

Email correspondence in 2013 between Prof. Robert Hardgrave Jr and Sachi Sri**Kantha, on MGR, DMK and Tamil films****[prepared by Sachi, Nov. 2023]**

After I began writing my 'MGR Remembered' series to the sangam site in Dec 2012, I thought of contacting Prof. Robert Hardgrave Jr. about his experiences and impressions in carrying out his research in Tamil Nadu, India during 1960s. Following six emails relate to this effort. Subsequently, our correspondence continued until the end of 2013, and came to an end. But, I had failed to retain print copies of not so informational scribblings.

From Sachi to Prof. Hardgrave [Sept 11, 2013]

Dear Prof. Hardgrave,

Greetings from Japan. I have been influenced by your writings on Tamil Nadu and Nadars since 1970s. I'm a Sri Lankan Tamil, and currently I'm authoring a a biography on MGR, the movie-star turned politician. I located an old research paper of yours entitled, 'The celluloid god: MGR and the Tamil film', published in *South Asian Research* (Britain), 1971; 4(4): 307-314. I could read only the abstract of your paper in a database which I had copied long time ago, but not the complete text. I would appreciate if you can kindly send me a copy of this paper of yours, either by PDF via email, or as a paper copy in regular post. Extremely sorry for troubling you with this request. Kind regards.

Sachi Sri Kantha

From Prof. Hardgrave to Sachi [Sept. 11, 2013]

Dear Mr. Sri Kantha,

I do not have 'The celluloid God' in a pdf file, but I can send you a paper copy along with other articles on Tamil film you may find of interest. Among several articles I did on Tamil film and on MGR, the essay, 'When stars displace the Gods' is the most extensive account.

I attach a copy of my vita and also a list of the articles I have done on Tamil film. I will mail you copies of the articles for which I have extra copies. I would be very interesting (*sic*) in reading your biography of MGR and would be most grateful if you would send me a copy when it is completed. Thank you.

Bob Hardgrave

From Sachi to Prof. Hardgrave [Sept 13, 2013]

Dear Prof. Hardgrave:

Thanks a lot for your two mails including your cv and publications, and I appreciate very much your help related to my request on your publications on MGR and Tamil film. Sure, I'll send you a copy of my work, when it gets published. Currently, I'm writing a series to the Ilankai Tamil Sangam (in New York). As of now, I have completed 10 parts. You can simply google 'MGR remembered' and the top entries bring out my series.

I'm just curious to know whether you can read Tamil. Having focused on Tamil Nadu for a long and working with Nadar community, I gather that you should be able to speak and comprehend Tamil. But reading and writing the language is another issue. That's my curiosity.

Just to provide a brief background about myself: I'm a Sri Lankan Tamil. But, having left the island in 1981 for my graduate studies at the University of Illinois, I have not returned home. I have been a long term resident in Japan since 1986, excluding the two years (1989-90), I spent at Philadelphia for postdoc research. Best regards.

Sachi Sri Kantha

From Prof. Hardgrave to Sachi [Sept. 13, 2013]

Dear Sachi, if I may (or perhaps you use another name for familiar address)

I studied Tamil at the Univ. of Chicago in my graduate studies, and used Tamil, both written and spoken, on my dissertation on the Nadars and in my work on the Tamil film. The film project was 1969-70, however, and I have no research since then that required use of Tamil. Even though I returned to Tamil Nadu periodically, I was not using Tamil – and it is now completely gone. Alas, but it takes a considerable investment of time to keep up a language, and as I was not using it in research, I let it go.

I will not go to the university until the middle of this week, and only then will I be able to make copies of the articles for you and get them in the mail.

Best wishes

Bob

From Sachi to Prof. Hardgrave [Sept 25, 2013]

Dear Prof. Hardgrave:

Today, I received the reprints and photocopies of your 5 publications on MGR-DMK-Tamil movies. I'm so delighted. Thank you very much for your kindness. In 1970s, your name was the first among American scholars I recognized for your studies on Nadars. I

had been wondering since then what made you interested in researching on Tamilians. I cannot believe that now I'm corresponding with you via email.

I recognize that you had interviewed MGR in December 1969. Now that he had died for 25 years, may I know some of your impressions about him. For example, (1) Did both of you talk in Tamil, or in English? (2) If you talked in English, was he able to comprehend your questions properly? (3) You mention that though his official birth date is given in 1917, it was recognized that he was born 5 years earlier. Did you check with him directly, about his birth year? (4) After your publications were printed, did you send these to him, and what was his reactions – if he bothered to express any? (5) Did you take any photo with him?

Sorry for troubling you with these questions. I was lucky, only to shake his hand for a second in 1981 at Madurai. That's my brief interaction with him. Hence, these questions to you. Best regards.

Sachi

From Prof. Hardgrave to Sachi [Sept. 28, 2013]

Dear Sachi,

I had become interested in India when an undergraduate, and for a Senior Honors thesis, I selected a political party – the DMK – I had read about but for which there were not scholarly articles. I was curious, and I was able to my [write] thesis from microfilm sources of *The Hindu* and other Tamilnadu newspapers. It was limited, but it got me interested in Tamil politics, and I was able to get a Rotary International Scholarship to spend a year in India, 1960-61, before I started my graduate studies for MA and PhD at the University of Chicago.

I divided my stay in India between Madras and New Delhi. I decided to give some focus to my time in India by extending my study of the DMK, and since no one had studied it before, I was welcomed by party leaders. I met all of the leaders, but it was E.V.K. Sampath (at that time, then DMK's only Member of Parliament, and a nephew of Periyar) who became my friend and mentor. At that time, MGR was more focused on film than on political life, but his films, of course, had a DMK theme.

My MA thesis at the University of Chicago was 'The Dravidian Movement', drawing on all the interviews I had conducted with DMK leaders and others when I had been in India, as well as a huge number of DMK and DK publications I collected. The thesis was published as a book in 1965.

I studied Tamil at the University of Chicago and used it in my Ph.D dissertation research on the Nadars. My next research project, in 1969-70, took me back to Tamil Nadu and to my continuing interest in the DMK for a study of politics and the Tamil film. I had met Shivaji Ganesan earlier, and I spent a good bit of time with him and got to know him quite well. While talking with many of the people associated with MGR and having special screenings for me at studios of old MGR films, I interviewed him only once. I attended meetings where he was present, but I really talked with him on one (maybe two) occasions. He was not really comfortable speaking English, but as I recall, most of our conversation was in English – perhaps with some Tamil. I do not recall any discussion of his birth year, but he was known to be very sensitive about his age, especially as he still played romantic roles where he was supposed to be a young man pursuing his love interest (often, of course, Jayalalitha). I wish I had gotten a photo of me with MGR. That would be a treasured memento.

There are so many stories of MGR helping people, but I know of one family (with

whom I remain close friends) that he helped greatly when they faced a financial crisis.

They remain forever grateful for his generosity.

Several years ago, when Theodore Baskaran was director of the Raja Muthiah Research Library in Chennai, I gave copies of all my film project interviews and also my collection of photos and film posters, and film-related pamphlets, publications, etc. to library.

I wish you all the best on your project.

Yours, Bob.
