

Archival Challenges and Cinematic Heritage: The Case of M.R. Radha's Filmography (1937 - 1980)

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ABSTRACT

Digital archiving of old films is crucial for preserving cultural heritage, ensuring that classic cinema remains accessible to future generations. This paper explores the state of Tamil cinema, with a special focus on the films of M.R. Radha, a significant figure in Indian cinema from the 1937 to 1980. This study presents a descriptive conceptual analysis of the current state of digital archiving within Tamil cinema. The study aims to assess the extent of this archival crisis, documenting the poor condition of these films and examining the technical and infrastructural challenges that hinder effective digital preservation. The findings underscore the cultural importance of preserving cinematic legacies like that of M.R. Radha and call for a more systematic and coordinated approach to digitalization efforts. The paper concludes by offering practical recommendations for stakeholders to improve preservation strategies and prevent the loss of these cinematic treasures for future generations.

Keywords: Digital archiving, old films, M.R. Radha, Tamil cinema, film preservation, digitalization efforts.

Digital Archiving of Films

Digital archiving of old films play an essential role in preserving cultural heritage, ensuring that the art, culture and history embedded in classic cinema are safeguarded for future generations. Cinema has long been a powerful medium that reflects the values, norms and emotions of its time. Through films, audiences have the opportunity to witness historical moments, societal shifts, and evolving cultural narratives. As physical film stock ages and deteriorates, digitization has emerged as a critical tool in both preserving these films and enhancing their accessibility for wider audiences. This shift from analog to digital formats is not just about preservation but also about transforming how these films are experienced, studied and remembered.

Film, as an analog medium, is inherently vulnerable to the passage of time. The physical nature of celluloid film makes it susceptible to decay, fading and damage. Even under ideal storage conditions, films will eventually deteriorate due to the breakdown of chemical components in the film stock (Usai, 2019). This gradual decay can result in the loss of significant historical and cultural artifacts if proper preservation measures are not taken. For decades, film archives have struggled with these challenges, striving to protect and maintain films using a variety of restoration techniques. However, these analog preservation methods are not infallible. They may slow down the degradation process but cannot fully prevent it (Bressan, 2018). Digital technologies, on the other hand, offer a solution with more permanence and the ability to recreate films in their original quality without the same risk of physical decay.

In addition to preserving the films themselves, digital archiving ensures that these works remain accessible to future generations of viewers, scholars and historians. Before digitization, many classic films were only available in limited formats and could only be viewed at specific locations like film archives or festivals. Today, digital platforms allow for broader access to classic films, often through streaming services, educational repositories, or public domain releases. This democratization of film access means that a wider audience can engage with historical works, and researchers can more easily study films from different cultures and eras, creating a more comprehensive understanding of cinema's role in societal development (Fossati, 2018).

Furthermore, digital archiving facilitates the restoration of films that may have suffered damage over time. Digital tools can clean up scratches, correct color degradation and even restore missing frames, bringing older films closer to their original glory. This has been particularly important for silent films, many of which were

thought to be lost due to poor archiving practices in the early 20th century (Streible, 2008). By digitizing and restoring these works, archivists ensure that a more complete history of cinema is maintained.

Archiving Indian Celluloid

India has one of the world's richest cinematic traditions, with its film industry producing thousands of movies across multiple languages and genres. From the silent films the vibrant talkies of today, Indian cinema has played a crucial role in shaping the nation's cultural and social landscape. However, like many countries, India faces the challenge of preserving its cinematic heritage, as physical film reels degrade over time. In response, the digitization of Indian films has emerged as an important cultural priority, with government initiatives and private organizations stepping up to preserve, archive and make these films accessible for future generations. The digitization of Indian films is a vital cultural undertaking, preserving the country's vast cinematic heritage for future generations. Through government-led initiatives like the National Film Heritage Mission and the National Film Archive of India, along with contributions from private organizations, significant progress has been made in digitizing and restoring classic Indian films. The combination of technological advances and institutional efforts ensures that the stories, artistry, and cultural narratives embedded in these films remain accessible, allowing audiences to engage with the rich history of Indian cinema for years to come.

The history of film archiving in India can be traced back to the colonial era, with the establishment of the Film Advisory Board in 1940, which was responsible for making propaganda films during World War II. Post-independence, the Films Division took over in 1948, becoming the primary agency for documenting the processes of decolonization and nation-building. The formation of NFAI in 1964 marked a significant step towards institutionalizing film preservation in India (Kishore, 2021). The National Film Archive of India (NFAI) is a pivotal institution in the preservation and promotion of India's cinematic heritage. Established in February 1964 as an autonomous media unit under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, NFAI's mission is to trace, acquire, and preserve the heritage of Indian cinema, as well as to build a representative collection of world cinema.

NFAI has acquired and preserved over 21,778 films, including award-winning films, popular box office hits and documentaries of historical importance. The archive also focuses on preserving films shown in the Indian Panorama section of international film festivals. NFAI classifies and documents data related to films, undertakes research on cinema, and publishes and distributes the findings. This helps in creating a comprehensive database of Indian cinema and facilitates academic research. NFAI acts as a center for disseminating film culture in the country and ensures the cultural presence of Indian cinema abroad. It organizes film screenings, exhibitions, and festivals to promote awareness and appreciation of Indian cinema. Recognizing the importance of digital technology, NFAI has initiated projects for the digitization and restoration of celluloid film reels. This not only helps in preserving the physical films but also makes them more accessible to a global audience. NFAI collaborates with various national and international organizations to enhance its preservation efforts. It receives support from UNESCO and other international bodies for safeguarding moving image heritage (NFAI, 2021).

Apart from the National Film Archive of India (NFAI), there are several other significant digital film archiving initiatives in India. Film Heritage Foundation (FHF) in partnership with the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF), organizes the Film Preservation & Restoration Workshop India. This initiative has been conducted in various cities across India since 2015 and focuses on training professionals in film preservation and restoration. The workshops cover a wide range of topics, including film, video, audio and digital preservation, as well as disaster recovery and archive management. Prasad Film Laboratory is one of India's leading film processing and post-production facilities. They offer comprehensive services for film restoration and digitization, working on both celluloid and digital formats to ensure the longevity of films. Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) has undertaken several projects aimed at preserving and digitizing Indian cinema. They offer specialized courses in film preservation and restoration, equipping students with the skills needed to maintain and restore film heritage. These initiatives collectively contribute to the preservation and accessibility of India's rich cinematic heritage, ensuring that future generations can continue to appreciate and learn from these cultural treasures.

The Legacy of Tamil Cinema

Tamil cinema, often referred to as "Kollywood," holds a significant place in Indian cinema due to its rich history, cultural depth and global influence. From its inception in the early 20th century, Tamil cinema has been a major force in shaping the cultural, social and political landscape of Tamil Nadu and beyond. Tamil cinema's roots trace back to the silent era, with films such as *Keechaka Vadham* (1916), one of the earliest silent films produced in South India, marking the beginning of a vibrant film tradition (Dhananjayan, 2014). The introduction of sound in Tamil cinema in the early 1930s brought significant transformation, with films like *Kalidas* (1931) becoming the first Tamil talkie. Over the decades, Tamil cinema has been known for its experimentation with different genres, including social dramas, mythological epics and political films that resonated with the masses. Legendary filmmakers like K. Balachander, Bharathiraja and Mani Ratnam have shaped Tamil cinema's narrative and aesthetic, while actors such as Sivaji Ganesan, Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan have become cultural icons. The industry's focus on storytelling that reflects the socio-political environment of Tamil Nadu has made Tamil films distinct. Films such as *Parasakthi* (1952) are remembered for their progressive and reformist themes (Sivathamby,

1981). Despite this rich tradition, the preservation of Tamil cinema has been severely lacking. A significant number of early Tamil films, particularly those from the silent era and early talkie period, have been lost due to poor archiving practices, neglect and the natural decay of film reels. Films made on nitrate stock, which was highly flammable and prone to deterioration, have suffered the most. The humid climate of South India has also contributed to the degradation of films stored without proper environmental controls. Films like *Chandralekha* (1948), which was one of the most expensive and ambitious projects of its time, are difficult to find in their original, untainted form (Baskaran, 1996). The lack of institutional support and awareness during the early years of Tamil cinema has resulted in the irreversible loss of many classic films, creating gaps in the understanding of Tamil film history.

The study aims to assess the extent of this archival crisis, documenting the poor condition of Tamil films and examining the technical and infrastructural challenges that hinder effective digital preservation considering M.R. Radha's films as a special case.

Tamil cinema, with its rich history and cultural significance, faces a significant challenge in the preservation of its classic films. M.R. Radha, a seminal figure in Tamil cinema from the 1930s until his death, left behind a prolific body of work that reflects the social and cultural milieu of his time. However, the current state of many of these films highlights a critical gap in digital preservation efforts. This study aims to examine the condition of 85 collected films of M.R. Radha, document their physical state, and analyze the technical and logistical challenges of digital preservation. The significance of preserving M.R. Radha's films lies not only in maintaining the integrity of Tamil cinema's history but also in understanding the broader implications of film preservation on cultural heritage. By examining the current state of these films, this research underscores the urgency of implementing systematic digitalization processes. Through a combination of literature review, technical analysis and expert interviews, this study advocates for the preservation of M.R. Radha's cinematic legacy, providing actionable recommendations for stakeholders to enhance preservation efforts and ensure that these cultural treasures remain accessible to future generations.

M.R. Radha and his filmography:

Art, often seen as a reflection of society's collective energy, reaches its pinnacle when it embodies the broader social dynamics. In Tamil society, drama and theatre have played a pivotal role as an essential art form, deeply intertwined with the cultural and political fabric of the region. Tamil theatre has a long-standing tradition, contributing significantly to shaping Tamil Nadu's political discourse. Over time, it has nurtured a wealth of intellectuals who became trailblazers and revolutionaries in Tamil theatre. Among them, M.R. Radha stands out for his profound contributions to Dravidian theatre, using his craft to voice the ideologies of the Self-Respect Movement and the Dravidian movement. The Self-Respect Movement, initiated by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, played a crucial role in the rise of Dravidian theatre in Tamil Nadu. One key moment was the Self-Respect Movement Conference in 1929, which became a turning point for Tamil theatre and cinema. A significant resolution, Resolution No. 26, called upon writers, playwrights, actors, and filmmakers to create content aligned with rationalist principles, avoiding themes that promoted anti-rational or religious beliefs, and undermining the values of self-respect (Periyar, 2001). This marked the beginning of a wave of artistic output that reflected the rationalist and anti-caste ideologies of the movement.

M. R. Radha was the stage name of Madras Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, an Indian actor who appeared in Tamil plays and films. Periyar E. V. Ramasamy bestowed upon him the title "Nadigavel" (Meaning: Spearhead of acting / frontrunner / torchbearer). He primarily portrayed villains, but he also appeared as a comedian in a number of films. Radha was a well-known theatre performer who appeared in more than 5000 stage productions. He began acting at the age of 10, first in minor roles, and over time developed to the point where drama scripts were specifically written for him (Kumar N L, 2023).

M.R. Radha, a committed follower of Periyar, used his theatrical works to promote these ideologies. Even before his association with Periyar's movement, Radha had been staging plays with rationalist themes. After gaining recognition with works like *Lakshmikaandhan* and *Izhantha Kadhal*, Radha collaborated with the esteemed Dravidian playwright *Thiruvalluvar K. Thangaraasu* to produce *Rathakanneer* in 1949. Despite facing criticism and opposition similar to his earlier works, *Rathakanneer* enjoyed widespread acclaim and became a landmark in Tamil theatre (Somasundharam, 2021).

Between 1937 and 1942, M.R. Radha appeared in only five films, indicating a lack of enthusiasm for the film industry during his early career. His acclaimed play, *Rathakanneer*, caught the attention of Perumal Mudhaliar, the founder of National Pictures, who sought to adapt it into a film. Although initially reluctant, Radha eventually accepted the offer, leading to the cinematic adaptation of his play, which allowed this significant work to survive. Following this period, Radha became actively involved in the Tamil film industry, appearing in 89 films from 1958 to 1966. His thriving career came to an abrupt halt when he was imprisoned for shooting his co-actor, M.G. Ramachandran. After his release, the number of film roles available to him significantly declined, prompting Radha to return to the theatre as a full-time artist. From 1969 to 1980, he participated in only 14 films, spending most of his time performing on stage with his theatrical productions.

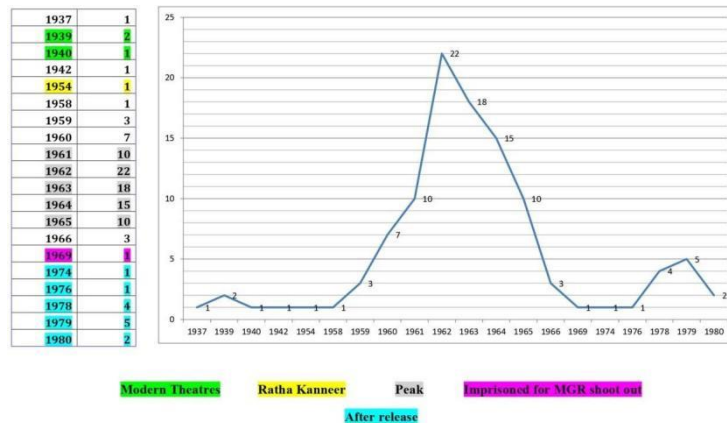


Figure 1 : Filmography timeline of M.R. Radha

Film Availability

An extensive analysis of M.R. Radha's filmography, which includes a total of 108 films, was conducted using verified information from Somasundharam's biography (2020) and other credible resources. It is essential to recognize that this filmography may not represent a complete account of his entire body of work, as there could be additional films not included in the records. Out of the listed films, 84 titles were identified as accessible across various platforms. These included OTTs, YouTube, Film Historians as well as DVD shops located in cities such as Salem, Chennai, Tanjore, and Sholinghur, along with other archives where films can be accessed.

S.No.	Movie	Availability	Source	Quality
1	Rajashekharan - 1937	Not Available		NIL
2	Chandana Devan - 1939	Available	Film Historian	Poor
3	Bombay Mail - 1939	Not Available		NIL
4	Sathiyavani - 1940	Not Available		NIL
5	Soga Melar - 1942	Not Available		NIL
6	Rathakanneer - 1954	Available	DVD and You Tube	Good
7	Nalla Idaththu Sambandham -1958	Available	You Tube	Good
8	Thamarai Kulam - 1959	Not Available		NIL
9	Ulakam Sirikkirathu - 1959	Available	DVD	Good
10	Bhagapirivinai -1959	Available	VCD	Good
11	Pettraval Kanda Peruvazhvu - 1960	Not Available		NIL
12	Ondru Pattaal Undu Vazhvu - 1960	Available	Film Historian	Poor
13	Aadavantha Deivam - 1960	Available	You Tube	Good
14	Kavalai Illadha Manithan - 1960	Available	You Tube	Average
15	Kadavulin Kuzhandhai - 1960	Available	You Tube	Poor
16	Rathinapuri Ilavarasi - 1960	Available	Film Historian	Average
17	Kairasi -1960	Available	DVD	Good
18	Pavamanippu -1961	Available	DVD	Good
19	Maadappuraa - 1961	Available	You Tube	Average
20	Panam Panthiyile - 1961	Available	You Tube	Average
21	Pangaligal - 1961	Available	You Tube	Good
22	Palum Pazhamum - 1961	Available	DVD	Good
23	Nallavan Vazhvaan - 1961	Available	Internet	Average
24	Thalai Sollai Thattadhae - 1961	Available	DVD	Good
25	Kumudham - 1961	Available	Film Historian	Good

26	Shabash Maappillai - 1961	Available	Raj TV Archive	Good
27	Kongu Naattuthangam - 1961	Available	Film Historian	Poor
28	Paadhakaanikkai - 1962	Available	DVD	Average
29	Padithaal Mattum Podhuma? - 1962	Available	DVD	Good
30	Paasam - 1962	Available	You Tube	Good
31	Patinaththaar - 1962	Available	Film Historian	Good
32	Thaayai Kaththa Thanaiyan - 1962	Available	DVD	Average
33	Kudumba Thalaivan - 1962	Available	DVD	Good
34	Kavitha - 1962	Available	You Tube	Poor
35	Aalayamani - 1962	Available	DVD	Good
36	Kaathirundha Kangal - 1962	Available	Film Historian	Good
37	Ellorum Vazhavendum - 1962	Not Available	NIL	NIL
38	Edhayum Thaangum Idhayam - 1962	Available	You Tube	Good
39	Chengamala Theevu - 1962	Available	You Tube	Good
40	Muthumandapam - 1962	Available	You Tube	Good
41	Seeman Petra Selvungal - 1962	Not Available	NIL	NIL
42	Kannadi Maaligai - 1962	Available	You Tube	Poor
43	Valarpirai - 1962	Not Available	NIL	NIL
44	Nagamalai Azhagi - 1962	Available	Film Historian	Good
45	Indhira En Selvam - 1962	Available	Private Archive	Average
46	Mangaiyar Ullam Mangadha Selvam - 1962	Available	You Tube	Good
47	Saradha - 1962	Available	DVD	Good
48	Thendral Veesum - 1962	Not Available	NIL	NIL
49	Pale Pandiyan - 1962	Available	DVD	Good
50	Paar Magaleya Paar - 1963	Available	You Tube	Good
51	Parisu - 1963	Available	Film Historian	Poor
52	Periya Idaththu Penn - 1963	Available	Private Archive	Good
53	Dharmam Thalaikakkum - 1963	Available	DVD	Good
54	Kaatu Roja - 1963	Available	Private Archive	Good
55	Ananda Jothi - 1963	Available	Private Archive	Good
56	Aasai Alaigal - 1963	Available	DVD	Good
57	Kanchi Thalaivan - 1963	Available	Film Historian	Good
58	Kadavulai Kanden - 1963	Available	DVD	Good
59	Kalyaniyin Kanavan - 1963	Available	Film Historian	Good
60	Naanum Oru Pen - 1963	Not Available	NIL	NIL
61	Iruvar Ullam - 1963	Available	You Tube	Good
62	Idhayathil Nee - 1963	Available	You Tube	Average
63	Neethikuppin Paasam - 1963	Available	DVD	Average
64	Koduthu Vaiththaval - 1963	Available	DVD	Good
65	Karppagam - 1963	Not Available	NIL	NIL
66	Mani Osai - 1963	Available	You Tube	Good
67	Lavagusa - 1963	Available	DVD	Good
68	Paasamum Nesamum - 1964	Available	DVD	Poor
69	Pachai Vilakku - 1964	Available	DVD	Good
70	Thaayin Madiyil - 1964	Available	Private Archive	Good

71	Aayiram Roobai - 1964	Available	DVD	Good
72	Vettaikkaran - 1964	Available	DVD	Good
73	En Kadamai - 1964	Available	DVD	Good
74	Kai Kodutha Deivam - 1964	Available	DVD	Good
75	Magale Un Samathu - 1964	Available	You Tube	Good
76	Ullaasa Payanam - 1964	Not Available	NIL	NIL
77	Arunagirinathar - 1964	Available	Film Historian	Good
78	Thozhilali - 1964	Available	Film Historian	Poor
79	Deivaththai - 1964	Not Available	NIL	NIL
80	Vazhi Pirandhathu - 1964	Not Available	NIL	NIL
81	Puthiya Paravai - 1962	Available	You Tube	Good
82	Pazhani - 1965	Available	You Tube	Good
83	Sarasa B.A. - 1965	Not Available	NIL	NIL
84	Enga Veettup Penn - 1965	Available	DVD	Poor
85	Vazhi Kaatki - 1965	Available	DVD	Good
86	Halo Mister Jameendar - 1965	Available	You Tube	Good
87	Santhi - 1965	Available	You Tube	Good
88	Paditha Manaivi - 1965	Available	Film Historian	Average
89	Vilakketriyaval - 1965	Not Available	NIL	NIL
90	Anandi - 1965	Available	You Tube	Poor
91	Thaalampoo - 1965	Available	Private Archive	Good
92	Chandirodhayam - 1966	Available	Film Historian	Good
93	Pettraal Thaan Pillaiyya	Available	DVD	Average
94	Sithi - 1966	Available	You Tube	Good
95	Thangamalar - 1969	Available	You Tube	Good
96	Samayalkaran - 1974	Available	DVD	Average
97	Dasavatharam - 1976	Available	DVD	Good
98	Vandikaaran Magan - 1978	Available	Film Historian	Poor
99	Panchamirtham - 1978	Not Available	NIL	NIL
100	Melathaalangal - 1978	Not Available	NIL	NIL
101	Taxi Driver - 1978	Not Available	NIL	NIL
102	Aadu Pambae - 1979	Not Available	NIL	NIL
103	Velum Mayilum Thunai	Not Available	NIL	NIL
104	Kandharalankaaram	Available	Film Historian	Poor
105	Yaarukku Yaar Kaaval	Not Available	NIL	NIL
106	Panchaboodham - 1979	Available	Private Archive	Poor
107	Naan Potta Savaal - 1980	Available	You Tube	Good
108	Dharmangal Sirikkirana - 1980	Not Available	NIL	NIL

Table 1: Filmography of M.R. Radha and their availability

The table presented provides a detailed overview of the availability and quality of various films spanning from 1937 to 1980, with a focus on films associated with M.R. Radha. It highlights a critical issue in film archiving: the difficulty in accessing and preserving older films, particularly in digital formats. This lack of proper digital archiving is a significant problem for both film researchers and enthusiasts, as it hinders their ability to study and appreciate these cultural artifacts. A thorough analysis of this table exposes the broader challenges in film preservation and the consequences of improper archival practices.

Availability Challenges in Archiving Films

A striking observation from the table is the overwhelming number of films marked as "Not Available." This spans from early productions such as *Rajashekharan* (1937) and *Sathiyavani* (1940) to later works like *Velum Mayilum Thunai* (1979) and *Dharmangal Sirikkirana* (1980). Out of the 108 films listed, a significant portion (28 films) is marked as completely unavailable, representing approximately 26% of the total catalog. These missing films include early pioneering works as well as mid-20th century productions, reflecting a chronic issue with archiving, particularly in Indian cinema, where preservation efforts for films from earlier decades are often inadequate.

The lack of these films in the digital or physical archive represents a loss of not just cinema, but a key portion of cultural and historical heritage. M.R. Radha, a prominent figure in Tamil cinema, played significant roles that reflected societal narratives and concerns of his time. The absence of many of his films in current archives makes it difficult for researchers to fully analyze his body of work or contextualize his impact on Indian cinema and culture.

Poor Quality as a Reflection of Archival Gaps

Even among the films that are listed as available, a substantial number are categorized under "Poor" or "Average" quality, signaling that even when films can be accessed, they may not be in a condition suitable for thorough analysis. Examples include *Chandana Devan* (1939), *Ondru Pattaal Undu Vazhvu* (1960), *Kadavulin Kuzhandhai* (1960), and *Kongu Naattuthangam* (1961), which are listed as being in "Poor" condition despite being archived by film historians. This raises the question of how these films were preserved and whether they have suffered from degradation due to neglect or improper storage. The older the film, the less likely it is to be available in good quality. For instance, most of the films from the 1930s and 1940s are either not available or are of poor quality. This contrasts sharply with films from the 1960s and 1970s, many of which are still available, albeit often in only average or poor quality. This pattern suggests that the lack of consistent archiving practices over the decades has led to the deterioration of many important works, further complicating efforts to restore or digitally preserve them for future generations.

Impact on Researchers and Film Enthusiasts

For film researchers, particularly those studying Tamil cinema or the career of M.R. Radha, the difficulties presented by this lack of proper archival practices are substantial. Researchers are often limited to secondary sources, such as film historian accounts or low-quality footage available on platforms like YouTube, which frequently does not meet the standards necessary for academic study. Moreover, the absence of films such as *Rajashekharan* (1937), a significant early work, means that researchers miss out on key pieces of M.R. Radha's early career, making it impossible to construct a comprehensive picture of his evolution as an actor or the socio-political impact of his work.

For film enthusiasts and cinephiles, the situation is similarly frustrating. The poor availability of classic Tamil films severely limits access to important cultural and entertainment heritage. The films listed as "Available" from YouTube or DVDs often suffer from low resolution or degraded picture and sound quality, which detract from the viewing experience and fails to convey the original cinematic impact. The digital availability of films like *Rathakanneer* (1954) and *Ulakam Sirikkirathu* (1959) on YouTube, although marked as "Good" in the table, may not meet contemporary expectations for quality due to the limitations of online platforms and the condition of the source material. This can result in a diminished appreciation of the films' original artistic and narrative value.

Digital Archiving and Preservation: A Crucial Need

The table also highlights the sporadic nature of archiving efforts. While some films from the 1960s and 1970s are preserved in relatively good condition—often through private archives or film historians this is not a systematic practice. Films like *Puthiya Paravai* (1962), *Pavamanippu* (1961) and *Saradha* (1962) are preserved in good quality, primarily in DVD format. However, this is not a universal standard. Private archives, though useful, are not always accessible to the public or to researchers, further complicating efforts to study these works. Moreover, reliance on physical formats like DVDs, VCDs, and outdated analog formats also raises concerns about long-term preservation, as these media degrade over time and may become obsolete.

The table illustrates the urgent need for proper digital archiving of films, particularly those from earlier decades. Digital preservation not only ensures long-term storage but also allows for greater accessibility, ensuring that both researchers and the general public can access these films without geographical limitations. Without proper digitization and restoration efforts, important films will continue to be lost to time, or at best, be accessible in degraded conditions that diminish their cultural and academic value.

The table serves as a stark reminder of the challenges faced by those seeking to preserve and study Tamil cinema, particularly the works of M.R. Radha. The lack of availability and poor quality of many of these films reflects a broader failure to prioritize film preservation, particularly in non-Western contexts. For both researchers and enthusiasts, the unavailability of key films creates significant barriers to understanding and appreciating the full scope of this era of cinema. The situation underscores the urgent need for systematic digital archiving efforts, which would safeguard these cultural treasures and make them accessible to future generations in high-quality formats. Without such efforts, an irreplaceable portion of cinematic history is at risk of being lost forever.

Experts on Significance of Film Archiving

An in-depth interview is a qualitative tool that concentrates on the interview schedule and obtains detailed answers for the questions, which are not possible to extract via research instruments such as a structured questionnaire. The in-depth interview allows the researcher to uncover intricate details, which cannot be obtained by other instruments, hence the particular research tool was chosen for the analysis. This tool was particularly suited for the objectives, which explored the inner working of the film industry (Divakar, 2020).

In-depth interviews are crucial in qualitative analysis for film studies as they provide deep insights into personal experiences, interpretations and emotional responses to films. These interviews allow researchers to explore subjective perspectives on themes, narratives and cultural impacts, uncovering layers of meaning that quantitative methods might overlook. They offer rich, detailed data, helping to understand how individuals engage with film in complex, nuanced ways. Five In depth interviews were conducted for the study to identify the significance and need of Digital Film archives. The experts are from various disciplines say Mr. Thanjai Somasundharam, Personal Secretary of M.R.Radha; Dr. Vinayagan, Founder of Centre for Indian Social Sciences; Dr. Saaron, Independent Documentary Film Maker; Professor Ramu Manivannan, retired professor of the political science department from the University of Madras; Dr. Viduthalai, Associate director for Tamil film industry. All these interviews were subjected to Inductive Content Analysis to study the opinions.

In a conversation with Thanjai Somasundharam (Personal Communication, 2024), the Personal Secretary to M.R. Radha and the last surviving human encyclopaedia of the legendary actor, he shared insights into M.R. Radha's unique perspective on his career in theatre and cinema. According to Somasundharam, M.R. Radha's primary passion was theatre, and he always regarded it as his true calling. For Radha, acting on stage was a more authentic and fulfilling experience compared to cinema. In fact, he viewed his involvement in films almost as a form of retirement from the theatre, which remained his preferred medium. Somasundharam echoed this sentiment, admitting that he, too, was less interested in Radha's film work. He considered cinema as a retirement from theatre. So was I. Even I wasn't interested on his cinemas. But that stays as an evident tool for his legacy in both Tamil Theatre and cinema.

Somasundharam states he had a partial collection of M.R. Radha's films. However, he graciously lent many of these rare films to film enthusiasts and others who, unfortunately, never returned them. As a result, his personal collection has dwindled. Reflecting on this loss, Somasundharam noted how DVDs were once seen as readily available and abundant, with no real urgency to preserve them. Today, however, the culture of physical film collections has all but disappeared, and these films are in dire need of proper archival efforts. He pointed to the success of recent restorations and re-releases of classic Tamil films such as *Aayirathil Oruvan* and *Karnan*, which have been digitalised and given a new life for modern audiences. In his view, if *Rathakanneer* undergoes a similar restoration and re-release today, it would undoubtedly receive the same level of admiration and success. This underscores the importance of preserving and revitalising Tamil cinema's rich history through proper archival and restoration initiatives.

Dr. Vinayagam (Personal Communication, 2024), the founder of the Centre for Indian Social Sciences, a foundation currently dedicated to archiving rare editions of Dravidian ideology, underscores the critical importance of preserving M.R. Radha's films. He highlights two key reasons for this. Firstly, these films are of historical significance. Beyond their narrative content, they serve as windows into the society, lifestyle, and cultural practices of the Tamil people during that era. Through the diegesis of these films, viewers can observe the social practices and values that shaped the time, allowing for meaningful comparisons between the past and contemporary society. These cinematic works offer a rich visual record of the Tamil way of life, making them invaluable for historical study and cultural understanding.

Secondly, M.R. Radha's films are essential for their ideological content. Regardless of the genre, plot, or character he portrayed, Radha consistently used cinema as a platform to disseminate Dravidian ideologies. Tamil cinema, in turn, leveraged M.R. Radha's prominence and legacy to spread these ideas. His films, particularly his iconic scenes, often carried strong messages aligned with the Dravidian movement, making cinema a powerful vehicle for ideological propaganda. According to Dr. Vinayagam, studying these films is crucial to understanding how they contributed to the rise of the Dravidian movement, helping it secure its influential position in Tamil Nadu's political landscape today. Archiving M.R. Radha's films, therefore, is not only about preserving cinematic history but also about safeguarding a significant cultural and ideological legacy.

Saaron (Personal Communication, 2024), a documentary filmmaker who has spent the past decade working on a project about M.R. Radha's legacy, shares the challenges he faced in gathering M.R. Radha's films. He begins by acknowledging that even he has been unable to collect all of Radha's works. His research also uncovered something rare video tapes of M.R. Radha's stage plays from his later years, many of which are now inaccessible or damaged due to the lack of proper digital preservation. After considerable effort, Saaron was able to successfully digitize one such recording for his documentary, a small but significant victory in his long struggle.

Turning to the decline of the DVD culture, Saaron expresses his surprise at how quickly it faded. Despite being a documentary filmmaker, he once believed that DVDs would endure as a permanent medium. By the time

he realized the fragility of this format, it was too late the DVD industry had largely disappeared. In the past, companies such as Moserbear, Raj Video Vision, AP International, and Ayngaran International played a key role in selling original copies of digitalized prints of old films. DVD sale centres were once ubiquitous across cities, but now only a handful remain, and even those rarely stock older films. This fading DVD culture has broader implications, not just for M.R. Radha's legacy but for other icons of Tamil cinema and theatre as well, including figures like *Kalaivaanar N.S. Krishnan*, *Kalaingar Karunanidhi*, and *K.A. Thangavelu*. Their works, too, are at risk of being lost if they are not properly preserved and digitalized. Saaron concludes by posing a critical question: who will fund and take responsibility for preserving these cultural treasures? Without support for such efforts, the legacies of these towering figures may fade into obscurity, lost to future generations.

Retired Professor Ramu Manivannan (Personal Communication, 2024) from the University of Madras shared his insights on the intricate relationship between art and society during a recent interview. He emphasized how veterans of the Dravidian movement left their mark across various spheres of influence, including print, theatre, and cinema. Figures such as *Puratchi Kavingar Bharathidasan*, *M.R. Radha*, *Kalaivaanar N.S. Krishnan*, *Kalaingar Karunanidhi*, *Aringar Annadurai*, and *Pattukkottai Kalyanasundaram* are prime examples of how art can be harnessed as a powerful and rational tool to express and propagate ideologies. Their contributions demonstrate how art served as a vehicle for disseminating the ideals of the Dravidian movement. Professor Ramu Manivannan also reflected on the stark contrast between today's political landscape and that of the past. According to him, contemporary politics is riddled with flaws, largely due to a lack of ideological intellectuality. This depth of intellectual engagement, he asserts, can only be nurtured through the study of archival sources that document the struggles and evolution of political movements. These archival materials not only preserve history but also offer critical insights into the ideologies that shaped earlier political eras. In particular, films serve as a vital resource in this regard. They provide a visual and engaging way to understand the period, especially for those who might not be inclined to engage with written texts. By capturing the essence of a movement through storytelling, cinema effectively bridges the gap between historical documentation and public understanding, making it an indispensable tool for intellectual and ideological exploration.

Dr. Viduthalai (Personal Communication, 2024), an esteemed associate director in Tamil cinema, highlights the profound impact of filmmaker M.R. Radha on the industry. He asserts that Radha's contributions are not only influential but also remarkably foundational in shaping the trajectory of Tamil cinema. In today's landscape, a new wave of rational filmmakers like *Vetrimaran*, *Pa. Ranjith*, and *Mari Selvaraj* continues to push the boundaries of parallel cinema, reflecting contemporary societal issues through their work. It is essential to acknowledge that M.R. Radha stands as a pioneering figure who significantly influenced the evolution of Tamil cinema. His innovative storytelling and thematic explorations laid the groundwork for the rich narrative traditions we see in the industry today. By addressing pressing social issues in his films, Radha prepared the Tamil audience to engage with complex subjects, fostering a culture of critical thinking and reflection. The importance of archiving M.R. Radha's films cannot be overstated. By preserving his work, we create opportunities to revisit and analyze these cinematic pieces, drawing inspiration for modern storytelling techniques. Such archives serve as a valuable resource for current filmmakers, allowing them to understand the historical context and narrative structures that have shaped Tamil cinema. Today's films often address current societal crises, offering commentary on issues such as inequality, injustice, and identity. In contrast, M.R. Radha's films provide a window into the societal landscape of decades past, illustrating the challenges and dynamics of earlier eras. Through his work, we can observe the evolution of societal values and the ways in which cultural narratives have transformed over time. In this sense, M.R. Radha's legacy is not only a testament to his talent but also a crucial reference point for understanding the ongoing dialogue between cinema and society.

Conclusion

The study underscores the profound importance of archiving films, in special reference to M.R. Radha, whose works are pivotal to understanding Tamil cultural and ideological history. His films, along with those of other Dravidian stalwarts, are not only cinematic expressions but also vehicles for disseminating the social and political ideologies of their time. These films reflect the societal values, struggles and lifestyles of the Tamil community, offering a rich historical and cultural record. However, the lack of systematic archival efforts, coupled with the decline of physical formats like DVDs, poses a significant threat to preserving this legacy.

Archiving ensures that these works remain accessible for future study and appreciation, providing an indispensable resource for understanding the intellectual depth behind the Dravidian movement. By preserving these films, we safeguard a vital connection to the past, ensuring that their cultural, historical and ideological significance continues to inform and inspire future generations.

Film archiving is of paramount significance, particularly in the context of preserving cultural heritage and historical narratives. The analysis of M.R. Radha's films underscores the critical need for systematic archiving practices to safeguard not only cinematic works but also the ideologies and societal values they represent. As highlighted, many films from earlier decades are either lost or exist in poor quality, which hampers researchers' ability to study and appreciate the evolution of Tamil cinema and its socio-political implications. The absence of

comprehensive digital archiving exacerbates this issue, as it limits accessibility for both scholars and the general public, thereby diminishing the cultural and academic value of these films. Moreover, the preservation of films like those of M.R. Radha is essential for understanding the historical context of the Dravidian movement and its impact on Tamil Nadu's political landscape. These films serve as vital records of the social practices, ideologies, and cultural narratives of their time, offering insights into the lives and values of the Tamil people. Without proper archiving, significant cultural artifacts risk being lost to time, depriving future generations of the opportunity to engage with their heritage. Effective film archiving is not merely about preserving entertainment; it is about maintaining a connection to the past, fostering cultural identity, and ensuring that the rich tapestry of Tamil cinema continues to inform and inspire future discourse. The urgent call for improved archiving practices is essential for safeguarding this invaluable legacy.

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