

Paper

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## ***Kalidas* cannot be the First Tamil Talkie**

### **Abstract**

It is widely assumed that '*Kalidas*' was a full-length film, but this is not true. It was the compilation of 3 shorts commonly known as *Kalidas*. It didn't have irrelevant patriotic songs. *Kalidas* was only a 4-reel short film. More importantly, it was entirely spoken in Telugu. Two unrelated Tamil short films with songs and dance are shown along with it. The film had songs in both Tamil and Telugu. The many misconceptions surrounding the film *Kalidas* stem from this lack of clarity. The prevailing circumstances of the time likely contributed to this. Since the primary focus of the compilation was firmly *upon* the titular Telugu segment *Kalidas*, there is no room for the argument that the film was the first Tamil talkie, as for the other two segments - the song and dance sequences – neither can be considered the first Tamil talkie either, as they were both non-narrative short films. Different languages offer comparable examples. With appropriate evidence, we will analyze in detail why *Kalidas* cannot be the first Tamil talkie, contrary to the traditional notion. We will examine the discoveries brought to light by extensive research pointing to a complex reality.

Only after the talkies' advent, a focus on language and regional identity emerged. During this transitional period, '*Kalidas*,' the first talkie, was produced without considering these factors—language, regional specificity, and length. In keeping with the prevailing practices of the time, it was primarily a commercially driven experimental and incomplete film. The use of sets directly from '*Alam Ara*' further illustrates this. It was a commercial effort aimed at the entire South Indian market. The following article explains this further.

The film *Kalidas*, released on 31.10.1931 over 90 years ago, is a simple example of how historical facts can change over time. The argument that *Kalidas* is not the first Tamil talkie solely because it included multiple languages has always sounded weak. This is because the notion that *Kalidas* is the first Tamil talkie has been the primary and widely accepted view since the early 1930s.

Let us go back to the past!

The first week of November 1931 saw something new and exciting emerge in bustling Madras - the first talking picture featuring Tamil and Telugu languages. That's how *Kalidas* was advertised; thus, the public perception built. Writer Kalki watched the film, which he had



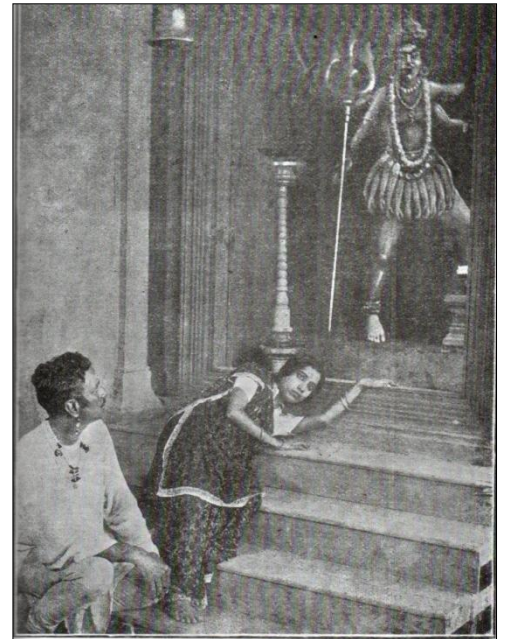
called a 'new Tamil talkie.' (By admission, he had already watched a few talkies in other languages by then).

*Kalidas* opens with the title 'Introduction', a sequence in which T.P. Rajalakshmi appears repeatedly in various costumes, entertaining viewers with a new theme each time. The performance varies per the theme, and she performs many songs and dances, each with a unique expression. The artist also appears in different costumes, donning a variety of silk saris and colourful outfits - in one of the songs, for example, she seems attired in a *khadi* sari and sings about Gandhiji and the *charkha*. She performs love songs, Telugu *keerthanas*, and more in this initial sequence, which lasts roughly thirty minutes, disappears, and appears nearly twenty times. *Kalidas'* core drama begins only after this segment.

Kalki describes the film's plot thus -

*"An arrogant Princess who feels that there is none to equal her intellect is wedded to a simpleton so dull that he sees a tree branch whilst sitting on its very tip. The bride discovers on the wedding night that her husband – whom she had married under the impression that he was a great pundit – is, in truth, a dimwit beyond measure. He prays to Kali Mata. The Goddess' grace transforms the dunce into a wise scholar."*

That, in a nutshell, is *Kalidas'* story. The canonical tale of *Kalidas* is more elaborate and contains more details. However, as the movie was shot as a trial effort and only four reels long, the production was able to capture only parts of the narrative. *Kalidas* also fell short of the standard in sound quality since the film was made when sound recording technology was still under development—the titular role played by a Telugu artiste, V.R. Gangadhar Rao, B.A. T.P. Rajalakshmi played Princess Vidhyadhari. The drama featured all artists speaking in Telugu and concluded after about forty minutes.



Following this, Rajalakshmi appears dressed as a *kurathi* (gypsy) and joins a stoutly-built *kuravan* played by Hadi, a.k.a S. M.Hadi (Mommmed Hadi). The couple danced together for about twenty minutes.

This was the *Kalidas* seen by audiences back in the day. Did viewers hear Tamil on screen? Yes, they did. Did they hear Telugu? Yes, they heard that too. Did that make *Kalidas* the first Tamil-Telugu talkie? Yes, it did. Thus ran the logic that paved the way for the

prevailing misconception, even though what audiences saw were three distinct short films compiled as a single presentation.

Consider this - the same artiste who sang and danced in praise of Gandhiji's *khadi* movement also appeared as *Kalidas'* wife, but wasn't Gandhiji's period different from that of the poet *Kalidas*? And why does *Kalidas'* wife later take on the guise of a *kurathi* and dance with a stout *kuravan*? What could be the connection between these storylines? More to the point, what connection could these two segments have with the title *Kalidas*? No one asked these questions back then. As it was a common practice back then - multilingual features and montages were nothing new. The audiences knew that this was just a film, a piece of entertainment;



Let us go back in time to a period preceding 1931. In the early years of cinema, it was a common practice to screen multiple films together. Later, narrative films emerged. When *Kalidas* was released in 1931, silent films were still

popular. In silent films, language is not a barrier; in fact, there was no role for language at all. Silent films produced in South India/ Tamil Nadu was screened all across India and even in foreign countries. Where necessary, the films carried subtitles and explained the dialogue and scenes. That was all it took. Anyone could screen silent films anywhere. This was the norm. And English was always there.



In reality, artists spoke the languages they knew while making silent films. That was the only way they could express natural emotions in their performance. The English spoke English, and the Tamilians spoke Tamil. Many of the actors featured in vintage silent films from India were foreigners or Anglo-Indians. Those who lived through those days also shared the following amusing detail - when subtitles were displayed during screenings, everyone would begin to read them aloud all at once, creating a tremendous din. Only those who could read could appreciate and understand the subtitles. In addition to subtitles, some narrators helped explain the story. These anecdotes help us know that regional variations were not considered important or necessary; India, with its diverse wealth of languages, was unique. Films were thus adapted to suit the languages of the regions where they were screened. It is important to remember that silent films continued to be produced and screened in India until the end of 1933. Our silent films were, on average, ten reels long and always accompanied by other films or performances. Any specific rule did not bind this combination; Hollywood films were often screened along with Indian-language films. In short, it was a mixed bag - a variety show.

When sound technology was introduced in the industry, the first films made in Indian languages were short features of song and dance performed by popular cinema actors, stage

actors and gramophone singers. It's easy to imagine that audiences would have been quite captivated by these short films.

Also included were speeches by national leaders and events relating to them. Short films from the inland were showcased attractively, along with full-length foreign films. It was also common to compile and screen individual short films together. They were collectively given a title and censored as a single unit without separate titles. The entire compilation was often named after the production company, such as '*Production Number 1*,' '*Production Number 2*' and so on.

Let us examine the details of a compilation named '*Sri Krishna Film Company Program*' released before even *Alam Ara*, the production contained seventeen segments and ran to eight reels. These seventeen segments comprised of Hindi songs (more than four), Gujarati songs, chorus songs, solo songs, Arabic songs, orchestral scores and more. Since this practice was quite prevalent in Indian productions of the time, it was not considered alien or new when *Kalidas* appeared, much in the same vein.

The practice of screening the main feature film along with additional short films continued even after *Kalidas* and during the popularization of talkies. It was almost as if single films were never accorded exclusive screenings, as they were always accompanied by at least one short film. Moreover, short films were often screened together as a compilation, even in the 1940s. Full-length feature films also comprised a medley of languages - a common practice. An interesting example can be seen in a 1936 Kannada talkie *Samsara Nowka*, which included a Tamil song from *Pattinathar* (1936). That *Kalidas* was also a montage and thus was not considered unique.

It is unclear whether *Kalidas* was censored as a single unit. Was the censorship certificate number 1598 issued in Madras (presently Chennai) only for the *Kalidas* segment of the film, or did it encompass the other two parts as well? It can be verified by accessing Madras' censorship records.

Kalki also mentions that Tamil-speaking *bhagavathars* (Hindu priests) often sang on stage in Telugu, Hindustani, Malayalam, Kannada, Gujarati, and sometimes even English. He says such was the case in Tamil theatre, too. It is clear, then, that multilingualism was a standard practice in the then-vast Madras presidency. This shows that the concept of a standalone, full-length film (as we understand it today) did not exist back then.

Given this context, it is unsurprising that no one found it unusual that two distinct films were screened along with the story of *Kalidas*. No one paid much attention to the languages, either. Kalki also didn't seem to have given it much thought, as is evident from his writings. Despite believing that the film '*Kalidas*' was in Tamil, he expressed his disappointment and contradiction in his writings due to the film not being in Tamil. It is possible that Kalki realized that the feature was a montage of three short films, but to the public, it was a single film titled *Kalidas*. This is where the complexity is.

The fact remains that these three short films can be separated without impacting continuity. The first short film that was shown (the song sequences) and the third short film

# “KALIDAS”

100% Talking, Singing and Dancing.

**PROGRAMME OF CONSISTS OF :-**

- 3 Reels of National Songs, Kirtanam, love songs and dance.
- 2 Reels of Kurathi dance enacted by Miss T. P. Rajalakshmi, one of her successful acts on the stage and
- 4 Reels of “Kalidas” one of his comedies and love portion of his life.

**Best Music, enchanting dances and gorgeous settings, sound recording at its best.**

(the *kurathi* dance) were both produced by Sagar Movie Tone even before the core segment containing the tale of *Kalidas*; in fact, the latter was produced by Imperial Movie Tone and was distinct from the other two segments in terms of cast, crew and language. The two production companies likely had close connections and commercial deals, but the company banners indicate they were separate entities. And yet, no one recognized any such distinction regarding the feature of *Kalidas*.

This, then, is the reason for the confusion surrounding *Kalidas*. It is a situation that has prevailed up until the current day. But we understand the truth now, at the very least. What would the answer be if one were asked the name of the first Tamil film? “It is... the *variety songs*... no, no, the

*kurathi dance*...” If pressed for more detail, one would reply, “The features that appeared in *Kalidas*.” It is impossible to avoid mentioning *Kalidas* in this regard. This is what has happened and what continues to happen.

These three were separate films in their own right, as evident from the songbooks and film advertisements released then. This was not given enough attention or importance.

Documents of the time clearly outline details of the other two shorts, which were unfortunately paid little notice.

There is also evidence that the ‘Tamil variety songs and dance’ sequences by T.P. Rajalakshmi were later included in a Hindi talkie *Dagabaz Ashak* that came after *Kalidas*. The same logic that calls the Telugu film *Kalidas* a Tamil talkie would then call the Hindi *Dagabaz Ashak* a Tamil film. It remains unclear whether this screening happened before October 31, 1931. It is unlikely, though - it appears that all three segments in *Kalidas* were censored as a single compilation and screened on October 31, 1931, for the first time.

Our 100% Tamil  
Talkies.

**1. HARISCHANDRA**

V. S. Sunderesa Iyer  
and  
D. R. Muthulaxmi.

**2. GALAVA RISHI  
or CHITRA  
SENOPAKYANA**

V. S. Sunderesa Iyer  
and  
D. R. Muthulaxmi

**3. KALIDAS and  
KURTHI DANCE  
(Tamil & Telugu)**

with  
T. P. Rajalakshmi.

**COME AND HEAR**

FIRST INDIAN TAMIL & TELUGU  
TALKIE

MISS.

**T. P. Rajalakshmi**

(Famous Southern Indian Stage Star)

IN

**KALIDAS**

100% TALKING  
SINGING DANCING

PRODUCED BY IMPERIAL MOVIE-TONE  
SELECTED KIRTHANAMS—  
LOVE SONGS AND A SPECIAL  
KORATHI DANCE.

Also Showing

TECHNICOLOR AUDIO RE-  
VIEW AND PATHE GAZETTE

AT

**Kinema Central**

(House of Perfect Sound)

FROM SAT. 31st Oct.  
1931—ONE WEEK.

### **Kalidas, a Telugu Talkie Feature - Sifting through the evidence**

The renowned writer Kalki watched the film *Kalidas* in Chennai in 1931 and penned a lengthy review for the November 16, 1931, issue of *Ananda Vikatan*. This review, which serves as a primary piece of evidence today, is considered Kalki's first film review. Kalki is believed to be the first Tamil writer to have written film reviews. Only the necessary portions from this valuable article are here:

*Oh dear! Forgive me, I had quite forgotten. I should have realized that readers from other towns would not know what a talkie is. 'Talkie' is an English word originating from the word 'talk', meaning to speak. A film that contains speech is called a talkie. My love for Tamil wanted to call this a Tamil pechi, not a Tamil talkie. But now that I have seen it, I have decided to call it a Tamil paati - there is no Tamil speech in it, after all. The only talk it features is in Telugu. But sprinkled in between were a few Tamil songs. So, it was more along the lines of a harikatha, and it is only right that I call it a Tamil paati. If you wish, you may call it a Telugu pechi.*

Kalki makes a clever Tamil pun in his review above. The Tamil word for talk or speech is *pechu*, and the word for song is *paatu*; on the other hand, *pechi* and *paati* denote women, the latter meaning grandmother. Kalki meant that with Tamil featured only in its songs, *Kalidas* was not a Tamil talkie but a Tamil musical. It is to be noted that there exists a strong misapprehension that Kalki made such a statement because *Kalidas* contained 50 songs. Where did this notion come from? It is false - *Kalidas* only contained eight songs across all three segments.

### **T.P. Rajalakshmi's remarks - A crucial testimony to the fact**

In our analysis of *Kalidas*, T.P. Rajalakshmi's remarks deserve scrutiny. They run thus:

*"H.M. Reddy told me they planned to produce a new talkie film in Bombay and wanted me to sing some Tamil songs as the first test. He said they would film it exactly as I sang and give me 1000 rupees. The thought of seeing and hearing myself sing filled me with a unique excitement. I agreed and went to Bombay. I sang the songs, and they recorded them precisely as I wanted. I felt an indescribable joy.*

*"One day, H.M. Reddy had a chat with me. He asked me what I knew [to do]. I replied that I was familiar with performing kurathi songs and dances. He filmed my performance and later produced a short Telugu talkie titled *Kalidas*. I received the chance to play the princess role in the film. Whatever he said in Telugu, I translated it into Tamil and delivered it as dialogue. This is how the first talkie came to be as a miscellany."*

### **L.V. Prasad**

L.V. Prasad, who starred in both *Alam Ara* and *Kalidas*, unequivocally stated in his article *Fruits*

When I was working with Arde-shir Irani, H. M. Reddy came to Bombay for producing his *Kalidas* in Telugu. He gave me an acting role in his picture.

of *Experience* (Picturpost, July 1962 and *PesumPadam*, June 1962) that *Kalidas* was a Telugu talkie. He further revealed that during his time in the film, he had a minor role as a shepherd in a village scene.

### T.V. Ramanath - Editor, *Pesum Padam* Film magazine



T. V. Ramanath

In a 1950s issue of the magazine *PesumPadam*, its editor T.V. Ramanath (born on 04.05.1911) wrote: "*In the film Kalidas, the dialogues were in Telugu while the songs were in Tamil. While people were surprised that the film was a talkie, they didn't seem to mind the mix of languages.*"

Because T.P. Rajalakshmi was a Tamil speaker and V.R. Gangadhar was Telugu, subsequent scholars have interpreted this statement to mean that the hero spoke Telugu while the heroine spoke Tamil. As for claims that Hindi and Urdu were also used in *Kalidas*, I have not found any direct evidence to substantiate the same. I am therefore not inclined to endorse this point of view. However, it is an uncontestable fact that the film contained both Tamil and Telugu languages. If we consider that Tamil dialogue was present in any one or all three of the compilations and give it the benefit of the doubt, it would reach the status of a multilingual film.

### More on *Kalidas*



The overseas marketing campaign for *Kalidas* exaggerated its Tamil identity and obscured its Telugu nature in countries with substantial Tamil communities.

All three segments of the film, directed by H.M. Reddy and put together, had nine reels\* (three for the first, four for the second and two for the third) and a runtime of roughly 1.8 hours. How could it have contained 50 songs? The songbooks themselves specify only eight songs, all of which were sung by female characters. The person who sang all the songs was none other than T.P. Rajalakshmi.

*(A reel is typically defined as a continuous length of film roll with a beginning and an end. In standard cinema practice, a reel is usually 1,000 feet long. The final reel of a film might be shorter than 1,000 feet or longer due to the varying lengths of scenes and the need to accommodate a complete story segment within a single reel. A 35mm film reel of 1,000ft takes approximately 11 minutes to run through a projector).*

All fine so far, then. Another peculiarity is that *Kalidas* was advertised as the first Tamil and



Telugu Talkie, as is clear from records of its songbook and promotional material. Why isn't it touted as the first Telugu talkie and the first Tamil talkie? The answer is as follows: There is a belief that the Telugu film *Bhakta Prahlada* was released before *Kalidas* on 15.9.1931 and, therefore, is the first Telugu talkie. Consequently, *Kalidas* has

been often considered the first Tamil talkie. However, Dr Rental Jayadeva discovered through documentary evidence that *Bhakta Prahlada* was released on 6.3.1932 - much later than *Kalidas*.

In those days, only a few copies of a film were printed. It is also evident that the contemporary practice of film revivals was not prevalent back then. Furthermore, while it is true that *Kalidas* was a box-office hit - it ran for roughly one week in a few theatres equipped with sound facilities - only two shows were screened on weekdays and three on holidays. It would be interesting to calculate how many people watched the film after its release, recorded their thoughts, and how many are still alive today.

This brings us to the end of this chapter. We have seen the reasons behind the common misconception surrounding *Kalidas*, even among those who later served as editors in cinema magazines. There are a multitude of opinions and urban legends about *Kalidas*, not all of which are true. Most of these are, by and large, later additions and misapprehensions. It is hard to find fault with them, though. After all, these errors are an invariable product of the passage of time and mark the progress we have made today.

(The author has published other research articles on *Kalidas*, which are more detailed. Only the necessary portions have been provided here).

The distributor of *Kalidas* was Bangalore-based Select Pictures Circuit. Select Pictures Circuit was a prominent distributor and exhibitor for film production companies like Imperial Film Company and Sagar Film Company. Dr. Ambalal Patel and Chimanlal Desai, the proprietors of Select Pictures Circuit and Sagar Film Company, were business partners with renowned filmmaker Ardeshir Irani of Imperial Movie Tone.

Stephen Putnam Hughes is right when he described *Kalidas* as an "unfortunate conglomerate medley." While he may not have intended to convey the full extent of its meaning, his words accurately capture the film's chaotic nature.

A full-length feature film titled *Kavirathna Kalidas*, directed by T.C. Vadivelu Nayagar was released in 1936. The earlier *Kalidas* is often confused with this one. And so, stills from the later film and the name of M.R. Santhanalakshmi are bandied about in error.



We saw that *Kalidas* is not the first Tamil talkie. This begs the question – which film can be credited as the first Tamil talkie with no hesitation whatsoever? Nearly everyone to date avers the honour goes to *Galava*. But the film that followed *Kalidas* was *Raja Harischandra*.

Following the clarification regarding the film '*Kalidas*', the filmmakers would have engaged in commercial competition and claimed rights, wouldn't they? Yes, they did. That's why the phrase 'Truly the first full-length talkie in distinctive Tamil'... appeared in the advertisement for *Raja Harichandra*.

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**S. Muthuvel authored three books on film history, including two monographs, and have published numerous film history articles in Tamil.**