

Evolving Of Tamil Cinema Over The Last Hundred Years In Shaping The Tamil Society And Right To Self Determination In Sri Lanka

Dr Paul Newman Associate Professor of History

St. Joseph's College, Bangalore

Abstract: Tamil cinema because of its origin is mostly preoccupied with Tamil culture, people and society. Since the 1990s, driven by rising production costs, dwindling audiences and fickle markets, Bollywood began targeting the Indian diaspora as a potential market for its films. Bollywood immediately captured the imagination of overseas Indians, who are often depicted as successful migrants and having strong national allegiances to India. In this context, the ways in which diasporic Tamils are represented in Tamil cinema, especially the Sri Lankan or Eelam Tamils, who constitute the largest market and most proximate diasporic Tamil community outside Tamil Nadu, remain largely unexamined. The shifts and changes in the India–Sri Lanka political relations in light of the ethnic conflict coupled with the nebulous articulation of ethnic affinity between Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils greatly impacted on the ways in which Eelam Tamils were depicted in Tamil cinema.

Keywords: Cinema, Eelam, industry, Diaspora, Culture

The first silent movie in Tamil, *Keechaka Vadham* was made by R. Nataraja Mudaliar in 1916.¹ The first talkie was a multi-lingual *Kalidas* which released on 31 October 1931, barely 7 months after India's first talking picture *Alam Ara*.² Since then, the Tamil film industry has had a massive impact on Tamil culture and its politics. The influence is so great that for more than 40 years. The last three Chief Ministers have been from the Tamil film industry and interestingly none of them are Tamil. Though at different times they have shed crocodile tears and attempted to sympathize with the Eelam issue no one has taken any concrete measures to bring reprieve to the Eelam Tamil issue.

According to the latest official statistics, as many as 1602 films were produced in India during the year 2012. The increase is sizable from the previous year when 1255 films were made. CBFC's figures show that the Tamil film industry has nudged out Bollywood from the number one position to gain the top slot. According to 2012 figures which have just been released, with as many as 262 films, Tamil films are on the top, while the close second position with 256 films has been occupied by Telugu films. Hindi films have been relegated to the third position with 221 films.³

In its modern era, Tamil films from Chennai have been distributed to various overseas theatres in Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Malaysia, Japan, Oceania, the Middle East, Western Europe, and North America.⁴ The industry also inspired filmmaking in Tamil diaspora populations in other regions, such as in Europe and Canada.⁵

It has been an interesting decade for Tamil cinema. Films are made on budgets that wouldn't have been dreamt of in the industry earlier. The production cost of *Raavanan* was estimated at Rs 55 crores by IMDb (Internet Movie Database) and that of *Thuppakki* at Rs 65 crores. According to a 2012 report by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu (Media and Entertainment in South India), Tamil films took Rs 1,030 crore in revenues in 2011-12.

For big-budget films, Rs 2-2.5 crores is usually spent on publicity alone, and the visual effects budget could range from Rs 5 crore to Rs 10 crore. Deloitte attributes such spending to ‘corporates and big studios like Eros and Fox Star crowding the regional film industry’, drawn by the low-cost, high-margin factor. And in looking for avenues of revenue, their makers reach out to the North as well as international market. Tamil Nadu leads in film revenues in the south with 1,030 crore⁶.

In post independent India, the Tamils have agitated and taken to the streets on two important issues, the first was the anti-hindi agitation of the 1950s and 60s and then the Eelam Tamil issue. The contribution of the Tamil film industry had left a lasting impression during the anti-hindi and pro-Dravidian movement so much that the politics of the state was decided by personalities from the Tamil film industry. Unfortunately the same industry has fallen in its morals and values to support the Eelam Tamil issue. If at all one industry that could have inspired the Tamils of Tamil Nadu of all age groups and force Tamil Nadu to have shut down in 2009, the history of Eelam struggle would have been different.

Sex and teenage fantasies, lack of moral values dehumanizes Tamil society and erases the memories of the Eelam struggle

Eelam Tamils are known for their hard work, enterprise and intellectual capabilities. In Tamil Nadu there are 110 Eelam refugee camps. Enter any house of a youth, you will not be surprised to find the posters of well-known Tamil film stars. In this context popular masala Tamil films have eroded the rich Tamil culture which was part and parcel of Eelam Tamils. Early marriages, teenage sex, elopement, teenage pregnancies, smoking, alcoholism, substance abuse, women abusing, violence, worshipping cine stars have become common in these camps.

While many in the Tamil cine world have expressed their sympathies for the plight of the Eelam Tamils, it is only a few actors and directors – and they are mostly not box office hits – who have explicitly empathized with the political struggle of the Eelam Tamils. In fact, despite the claims of many in Tamil Nadu cinema, both on screen and off, that they express ‘genuine’ Tamil sentiments and culture, the portrayal of the Eelam Tamils’ struggle in mainstream cinema has been negligible. Now, this is a relative statement considering the fact that the political struggle of the Eelam Tamils heralded a new phase of militant Tamil nationalism, created a society that reformers and poets of Tamil Nadu could only write about, and waged a war for liberation that was of epic proportions in its moments of both triumph and tragedy.

The comedy flick *Thenali* (2000) of KS Ravikumar had Kamal Haasan playing the lead character of ‘Thenali’, an Eelam Tamil refugee in Tamil Nadu. Having witnessed his father’s death and mother’s rape at the hands of Sri Lankan soldiers, he is in perennial fear of almost everything. *Bala’s Nandha* (2001) features Laila as an irritatingly innocent Eelam Tamil refugee, whose sole desire in life after landing in Tamil Nadu is to get married to a local street thug. The other character of interest in the flick is the local don who acts as patriarchal benefactor to the oh-so-poor-and-oppressed-refugees but would not entertain any ‘anti-social elements’, whatever that means.

And then, there is the ‘critically acclaimed’ director Mani Ratnam’s *Kannathil Muthamittaal* (2002). In short, the story is of an Eelam Tamil refugee-cum-orphan who is adopted by a Tamil Nadu family

After learning about her origins, the child expresses a desire to meet her surviving mother, but after visiting the island and witnessing the ravages of war, she returns to Tamil Nadu to be a good Tamil girl hopefully.

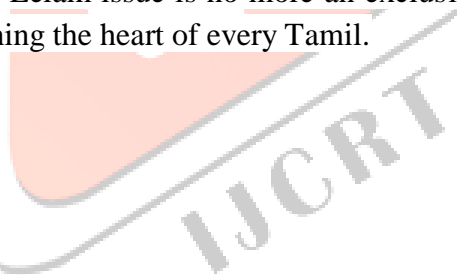
A common thread in the above three movies is that in their portrayal of Eelam Tamil subjects on screen, they seek to domesticate the Eelam Tamils for a middle class ‘Indian Tamil’ public. The Eelam Tamils are removed of their political agency and sense and are presented as an object of pity, an agathi (refugee) and/or an anaathai (orphan). Concrete political solidarity is not demanded but an abstract humanitarian sentiment is requested. If

one were to put these sentiments into words it would be something like the following. “Ooh, look how they suffer. Let’s marry them. Or adopt them. Or take them under our shelter. Assimilate them into our safe lives. Let us be benevolent providers.” Charity is the gesture appealed for.

Many may argue that films have given us entertainment, have acted as socializing activators, enriched and refreshed our culture. They have at times taught us team work and stirred our imagination. They have showcased Tamil culture and society to people of other parts of the world. They have educated us and has been a source of inspiration to many apart from being an art form. All these advantages are over shadowed by many sloppy films that are made which profess violence and have a deep impact on the minds of the young ones. We must all realize that movies are made with only one aim, that is to make a profit and not for any charity work.

Films establish false notions and are art forms of personal opinion which many times are false. Modern day films have no respect for law and order, they are a bad influence on the youngsters as most top actors are shown as super human beings who can thrash up any number of people touting weapons, threatening, gang formation, verbal abuse and criminal tendencies thus creating a negative mindset on our youngsters. The actors are portrayed as larger than life characters reducing real heroes in our rich culture to pedestrians. When our brethren are suffering in the Vanni, how many people from the film fraternity have come forward to conduct charity shows?

Every Eelam Tamil must remember that they contribute a major chunk of revenue to the Tamil film industry either through watching films or listening to music or watch live shows by film personalities. It is here every Tamil should ask what the famous film stars including Rajinikanth, Kamal Hasan, Ajith, Vijay, Surya, Karthik, Vikram, Dhanush, Arya, Jeeva, Jeyam Ravi, Jeeva, K.Bhagyaraj, Vishal, Prakash Raj, Santhanam, Siva Karthikeyan, Prabhu, Vijayakanth, Udayanithi Stalin, Ilayarajah, A.R.Rehman, Mani Ratnam, Gautam Menon, Shankar and scores more have given back to Tamils as the Eelam issue is no more an exclusive issue of the Eelam Tamils or the Diaspora Tamils but it is an issue touching the heart of every Tamil.



¹ ^ "Metro Plus Chennai / Madras Miscellany : The pioneer 'Tamil' film-maker". *The Hindu* (Chennai, India). 7 September 2009

² Velayutham, Selvaraj. *Tamil cinema: the cultural politics of India's other film industry*. p. 2.

³ http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-08-20/news-interviews/41428396_1_tamil-films-producers-malayalam

⁴ "With high demand for Indian movies, Big Cinemas goes global". *The Times of India*. 12 June 2011

⁵ Celebration of shared heritage at Canadian film festival". *The Hindu* (Chennai, India). 9 August 2011

⁶ http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-10-17/chennai/34524577_1_tamil-cinema-film-industry-indian-film