tamilselvan displays his radical ideas and quick-fire linguistic skills. The aspiring writer and campaigner has just met Anandan, who is already an admirer of his writing but not his radical politics. When Anandan admits that he doesn't agree with his rationalist principles, Tamilselvan says, 'That's obvious from your white handloom cloth dress [associated with Gandhi and the rival Congress Party].' Anandan laughs, but his new friend goes on, 'Tamils don't respect science. They worship animals. Why do you wear cow dung on your forehead [referring to the traditional ash mark]?' When Anandan asks about god, the writer says, 'Doesn't exist.' What about temples? 'Mere stone.' Scriptures? 'Barbaric superstition.' In five minutes, Tamilselvan has articulated the radical ideas of his political party. Anandan is more amused than shocked, and he is impressed by the writer's linguistic talent. This is the fundamental contrast that will later split the duo: Anandan thinks only of how Tamilselvan can enhance his acting career, while Tamilselvan uses his friend to further his political agenda.

**Committed** Tamilselvan's commitment to these causes is illustrated in several scenes throughout the film, but the most dramatic scene is a flashback. Tamilselvan leads a protest by lying on railway tracks. His demand is for more places for non-Brahmin students and more courses on Tamil language in universities. The police try to move him as a train rushes forward. A huge crowd watches in stunned silence as the prone Tamilselvan cries, 'Tamil forever!' Everyone is sure that he will be crushed, but (of course) the train screeches to a halt only feet from his head. One of those in the crowd is Thamarai, a young woman, who is smitten by his bravery and good looks. Later she marries him.

**Ambitious** Perhaps the key scene in this nearly-three-hour film is one that illustrates Tamilselvan's ambition. Anandan, who has just achieved stardom, is eating a meal in Tamilselvan's house. He is humble despite the adoration from a dozen relatives who ogle him. Then Tamilselvan tells him to get up and takes him up to the roof terrace. Below them are hundreds of common people, perhaps the whole population of the village, just waiting for a glimpse of the star. When Anandan appears, they break into spontaneous cheering. Anandan is overwhelmed and confused, but Tamilselvan knows what to do. He gently takes Anandan's hand and coaxed him into a wave, causing the crowd to scream wildly. Anandan raises his hand higher and higher, acknowledging the adoration from the people, who go berserk with more screams and cheers. A smiling Tamilselvan says to him, 'This is

power. Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, they all worked hard to get this.' Anandan says that he's just an actor, but Tamilselvan replies that the crowd doesn't think so. When Anandan asks him he should do, the writer says, 'Use this power for our party and its principles. It all depends on your face and that silver screen.' It is a powerful scene, revealing the depth of Tamilselvan's ambition, his unbridled thirst for power.

**Anandan** Anandan is an aspiring actor who becomes a big star and politician. Anandan, unlike his sophisticated writing partner, is a man of the people. Coming from a lower economic class, he struggles to make a living (until he becomes the biggest star in south Indian cinema history). He is a little shy at first, but is soon seduced by the power of his image. He has a sentimental and playful side, which is displayed with his wife and lover, but he can also be cold and calculating when necessary.

**Realist** Unlike Tamilselvan, Anandan is a realist and not an idealist. This deeply ingrained trait is illustrated in a conversation between the two men. Anandan is in despair because his (and Tamilselvan's) first big film has been shelved, while Tamilselvan is euphoric in the wake of a big electoral victory. A voice-over announces that the party will 'make all the dreams of the common man and woman come true.' Then the camera cuts to a dramatic shot of Anandan looking up at Tamilselvan standing on a high roof of an old monument (where his political rally has just been held). Anandan explains that their dream of the film is finished, but Tamilselvan dismisses the fickle fortunes of the film world and extols the new history that his party is unfolding. Anandan then launches into an attack on his friend, saying that he has never had to struggle and never known poverty as he has. What good are the party's promises, he asks, when he (Anandan) cannot earn money to feed himself and his wife? What about his dreams (referring to the party's pledge to realise everyone's dreams)? Until these day-to-day realities are addressed, Anandan will not commit to any political cause.

**Competitive** When his cinematic dreams are fulfilled, however, Anandan reveals his competitive streak. He and Tamilselvan are a duo who complement each other: one writes, the other acts; one is political, the other has fame. However, their personalities are symbiotic only as long as their spheres of life are separated: when Anandan enters politics, they become rivals. Indeed, Anandan is not above undermining the man who brought him into the world of politics. A good illustration occurs after Tamilselvan has become Chief Minister, a post that Anandan himself wanted. A large political rally is being held, at which he should be in attendance, sitting quietly by on the stage listening to Tamilselvan's keynote speech. But Anandan waits until Tamilselvan is halfway through his speech before he appears and steals the show. Wearing his trademark sunglasses and hat, he diverts the crowd's attention away from the humiliated Tamilselvan, left speechless in front of the microphone. Tamilselvan taught him how to manipulate crowd power, and now the pupil has used that technique to upstage his teacher.

**Tender** Anandan is competitive and wildly famous, but he remains (or the film-maker suggests that he remains) a common man at heart. Anandan has a genuine kindness that is on display in many scenes. However, one particular scene stands out for its wordless tenderness. When a car arrives his house, Anandan goes outside and sees a badly shaken Ramani (one of his leading ladies) inside, barely holding back the tears. 'I won't go back there [to her uncle's house]', she says. In the previous scene the uncle has beaten her because he thinks she is flirting with the 'worthless film star.' Anandan goes closer to her and puts a soft hand on her bruised face. Then he cradles her in his arms and takes her into the safety of his own house. There are few words spoken in this scene, but Anandan's facial expression, warm and reassuring, communicates a great deal.

<b>Pushpa</b>	Pushpa is Anandan's first wife.
<b>Ramani</b>	Ramani is Anandan's second wife.
<b>Maragatham</b>	Maragatham is Tamilselvan's wife.
<b>Thamarai</b>	Thamarai is Tamilselvan's mistress and later his wife.
<b>Kalpana</b>	Kalpana is an actress and later a leading politician.
<b>Ayya Veluthumbi</b>	Ayya Veluthumbi is the older political leader who inspired both Anandan and Tamilselvan.



(The duo meet for the first time)



(Pushpa at her wedding to Anandan)



(Tamilselvan, right, with his wife, Thamarai)



(Anandan in a tender scene with his wife)