Abstract

The 1970s Tamil Cinema and the Post-classical Turn

This paper engages with the significant Tamil films of the 1970s to explore the way these films were distinct from much of the films made by and mostly in the Madras studios, like Modern Theaters, AVM, Gemini, and Vijaya-Vauhini, during the earlier decades. This paper interrogates the seminal moment in the history of Tamil cinema, when films like *Aval Appadiththan* (That's the way she is, 1978), *Agraharathil Oru Kazhuthai* (Donkey in an elite colony, 1978), *16 Vayathiniley* (At age sixteen, 1977) and *Uthirippookkal* (Fallen flowers, 1979), marked by ambiguous and dark protagonists, new subjectivity, avoidance of clichéd and cathartic closures, experiments in cinematography and editing, and shooting on locations, signaled the transition of Tamil cinema from the classical period of the studio system to the post-classical.

The 1970s Tamil Cinema and the Post-classical Turn

The 70s in Tamil cinema marked a unique time when a distinct transition from the old to the new occurred. The studio system, which was on the decline from the mid-60s, lost its power over the film industry, and in its place emerged independent producers and technicians, who now shaped Tamil cinema by dictating the form and content of its films. Simultaneous to the fading away of the centrality of the studio system, its biggest stars MGR (Maruthur Gopalan Ramachandran) and Sivaji Ganesan also lost their preeminence as the key players who substantially dictated the economics of the industry through their dominance of the box-office for over two decades. These changes marked a dramatic shift of power away from a studio system that was arguably the biggest in the private sector outside the classical Hollywood. This decentering of the power and control of the Madras studios, which dominated not only Tamil but also Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam cinemas for over three decades, thus, marks the 70s as the most significant decade in the history of South Asian Cinema.

Although the 50s and the 60s are often nostalgically referred to as the "golden period" of the Madras studios, their dominance was already undermined in the 60s by the rising power of individual stars, but the studios could still coexist with the stars and exercise control over production and distribution by financing and offering their facilities to outside producers. Thus, it was only in the 70s that Tamil cinema established its identity as a cinema driven by independent producers and technicians, who moved away from the studio infrastructure and its formulaic narratives in search of a new style. Therefore, in this paper, I engage with the significant Tamil films of the 70s to

interrogate this unique decade when all the films made could not be co-opted as Madras studio pictures, since the form and content of many of the landmark films were distinct from much of the films made by and mostly in the Madras studios—particularly the major ones like the Modern Theaters, AVM, Gemini, and Vijaya-Vauhini—during the earlier decades. This period, thus, signified a seminal moment in the history of the Tamil cinema of the transition from the classical period of the studio system to the post-classical. Although postclassical has become a loaded term as far as film studies is concerned, I prefer to use it in its hyphenated form as it informs us of the ringing-out of the old and the ringing-in of the new of the 70s Tamil cinema, and the conflation of the echoes of the old and the new through its hyphen.

By the classical period (of Tamil cinema), I refer to a certain classicism entailed in the style, storytelling, modes of production, and technology of the (Madras) studio system (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson). Until the late 60s, Tamil cinema was marked by the uniformity in the narratives, which generally favored the predominant genre of the melodrama, and the modes of production driven by the studio system and the stars, and the technology available mainly through the studios for production and postproduction. However, with the fading away of the studio system in the 70s, all the above factors began to loose their homogeneity. Though the standardization of an earlier industrial practice too was defined and dialectically driven by variance, as exemplified by the films of auteurs like Shridhar, it was the 70s that marked Tamil cinema's uniqueness as predominantly driven by differentiation, not only with an earlier classical style but also among the different types of films which emerged particularly from the mid-70s onwards.

Therefore my point of departure is Bordwell's later observations on the continuity and change in Hollywood from the 60s onward, and his claim that classical narrative has the stability to explain the contemporary changes in storytelling and style as it has the potential to subsume difference by co-opting variations (Bordwell 14). Though the traces of the classical is present in the 70s Tamil films, it is the "post" which defines the decade—the period "after" the complete domination of the studio system and its stars, when Tamil cinema was redefined by films which emblematized the spirit of experimentation.

Before exploring the 70s Tamil films, let us look at the discourse surrounding the postclassical which is inextricably tied to (classical) Hollywood: After their compelling analysis of the film *Die Hard* (1988), and arguing for it as falling under both the rubric of the classical as well as the postclassical, Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland conclude by comparing their act of classification to rotating a crystal due to its interpretive malleability (Elsaesser 289). In their reading *Die Hard,* "can neither be situated conceptually in a linear, progressive, chronological line nor pictured as a dialectical or directly antagonist relationship (to the classical)" (79). Elsaesser's analysis foregrounds the tenuousness in labeling randomly chosen films; therefore, for my claim regarding the post-classical in Tamil cinema, which is not predicated on any one film, I will explore the 70s in a linear, progressive, and chronological order for the provenance and entrenchment of the post-classical period. I will interrogate the decline in the productivity of the major Madras studios as well as the descent of its main stars to demonstrate how the studios became a nonentity, particularly during the second-half of the 70s, when it was the challenges to the studio-inflected classical narrative and style

that attracted the audience to the theaters. Such a critical evaluation of the 70s, I believe, will enable our understanding of the significance and uniqueness of the post-classical turn that defined the specificity of the Tamil cinema by undergirding its narratives with regional and native ethos, unlike in the case of Hollywood where the postclassical 70s cinema, became a conduit to the expansive New Hollywood of the 80s. In Madras, however, the 70s experimentation with form and thematic was a means to uncover the singularity of Tamil cinema/culture by filtering it from the stereotypical Madras(i) studio picture/melodramas.

Tamil cinema scholars differ widely in their assessment of the number of studios which were in Madras: while Theodore S. Baskaran accounts for 98 by the end of 1998, Venkatesh Chakravarthy argues that the total would never have exceeded 30 (Baskaran 89; Chakravarthy). This huge discrepancy could be reasoned out to the lack of a standard definition as even a standalone dubbing facility was often addressed as a studio. Nonetheless, as studios which were active for at least 3 decades, and which had all the facilities for production and postproduction including a laboratory under one roof, only 5 qualify to be considered as the major ones: The Modern Theaters, AVM, Gemini, Vijaya-Vauhini, and Prasad Studios.

The Modern Theaters Ltd., oldest among the majors produced 116 films between 1937 and 1982 (Venkataswamy 169-74). During the 50s it produced 36 films, but in the 60s only 24; it further dwindled in the 70s to 5, none of which were box-office successes. After 3 more productions in the early eighties, The Modern Theaters Ltd. closed down in 1982 (150-61). The Modern Theatres was once at the forefront of innovation exemplified

by its special effects, particularly during the inaugural "title sequence," and was the unparalleled pioneer among the Madras studios—producer of the first Malayalam film *Balan* (1938); producer of the first color film in Tamil (*Alibabavum Narpathu Thirudargalum*/ Ali Baba and Forty Thieves, 1956); known for its international collaborations: seven films in Sinhalese in partnership with Ceylonese producers, and one in English (*The Jungle*, 1952). From the 50s when it was on top of the market controlling genres, stars, and the scales of production, 60s was a descent, and 70s a steep decline.

In contrast to the defunct Modern Theatres, the most prolific of all majors, the AVM Studios, has announced its 175th feature film recently; nonetheless, the 70s marked its lowest output ever since it began production in 1945.[i] From 1968 to 1976, AVM produced only 17 films, and thereafter no films until 1980. Venkatesh Chakravarthy reasons the low output to three major factors: in 1968, the workers went on strike, demanding salary on par with the workers of Vijaya-Vauhini studios, which led to the shutting down of its operations for 18 months; the second major strike again in 1975; and the general economic crisis for the studios during the later half of the seventies: it was a time of recession, and many studios in Madras had to rent their floors to organizations like the Food Corporation of India which were looking for warehouse space; however, AVM tried to survive the crisis by reorganizing their studio space into a massive theater, a post-production sound unit, and retaining four of its studio floors (Chakravarthy: "Naam Iruvar" 50-53). From 1947 onward, AVM had produced an average of 4 films a year with 22 major hits by the end of the 60s; therefore, the 70s—with an average of less than 2 per year—indicate, like in the case of Modern Theaters, a sudden fall in the level of its operations (Anandan 7-43).[ii] When AVM released its carefully mounted and well

publicized film every quarter till the 60s, the boxoffice success of most of its films, and their innovative scripts which anticipated the changes in the tastes of the audience, became the signifier of the "pulse of the masses" for most producers (Suryanarayanan). Besides, AVM Studios regularly entered into "package" contracts with outside producers by offering them their entire facilities including the raw stock and the processed final prints on credit for a share in the profits. Thus AVM was the nucleus of the Tamil film industry; for example, Sivaji Ganesan's highly successful and landmark films in the early 60s were in partnership with AVM but were released by producers under their own banners (Anandan).

The decline in the 70s is mirrored by the history of Vijaya-Vauhini Studios as well. With thirteen floors (Vahini-13 and Vijaya-2), it was arguably the biggest studio in Asia in the 50s and 60s, and produced 45 films from 1950-1980: 15 films in the 50s, 18 films in the 60s, 12 films in the 70s. Vijaya-Vauhini's significance lay in the trends it could set through its bilingual films in the Tamil and Telugu market through its sophisticated production values, achieved through a team of technicians like the legendary cinematographer Marcus Bartley. Nonetheless, Vijaya-Vauhini, like AVM, did not produce any Tamil film during the second half of the 70s; thus, signifying the end of Madras studios as the predominant production houses of Tamil cinema.

Gemini Studios too, reeling under the death of its visionary founder S.S. Vasan— the DeMille of India known for his spectacles like *Chandralekha* (1948)—on 26 August 1969, saw its output shrinking in the 70s: in the 50s it had produced 7 Tamil films; in the 60s 4; and the 70s 2; whereas in Hindi the corresponding figures were 8, 7, and 7. Thus, it was interested in maximizing income by catering to a national market in the 70s rather

than producing Tamil films. The Hindi version of *Chandralekha* (1948), which was highly successful all over India, established Vasan's reputation as an unparalleled producer on an epic scale, and gave him the clout to cast stars like Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand in *Insaaniyat* (1955), and Dilip Kumar and Raaj Kumar in *Paigham/Message* (1959). Though Gemini studios continued to work with iconic figures like Rajesh Khanna (*Aurat*/Woman, 1967) and Amitabh Bachchan (*Sanjog*/Coincidence, 1971) during the later decades, they had not yet attained their star status, thus, exemplifying the descending graph of Gemini from the 50s to the 70s.

The fifth major, Prasad Studios, focused in the 70s on offering the best postproduction facilities in India and produced only one Tamil film—*Piriya Vidai* (The Long Goodbye, 1975). Besides, founder L.V. Prasad's not directing a Tamil film after the successful *Iruvar Ullam* (The minds of the duo, 1963), in which he worked with Sivaji Ganesan, points to the other important dynamic of the studio period: MGR and Sivaji established themselves as bankable stars by the end of the 50s—MGR through the huge success of *Madurai Veeran* (The Soldier of Madurai, 1956), and Sivaji through his double role in *Uthamaputhiran* (The ideal son, 1958) (Baskaran 57). As a consequence, the 60s saw them becoming power centers, and the industry reorganized itself around these two stars in its objective of releasing almost a film every week: of the 485 Tamil films produced in the 60s, Sivaji acted in 75, and MGR in 60, thus, between them acting in 27.8 % of the total films as heroes. But, the 70s saw a decline: Sivaji acted in 72 films and MGR only in 30 out of a total of 641, thus, together accounting for only 15.9% of the films (Anandan 13-28).

The decline on the part of MGR is obvious, since he did not act in movies towards the end of the decade, as he became the first popular star in India to become the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu in 1977. MGR, who was a member of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam/Dravidian Progressive Front, and a Member of the Legislative Council, elected from the St. Thomas Mount constituency in Chennai (in 1967, and 1971), was not happy when he was given the party treasurer's post instead of a ministry after his mammoth win in the 1971 elections. Then-Chief Minister, M. Karunanidhi, wanted to undermine MGR's enormous popularity and the incomparable network of his fan clubs, and launched his son Mu Ka. Muthu in a film scripted by him with a protagonist as an imitation of MGR's persona. The spiraling of Muthu fan clubs at the behest of the DMK party functionaries and their financial incentives angered MGR's fans, and "the secretaries of eight hundred of his fan clubs threatened to disaffiliate their clubs from the DMK, forcing Karunanidhi to disband the Muthu clubs (Subramanian 243-44)." When an increasingly alienated MGR, responding to the charges of corruption against the party by the media, asked for the disclosure of the assets of party members and their relatives, he was suspended from the party on 10 October 1972. In a week, MGR formed his own party—the ADMK (Anna Dravidian Progressive Front)—on 17 October 1972. Later, the ADMK won the state legislative elections in 1977, and MGR became the Chief Minister, and remained so till his death in 1987 by winning the elections in 1980 and 1984 (243-330; "Celluloid Connection"). The 70s, therefore, was the most crucial decade in the career of arguably India's most popular star of the last century. Although the number of his films declined, MGR's successful transition from celluloid to politics as a mass hero

while blurring the line between cinema and life prefigured the increasing visibility of stars in active politics.

The year 1977, thus, was seminal, as it saw the aura surrounding MGR reach its teleological fruition and validate the Dravidian movement's investment in film as a preeminent tool for ideological dissemination: MGR's persona was carefully constructed from the 50s by a team of writers, directors, and producers, who borrowed the swashbuckler action-hero stereotype from Hollywood, especially from the films of MGR's idols Erroll Flynn and Douglas Fairbanks Jr., and juxtaposed it effectively with the staple of the melodrama of indigenous folklore or the mythos of an Oedipal son who could balance the excessive attachment toward for his mother with the taming of the shrew(s) and freeing the downtrodden. More over, MGR's charisma as an innocent but a rebellious villager against injustice appealed to his fans in the nooks and corners of Tamilnadu, and contributed to the entrenchment of the industry, particularly in terms of box-office returns from villages, and through the expanding network of exhibition outlets—the semi-permanent and touring theaters in the semi-urban and rural areas.

Nonetheless, by the 70s MGR's persona subsumed the protagonist and the narrative of his films, as exemplified by *Nam Naadu* (Our Country) released in November 1969. The film produced by Vijaya-Vauhini recycled for its narrative the growing resentment of the masses over the corruption in the DMK government, particularly after the demise of Annadurai and Karunanidhi's taking over of the leadership in 1969. In *Nam Naadu,* MGR plays an honest clerk in the Mayor's office who is forced to contest the elections due to rampant corruption. MGR utilized the film to critique his own party, the DMK, thorough the idiom of the propaganda song, a staple of

most MGR films: for instance, the lines, "*Vizi Pola Enni Nam Mozi Kaakka Vendum*/Like the eyes we must protect our language; *Thavarana Perku Ner Vazikaata Vendum*/Show the right path to the misguided ones; *Jana Naayagathil Naam Ellorum Mannar*/In democracy we are all kings; *Thennattu Gandhi Annaalil Sonnar*/As told by the Southern Gandhi (Annadurai)," alludes to the Dravidian ideology by invoking Tamil language, but is used by MGR to critique Karunanidhi and recall the greatness of Annadurai. Later, when MGR founded the ADMK, his party's candidate Maayathevar contested and won the by-election at Dindugal in 1973. *Nam Naadu* was rereleased to capitalize on the euphoria, and stock shots of MGR and Maayathevar celebrating the electoral victory was inserted into the film when MGR celebrates his success in the mayoral elections (Suryanarayanan). Furthermore, the black and red colored flag of the DMK, which flies at the Mayor's office in the film, was changed to the tricolored—black, white and red— one of the ADMK. Thus, MGR's persona subsumed not only the characters he played on screen and dictated the way his films will be showcased and exhibited, but also undermined the reputation of Vijaya-Vauhini as producers of classical films with a seamless narrative that sustain an illusion of reality. The rupturing of the national through the regional in the narrative, which alludes to a Naadu/country while invoking a Southern/regional Gandhi, enabled the space for the juxtaposition of the Mayoral/metropolitan electoral success with that of the regional/Dindugal district.

Though MGR's persona as the stereotypical oppressed, epitomized by the titles of his films—*Mattukara Velan* (Cowherd Velan, 1970), *Rickshakkaran* (Rickshawpuller, 1971), and *Meenava Nanban* (Fisherman's friend, 1977)—continued through the 70s, the aging star's pull at the box office was waning: in the 70s, only 9 of his 30 films had huge

success (30%). The paucity of fresh ideas to feed an aging star's young romantic persona on the part of his regular writers led MGR to look elsewhere for the stories: the 70s marked significant remakes in MGR's career, including three consecutive remakes from Hindi—*Ninaithadhai Mudippavan* (Achiever of goals, 1974)/*Sacha Jhutha* (True and false, 1970), *Naalai Namade* (Tomorrow is ours, 1975)/*Yaadon Ki Baarat* (Procession of memories, 1973), and *Pallandu Vazhga* (Long live!, 1975)/*Do Aankhen Barah Haath* (Two eyes and twelve hands, 1957). However, none of them succeeded like the originals (Suryanarayanan).

This mirrors Sivaji's career when he had 12 remakes in the 70s, accounting for one out of six of his films, thus, underscoring the changed scenario when producers wanted to play safe. However, 1972 was a year of phenomenal success for Sivaji—he had six hits till *Bharatha Vilas* (his first film of 1973). But the very next film presaged Sivaji's fading charisma as a hero at the box-office and his transformation into a character actor by the 80s: *Raja Raja Cholan* (Chola Emperor Rajaraja, 1973), the first cinemascope film in Tamil on the life of the Chola emperor Rajaraja, bombed at the box-office; thereafter, the success rate of his films dwindled ("Strokes"). Subsequently, many of his films after 1974, were under production for a long time due to financial hurdles, and fared miserably at the box-office when released (Anandan).

Nevertheless, Sivaji, more than anybody else, epitomized the efficiency of the Madras Studios: in 23 years, from *Parasakthi* (1952) till *Avan Than Manithan* (He is the man, 1975), he had acted in 175 films, i.e. an average of 7.6 films a year. In a career spanning more than 4 decades, he acted in 306 films, of which 288 were lead roles. Therefore, the mid-70s with Sivaji's career on decline and MGR's gradual exit from

films marked the end of an era: an era marked not merely by the domination of the studio system through its productions and that of its collaborators, the independent producers, who functioned like satellites around the stars, but also the preeminence of studio-trained technicians and their aesthetics of indoor lighting (inspired by the three-point Hollywood style) and use of the sturdy Mitchell camera, in-camera special effects, continuity editing, and seamless narratives centered on melodrama and action framed in city/village locales mostly designed inside the studio.

The mid-70s was also the time, when the graduates from the Film and Television Institute of India, Poona, and the Institute of Film Technology, Madras, made their presence felt; scholars regard the 70s as the only decade when Tamil cinema had the semblance of an art movement. Films like *Thagam* (Thirst, 1974), *Thikkatra Parvathi* (Abandoned Parvathi, 1974), *Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal* (Some people…at some moments, 1977), *Agraharathil Oru Kazuthai* (Donkey in an elite colony, 1978), *Aval Appadiththan* (That is the way she is, 1978), *Oru Nadigai Natakam Parkiraal* (An actress watches a play, 1978), *Kudisai* (Hut, 1979), constitute the only period in the history of Tamil cinema when there was a sustained attempt towards an alternative form of cinema.

Of these films, *Aval Appadiththan* reflected most the aspirations for change in Tamil filmmakers and audience in a changed environment: in 1978, the International Film Festival was held in Madras, apart from the film appreciation course conducted by the National Film Archives, which energized the film society movement in Madras. In this backdrop, a young director from the Madras film school, C. Rudraiah, teamed up with his classmates and cinematographers, Nallusamy and Gnansekaran, to make a film

on the triangular relationship of a documentary filmmaker, an independent woman and her sexist boss, and signed-up the emerging stars of the 70s: Arun (Kamalahasan), invested in documenting the plight of women, arrives in Madras from Coimbatore and falls in love with the enigmatic Manju (Sripriya), who is haunted by her past, and the life of her "wayward" mother. She works for the male chauvinist Thyagu (Rajinikanth). Arun falls in love with Manju, proposes and waits for her response, but by the time the reluctant Manju could make up her mind regarding marriage, he leaves for his hometown and returns with his newly married wife. The final sequence has Thyagu driving his car with the newly weds along with Manju from the station. On the way, Manju asks Arun's wife for her opinion on women's liberation. When Arun's wife expresses her ignorance on the subject, Manju retorts: "That's why you're happy." Then she abruptly asks Thyagu to stop the car and gets down on the way, and the car pulls away from her in the last shot: "All this could have been avoided if only she had a 'proper' mother! The last shot of the film leaves her on the road that is where liberated woman ends up. This final visual detail reveals the entire content of the film," observed Tamil's preeminent feminist writer, Ambai (Lakshmi 25), in her critique of the representation of women in Tamil cinema. Nevertheless, on reevaluation *Aval Appadithan* is considered by many to be a landmark Tamil film as it refrained from the cliché of the pseudo-feminist, a staple of the 80s and 90s Tamil cinema (Kumar). The climax of the film, while showcasing Manju's criticism of the complacent Arun's wife/Tamil women, complicates any easy access to her subjectivity by immediately positing her in a no woman's land from the audience's point of view—the any-space-whatever denies both the cathartic as well as a Brechtian understanding of her subjectivity (Deleuze 109).[iii] Manju's characterization, thus,

resonates with the atypical representation of women in the films of the legendary K.

Balachander, especially *Arangetram* (Debut, 1973), *Aval Oru Thodarkathai* (She's is a

never ending story, 1974).

Besides, to focus only on the narrative would be to miss the real significance of

the film. *Aval Appadiththan*, recalls the films of the "film school brats" of Hollywood and

Bombay in its technique—inspired by the French New Wave—of the use of jump cuts,

repeated zooms, extreme close-ups, and handheld camera. The easy availability of the

lightweight Arriflex 35-2c cameras in the 70s enabled location shooting, while the film

school training helped cinematographers to use minimal lights privileging realism which

was vastly different from the studio style—with high intensity key lights and the soft

filler-lights for the shadows. The film within the film—the documentary shot by Arun—

reflexively reveals the enthusiasm of these young filmmakers through a handheld camera

which, as it documents the documentary, records the spontaneous and insightful reactions

of women to Arun's question about equality, freedom and choice. The music was

composed by, another star on the horizon, Elaiyaraja, whose songs were used to

punctuate the interiority of the characters rather than as a spectacle or merely move the

plot forward.

The search for a new idiom was underscored by John Abraham's *Agraharathil*

Kazhudhai as well. John, and his cinematographer Ramachandra Babu, graduates from

the FTII, drew their inspiration from their mentor Ritwick Ghatak, Robert Bresson

(particularly *Au hasard Balthazar*, 1966), the political cinema of Latin America (mainly

that of Glauber Rocha) and the surrealism of Bunuel, to narrate the story of Prof.

Narayana Swamy, who provides refuge to a donkey (whose mother has been killed by a

mob), and a mute girl Uma—the caretaker of that donkey—in a village. The "evil"

donkey is held responsible, when Uma's stillborn child is found dead outside the temple,

and killed. Soon after, as the cremation of the donkey gets delayed in getting the suitable

(caste) person to light the pyre, miracles happen and the villagers start worshipping the

donkey. Ultimately, when the donkey is ritually cremated, the fire that spreads engulfs

the whole village except the professor and the girl. The screenwriter Venkat Saminathan,

criticized the film for its immaturity and unevenness, whereas others endorsed John's

political "cinema of imperfection" ("Nerthiyatra" 16-9). The film incited debates in the

media regarding casteist politics. Nonetheless, John's conflation of his leftist politics and

the mythos surrounding donkey as an abject figure goes beyond its critique of the

Brahmanical hegemony as it tries to shake a feudal society out of its slumber by

showcasing the absurd universe in which its bigots are enclosed. John's raw and

incoherent style was in polarity to the seamless, closed universe of both the classical

narratives—responsible for the creation of the MGR myth—and its

unthinking/superstitious audience. *Aval Appadiththan* and *Agraharathil Oru Kazhuthai*,

thus, challenged the classicism of the studio system through their formal innovations and

narrative style. However, the most enduring influence on Tamil cinema was from films

that were not so removed from the mainstream.

Barathiraja redefined popular Tamil cinema with his seminal film *16 Vayathiniley*

(At age sixteen, 1977): *Ananda Vikatan*, the popular Tamil weekly, praised the film for

representing village life with realism, and for avoiding the cliché of (studio) court and

police station in its poignant climax. Vikatan's technical reviewer, while complimenting

cinematographer P.S. Nivas, the Madras film school alumnus, for his framing of the lush

green village landscapes, drew attention to the error in focusing and advised the assistant/focus-puller to be alert: with the new Arriflex cameras mounted with zoom, while the mobility enabled shooting in any nook and corner, the focus-pulling became critical as slightly missing the mark meant the scene was going to be in soft focus. Besides, the lush green photography was made possible by the availability of cheaper Orwo color stock, which favored the green. The reviewer also criticized the dark scene where the villain asks for beedi (tobacco rolled inside dry leaves) at the kiosk, and wondered whether it was because of underexposure or under-developing in the lab: this draws attention to the film's aesthetics of location-shooting as well as available-light photography with minimum accessories (like reflectors in the outdoors). Such aesthetics also mirror the mode of production of an independent film with limited resources—the entire film was shot in Karnataka, the neighboring state, to qualify for a subsidy of Rupees 50000/$1200 approx. Regarding the editing, the reviewer points to the repetition of shots in the very beginning of the film: when the heroine waits at the railway station with expectation, the train leaves without the expected guest, and instead of a (reaction) shot of her disappointment, the (earlier) shot of her expectation is repeated. The meticulous attention to such details in a popular weekly reveals the informed audience of the 70s, who were mainly responsible for the success of films like *Aval Appadiththan* and *16 Vayathiniley*.

Bharathiraja had his training in the industry as an assistant to directors ranging from the arthouse-inclined Babu Nandancode to the veteran mainstream director of Kannada films, Puttanna Kanagal, which enabled him to combine the art-cinema sensibilities of location shooting and the use of non-professional actors with the

mainstream paradigms of melodrama, romance, songs, and action. Thus, he could rework the classical genre of a love triangle and experiment with its possibilities, and render *16 Vayathiniley* in the post-classical mold. While Rudraiah or John too experimented, their films could be described as anticipating the postmodern in their appeal to an increasingly modernizing and cinematically aware audience in urban cities, whereas Bharathiraja's film was catering to a larger audience which was rejecting the traditional studio-produced films and was prepared for the reinventions of style and the retelling of the stories they were familiar with.

The narrative of *16 Vayathiniley* revolves around the village girl Mayil (Sridevi), her distant and unattractive cousin Chappani (Kamalahasan), who is secretly in love with her, and the village rowdy Parattai (Rajnikanth). Mayil, aspires to be a teacher, but falls in love with the veterinarian who arrives from the city, and gives up her desire to pursue the teachers-training course in the city. But the veterinarian exploits her sexually and leaves the village; consequently, Mayil's mother dies of shame. Chappani supports the lonely and despondent Mayil, who begins to appreciate the innocence and commitment behind his appearance, and decides to get married to him. When an overjoyed Chappani goes to town to get the *thaali* (*mangalsutra/*sacred thread), Parattai, who had an eye for her from the beginning, enters her home and tries to rape her. Chappani returns in time to save Mayil but kills Parattai, and goes to jail.

This brief sketch informs us of the familiar territory the film treads, but what was unfamiliar was the framing of the entire story in a flashback through Mayil, who is waiting for Chappani to return, at the station. Unlike, earlier films like *Mother India* (1957) or its Tamil remake *Punniya Bhoomi* (1978), when the flashback ends there is no

closure in the classical sense, as Mayil is still waiting, and we are not informed as to how long it is going to be, though the (superimposed) title card assures us that Chappani will return and Mayil will be happy. Such a waiting invokes the poignant subjectivity of the ambiguous wait for freedom that the state of Emergency (imposed by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from June 1975 till March 1977) entailed—the film went into production immediately after the Emergency. Therefore, the plot of the classical love triangle was retooled to address a recent trauma: during the emergency, the MISA— Maintenance of Internal Security Act—could be imposed on anyone who disagreed, like the Dravidian ideologues or Tamil subnationalists, to imprison and maim, as exemplified by the lame protagonist Chappani. Bharathiraja had originally planned the film as a Film Finance Corporation project in black and white during the Emergency.

Nevertheless, today *16 Vaythiniley* has become synonymous with color and (outdoor) cinematography. "Bharathirajaa changed the course of Tamil cinema by taking the camera out of the studios and into the villages and its natural landscapes (Rao, 227-228). After the classical-studio period (from the 30s till the 60s) and before the invasion of video/MTVstyles in the 80s, this post-classical period, particularly from the mid-70s onward, when Bharathiraja visualized his songs through his unique style of repeated entry of faces in close-ups, freeze-frame shots, and symmetrical reversing of movement, marked a unique time in Tamil cinema. His narration and style of using long takes and improvisations for dramatic scenes instead of the shot/reverse shot technique of the studio-films energized the experimental impulse within mainstream cinema. For instance, addressing the audience directly/frontally through voiceover, improvising with local dialects, and symbolic and contrapuntal sound effects marked his use of sound. Parallel to

Bharathiraja's intervention in sound and images, was the challenge posed by Elaiyaraja's music to the accepted norms (Chakravarthy: "Mani Ratnamum" 289-90). Elaiyaraja was trained in western classical music; therefore, could combine the folk melodies with complex orchestral score. His music would become the mainstay of the post-classical period as his name enabled the marketing of films since he was one of the dominant stars in the package. Besides, the minimalist use of instruments made him affordable for the independent producers, and his ability to draw from composers like Bach to the very specific folk music of the narrative locale contributed to rare melodies and the success of these films.

But above all, 16 Vayathiniley's stature as the watershed of the 70s Tamil cinema lay in the seeking of its audience for a redefinition of Tamil culture and its specificity: during the 70s, parallel to the waning of hopes surrounding Nehruvian socialism in India, the dreams of an egalitarian Dravidian land, alluded by films like Parasakthi (1952), vanished in the state, and the audience were searching for ways beyond the empty rhetoric of the politicians to define themselves as Tamilians: earlier films of the Dravidian ideologues could posit Tamil chauvinism against the Hindi/Congress hegemony, but the 70s audience were not satisfied by such binaries: the outsider/veterinarian (still) arrives and destroys Mayil's dream, but the focus was on Mayil's readjustment to the realities and her discovery of the heart and spirit of the local/Chappani.

The next landmark film to foreground the changing directorial approaches was *Uthirippookkal* (Fallen Flowers, 1979)—the top favorite of many directors including Mani Ratnam: "If I get anywhere near what Mahendran did in Udhiri Pookkal, I'll be a

happy man ("Magic")." Mahendran, the director of the film was a scriptwriter from the industry, and he adapted Tamil's seminal writer Pudhumaipittan's short story *Chirrannai* (Stepmother) for his second film as a director. The film revolves around the family of the administrator of a local school Sundaravadivelu (Vijayan), his wife Lakshmi (Ashvini), two kids, sister-in-law Senbagam (Madhu Malini), and father-in-law (Charuhasan). Sundaravadivelu's character is complex and dark; he is a caring father but a misogynist who lusts after his sister-in-law. His patient wife and her helpless father put up with his schizophrenic persona of dignified calm and threatening turbulence. A new teacher (Sunder) and a health officer (Sarathbabu) arrive at the village, and Sundaravadivelu, on growing suspicious about his wife's friendship with the health officer, tortures her. He decides to divorce her and marry his sister-in-law, who has already fallen in love with the new teacher. When Sundaravadivelu's sick wife dies, he remarries another woman. Later when his sister-in-law goes to invite him for her marriage with the teacher, he disrobes and molests her. When the village comes to know about this, he is forced to walk— followed by the entire village— to the pond and commit suicide by entering into it. His children wait for him hoping that he would swim back.

The characterization of Sundaravadivelu was new to Tamil cinema: although he was an affectionate father and a prideful administrator, he was portrayed unambiguously as flawed, lecherous, and scheming, thus, leading the audience into the very heart of darkness of the village: the climax, when the entire village chases him, through its long shots suddenly distances the audience to meditate on a weak, conscienceless man juxtaposed with an equally inhumane and rigid society. It is rendered visually without any dialogue, and recalls Mahendran's authorial style of moving the camera away during

key conflictual moments, for instance, when Sundaravadivelu's slaps his wife, and imploring the audience to engage with the visual to interrogate the violence underneath. Besides, the sparse dialogues added to the instability which marked Sundaravadivelu's relationship with people, and the silence provided Elaiyaraja the space for differential theme music to etch out the characters, especially the laconic Lakshmi and her profound sorrow and her joyful moments with the children. It was a sign of the times that films like *Uthirippookkal*, which not merely inverted the verbose Tamil cinema on its head but deglamorized the village hero, celebrated silver jubilee (175 days): the synthetic village hero of the studios was replaced by a complex protagonist who propelled the audience to introspect the culture which produced him. Besides, the Madras film school alumnus, cinematographer Ashok Kumar's predilection for backlit photography to frame the dark hero's journey enabled the juxtaposition of the serenity of the village with its dark unconscious. Released in the same year, *Pasi* (Hunger, 1979), and *Rosaapu Ravikkaikari* (The woman in rose blouse, 1979), were other milestones in the post-classical period.

As my above discussion of few of the significant films of the post-classical period reveals, the 70s was the high point of creativity and experiment which substantially inspired and changed Tamil cinema in the subsequent decades. Mahendran's style of visual rather than verbose storytelling inspired many young filmmakers including Mani Ratnam, particularly his first major success in Tamil—*Mouna Raagam* (Silent Symphony, 1986). Even recently, the critically acclaimed and commercially successful film *Myna* (2010) recalled *16 Vayathiniley* in its romance in lush green locales and adventure outdoors ("Myna"). Similarly when *Paruththi Veeran* (2007) became a landmark success, critics invoked the 70s to map the trajectory of its village backdrop

and characterizations. Thus, the 70s certainly was the defining decade of Tamil cinema when classical period of the studios paved way for the post-classical through a radical reorganization of its modes of production due to the failure of the studio system and the arrival of new stars whose status had yet to be entrenched, thus providing the space for innovative directors for formal and narrative experiments, and to explore particular character and thematic traits. This post-classical period, marked by weak and ambiguous protagonists, ambivalence of traditions, realism in dialogues, new subjectivity, avoidance of clichéd and cathartic closures, shooting on locations and subtler melodramas, was driven by the necessity to redefine Tamil/regional specificity in the wake of the unkempt promises of the Dravidian government when it came to and remained in power from 1967 onward.

Endnotes

[i] According to Anandan, the number of films produced by the various independent producers with the assistance of the major studios would be much higher than the number of films produced by the studios themselves.
[ii] All the statistical details in this paper are from Anandan (2004).
[iii] For Deleuze such "any-space-whatevers" are singular spaces wherein the homogeneity is lost—in this case our labeling of Manju as a cynical loser.

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