

Politics by the roadside

Lettering in Tamil political party graffiti

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The visual public sphere is a significant resource of attention that the political parties compete for with commercial entities. This paper studies a stylistic case in the party propaganda in Tamil Nadu where typography and composition of text in a frame are used to create visibility to party identity.

Politics by the roadside

'... social life, in all its aspects and in every period of its history, is made possible only by a vast symbolism ... Collective sentiments can just as well become incarnate in persons or formulae: some formulae are flags, while there are persons, either real or mythical, who are symbols.' (Durkheim)

Political institution, one of the prime movers of social life, relies significantly on its symbols for communication. So does the market. The realms of the market and the political sphere have been dealt with often in their handshakes and competitions in policy making and financial conjectures. But, the systems of competitive politics and market compete at many other dimensions. Public attention, noted to be one of the scarcest resources in this era's business (Pieters and Wedel), is one such. The visible public sphere is a space where this competition for attention is apparent. This paper is a look at a stylistic case where, while they compete in the attention economy, the signage of electoral politics takes on a typographic niche.¹

Party Politics

'The most difficult knot to unravel is that between the sphere of politics and the sphere of society' (Sartori, What is Politics?)

Any democracy, as a political system, negotiates with the knot between the political and the social. Assuming a secular and politically liberal position may be a difficult position in terms of decision making, owing to its incommensurability² (Berlin and Williams). This is an essential knot to wield and work with as the people constituted in the society at any

¹ Samples for the same have been photographed from the constituencies of Alandur, Pallavaram and Tambaram (Kanchipuram District, TamilNadu) through the months of October and November 2012.

²Incommensurability is the idea that in a state of absolute liberalism and tolerance towards any value stance, one finds it logically impossible in heuristics, as decision making requires a stand to be taken against another.

given point are not homogenous; Factions are an unvarying reality in most polities. These factions make available some necessary footholds for a sense of collective decision making. The party system³, by institutionalizing these factions, makes a solidified bridge between the people and the system.⁴

The creation of such a party identity is a result of a co-playing of history and affection. History may include aspects such as ethnicity, power-struggle, language, religion, caste etc. Affection on the other hand may posit a common aspiration, theoretical/textual conformity, attitudes towards certain issues etc. (Sartori, Parties and Party Systems: A framework for analysis)

The tangible expression of a group identity occurs through symbols; Symbols facilitate and enable behavioural communication of identities amongst people. (Schatz and Lavine). Flags, of these symbols, appear to be one of the antique and politically consequential symbols. They have been noted for their function of group representation especially in abstract entities such as national, political or ideological. This function includes communicating *groupness* and a specific group identification, and their ability to demarcate between the in-group and the out-group. (Schatz and Lavine)

³ A political party in a democracy is essentially a group of people connected and driven by shared interests to compete in the legal electoral system of the state as a collective identity. They usually arise from social cleavages. Beginning from the reflections of Bolingbroke and Burke on the inevitability of parties in a parliament³ (Rogers), leading to a post-Jefferson acceptance of the party system of electoral choice making, the idea of party politics today is almost a systemic axiom of democratic governments such as India.

⁴ The extent of institutionalizing of a party system has also been studied to be a measure of a democracy's strength and stability. (Frank C. Thames)

Market and Electoral Politics

Party politics in a democracy essentially grounds itself in the principle of *political pluralism*. Such an attitude on the other hand is inimical to the electoral politics which function on the basis of the majority choice. The via media here is identified to be a notion of *limited majority* – A majority which respects the rights of various co-existing minorities (Sartori, Parties and Party Systems: A framework for analysis). Hence, in a majoritarian democracy, parties strive towards maximizing their electoral base (Downs) by putting forth an agenda that appears most convincingly inclusive and often abstract. This implies that any party symbol, though factional – defining the out-group away/exclusionary – including the flag, needs to strive at maximizing peoples' identification with it.

Maximizing a party's electoral base is a function convincing the voters about the power worthiness of a certain party. In this regard, the central political actors of a party who profess the party agenda and the non-aligned voters are in a state of information asymmetry. The active party affiliations and passive political siding such as voting are constitutionally voluntary (Sartori, Parties and Party Systems: A framework for analysis). Given these two conditions, transmitting information and persuasion become significant requirements in the running of such a system. (Downs)

Rhetoric and propaganda in electoral politics play by rules very similar to competitive brand marketing. While their publicity languages and media are similar, they differ significantly in terms of a fundamental aspect – the motive. While the publicity expenditure of a brand may be directed towards profit maximization, party propaganda intends to maximize the number of votes gained. Welfare based policies and desirable

governance, or their promise, may be seen as similar to a sales pitch. They are a part of the cost incurred in case of parties that seek to reassume power. (Downs)

Often in case of a two or a two and a half party system⁵ the public are sufficiently aware of the major party identities. In such cases the public do not find themselves under-informed about the political identities of the contesting parties while making a choice. The situation is analogical to that of a mature product's brand market. In such cases the function of advertisement is to increase visibility of the brand identity with respect to its competitor (D'Souza and Rao). Similarly, the political parties often focus on improving their visibility in the public sphere by creating a *presence*. Affirming the validity of the advertisement strategy of repetition such an instance is identified by Delia Dumitrescu in her study of the phenomenon of postering at Paris during the 2007 French Legislative and Presidential Elections (Dumitrescu). Such a strategy essentially works towards increasing the public capacity to recollect from memory – socio-psychologically, this is a function of availability heuristic.⁶

It has been noted that party publicity campaign has three target groups that are spoken to simultaneously. They are the undecided voter, the decided voter who is siding by the party and the party members (Dumitrescu). Typically a dialogue also occurs between parties in their campaign space. While the former three are either neutral or positive in the realm of propaganda, the latter seeks to counter-act through the same or similar media; The latter may be either actively or passively negative.

⁵ Based on Sartori weightage based classification. (Sartori, Parties and Party Systems: A framework for analysis)

⁶ A mental shortcut phenomenon where an easier recall of an event or a consequence makes it a more viable option in heuristics. (Kahneman and Tversky)

Politics by the roadside

In a consumerist society, the market simultaneously vies for the attention of the public sphere that includes political agency of the same groups of people. One of the spaces where this is particularly evident and stark is the visible public sphere. Attention of any viewer is constantly competed for by a clutter of advertisements – hoardings, posters and banners filled with attention seeking graphic (Pieters and Wedel). This is, as visible in Figure 1 where a Congress poster and a VCK poster are cluttered alongside cinema and sponsored event posters, a common sight in most roadside walls and panels. With the increasing commercial presence though, it is easy for the party publicity to drown into invisibility.



Figure 1

The visual public space

Flags were useful by the signaling capacity that their raise from the ground level gives. These have lost their viability as a means of visibility owing to urbanization which includes raised buildings and hoardings which occupy the visual space of the skyline. Figure 2 and 3 for instance show AIADMK and DMK flags respectively. The former is distracted by the hoardings in vicinity, the red in the 'MRF' in particular. The latter, though raised high, is made inaccessible by the built environment around. Installation of flags appears to be no longer an option except in a skeuomorphic sense. Therefore, though flags symbologically function to display a political identity, they are materially and visually insufficient a means of signaling for competitive identity assertion in electoral politics which coexists with a market society.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Party posters and hoardings on the other hand are continuous and too similar to commercial and religious advertisements. This is visible especially in case of parties with lesser spending capacity who find themselves incapable of expenditure on sophisticated image and graphic display systems considering the expanse of their target group of people. Hence, unlike what Delia Dumitrescu observes in France, *presence* by postering does not guarantee sufficient visibility to the party symbols in Tamil Nadu since commercial market still actively uses this medium. In cases such as of Figure 2 that exhibits a freshly laid layer of AIADMK posters, the posters are too continuous with commercials to stand out. Here, for instance, the black panel of the poster underneath draws attention by being in stark contrast with these set of posters and the rest of the cluttered wall stretch.



Figure 4

The public *presence* lost in this process is, in urban and suburban Tamil Nadu, compensated by graffiti and murals. Such political graffiti most often carry only textual material with information on the party contestants, party's central player and its local player. The attention seeking aspect of this medium lies in its typographical bent.

The typographic bent

In a case where text and images vie for attention, it has been noted that strategic increase in the surface size of the text element has a greater effect on attention (Pieters and Wedel). The textual graffiti used by party publicity are composed of bold, high contrast typefaces of the Tamil script. These are constructed in a manner as to minimize negative spaces and with appropriate kerning as to create a continuous extended block of area.



Figure 5

The comparative size of the graffiti text is notable in the VCK wall in Figure 5. It occurs at the eye-level of the road-user similar to the phenomenon of postering, as is visible in the AIADMK wall stretch in Figure 6.



Figure 6

How does the text thus get mapped with the party identity? How is this design in particular distinct and attention seeking?

Here, such horizontal division of the text colouring, where neither of the colours is used as a value or a shade of the other, is visually coded as the stylistic domain of political visibility in TamilNadu. As Figure 7 shows a 'talapati' written in DMK's flag colours - red in the bottom and black on top - each of the glyphs is filled in a horizontal division of colours, for the whole word block to draw the viewer to the colour code. The lettering design of these graffiti texts thus acts as a substitute to the flag in conveying and conditioning the public into the party colour-code by its visibility and repetition.



Figure 7

Some other attributes of these texts are that the lines of these typefaces are thick with vertical lines of emphasized thickness. These carry connotations of stability, substantive presence and such attributes considered desirable in a governing body. These are often added on with more humane attributes such as smooth edges, curvilinear lines along the division of colour, handwriting like forms etc. to convey the players' attitude of accessibility (Mackiewicz and Moeller).

Composition

A political party is an intermediary institution between the government and the people. The local players of a political party are the mediators between the axial centre of a party and the people. The relationship between the local players and the centre is a vital attribute that identifies the type of a party system (Sartori, Parties and Party Systems: A framework for analysis). This gets reflected in the framing of content in the posters, graffiti and hoardings.

The political party identity in Tamil Nadu may be identified as *centripetal*, i.e., driven towards the centre. This would imply that the local players carry a central identity of the party to equip themselves in the local political scene. This need not mean a central concentration of power since the centre is empowered to its massiveness by the conglomeration of many local *presences* (Dumitrescu). A mutually symbiotic and feedback based relationship exists between the centre and the local. The visual design of the hoardings express this attribute of local expression of the central party identity usually to identify the local player in continuum with the central identity. This is similar to brand symbols being mapped to the textual content or the display elements, a necessary aspect of commercial advertisements. (Pieters and Wedel)

The identification of the local player with the centre is done by the composition of these walls. Following hierarchical sizing, the party's central player or the leader is mentioned in the largest font, often illegible as a word from close viewer positions. The local players' names are presented in appropriately reduced more legible size of lettering around, alongside or following the main name. The latter follows the design of the former,

Politics by the roadside

establishing the link. The inter-playing of the central and local players in party politics with a different manner of emphasis on each comes to display here as in Figure 8, an MDMK wall-stretch. Here only 'ko' of the name 'Vaiko', referring to the the party leader is in this photographic frame – a part of a moped driver's view from the road⁷. The names of local leaders such as 'Tamilarasan', 'T.D.K.Govindarajan' and 'Bhaktavatsalam' are smaller yet more legible.



Figure 8

As these compositions are on the walls, they are continuous with the built environment of a space. Frames are the limit of a canvas. Here it is the wall. Hence, often they are in continuum with other walls and hoardings. Figure 9 is a good instance of how these graffiti function. Despite being surrounded by hoardings of much larger size, the graffiti's identity and visibility is not tampered.

⁷ A similar case is visible in Figure 1 which expresses the comparative sizing of the party leader's name, often a well known nickname.



Figure 9

Power sites

Such political graffiti are constantly re-done, worked on and extended based on power shifts. These are seen as sites of power and not just local space knowledge. Also, in case of a political crisis or a movement, these are sites of expression. In this function, they act similar to flags which are read to suggest social solidarity and political deference. More emphatically these graffiti function as cues of social domination. (Shanafelt) Desecrating an enemy's flag is seen as a show of commitment to one's sub-community. (Posner) Similar to these treatments of a flag, change of regime often evokes a clear-up of the graffiti created by its dominant oppositions or those placed in strategic locations. Figure 10 and 11 show

Politics by the roadside

instances of VCK's graffiti defaced in the prime stretches of the Grand Southern Trunk road near the Chennai Airport.



Figure 10



Figure 11

In other frames

This typographic style, in case of major parties, is often used as identity tabs in spaces that are otherwise not political. Figure 12 illustrates the hoarding for a stunt show where the chief guest's name 'T.K.M.Chinnayya' is stylized in AIADMK's flag colour code, red-white-black to indicate his political affiliation.



Figure 12

Other material presences such as badges, attire and vehicle stickers that are used by party loyalists and local players are significant in relating the daily functionality to the static symbolism perpetuated by the posters and hoardings.

Politics by the roadside

A manner of professing party loyalty is found in diffusing party symbols, which belong to the public sphere, into the private sphere. Figure 13 is a hoarding constructed for a housewarming ceremony that has the names of AIADMK party loyalists in the colour code of the party. Figure 14 is a wedding invitation with the names⁸ of DMK party loyalists in a similar style.



Figure 13

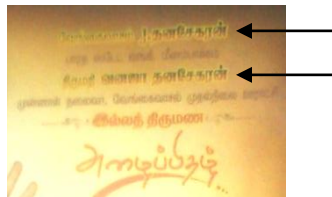


Figure 14

⁸ Marked with arrow marks owing to lack of image clarity: The pictures are of low resolution and the whole invitation/hoarding have not been published so as to minimize identity revelation.

Limitations and further research

The ephemerality of political propaganda elements such as posters, hoardings and graffiti pose a challenge in studying their evolution over longer periods of time. Occasionally they are also politically sensitive and may be difficult to photograph. However, periodic archiving of these graffiti in specific spaces over extended periods of time may prove useful in studying how power fluctuations are expressed in the visual public sphere.

Politics in Tamil Nadu has maintained a nexus with its film industry.⁹ Hardgrave notes how 'The huts of a slum fly the DMK flag. When M.G.R., the sacrificing government clerk turned politician in the cause of the poor, seeks election, his posters are in the red and black form of the DMK' (Robert L. Hardgrave). A detailed study of such videographic sources may be useful in analyzing symbolic expressions of politics in Tamil Nadu.

Further quantitative studies regarding the artists involved in the creation of these graffiti, the materials used and the nature of the walls chosen may prove useful in studying market externalities created by the electoral politics in Tamil Nadu.

⁹ While the audio-visual medium of cinema was used by the supporters of Congress ever since the introduction of the medium in the early twentieth century, it was virulently utilized by the Dravidian parties such as the DMK and the AIADMK for propaganda, political messages, symbols and image building. (Robert L. Hardgrave)

Glossary

Political party details as used in the study:

MDMK – Marumalarcchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam



AIADMK – Akila India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam



DMK – Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam



VCK – Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi



Congress – Indian National Congress



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Politics by the roadside

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