

Critique

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Fortitudinous of A Forbearing Farmer



Poyum poyum manidhanukkindha Buthiyai koduthaanae; Iraivan buthiyai koduthaanae; Adhil poiyum, purattum, thiruttum kalandhu Boomiyai keduthaanae; Manidhan boomiyai keduthaanae – Thaaai Sollai Thattadhe, 1961 Tamil film starring MGR and directed by M A Thirumugam.

“A farmer cannot work without applying his mind. He must be able to test the nature of his soil, must watch changes of weather, must know how to manipulate his plough skilfully and be generally familiar with the movements of the stars, the sun and the moon. The farmer knows enough of astronomy, geography and geology to serve his needs. He has to feed his

children and has, therefore, some idea of the duties of man, and, residing as he does in the vast open spaces of this earth, he naturally becomes aware of the greatness of God. Thus, we can see, he does have an educated mind.” Mahatma Gandhi. INDIAN OPINION VOL 13: 12 MARCH, 1913 - 25 DECEMBER, 1913; Page- 64.

This profound observation by the revered Mahatma succinctly encapsulates *Kadai Vivasayi* by M Manikandan of *Kaaka Muttai* fame.

India’s large community of food providers to the nation – the farmers and their ilk – have provided facile fodder for the

country's film and entertainment industry to come up with naive narratives addressing various woes confronting their constituency. Right from the time of Bimal Roy's monumental black and white classic *Do Bida Zameen*, even earlier and later, across all regional languages of the country, have seen filmmakers bring in their perspectives to the woes of whom Mahatma Gandhi described: *Of course, the farmer is the father of the world. But it is his greatness that he is not aware of the fact.*

In recent years, with farmer suicides, and more so, farm laws affecting the community, dominant in the national discourse and catching the fancy of civil society conscience, especially the privileged urban class, it is only to be expected that filmmakers seek to bring to the centre stage of public discourse issues affecting the farming lot. Some have simply replicated the real incidents onto the screen with the proverbial cinematic licence to portray their stories. In contrast, others sought to cash in on the issues for their individual benefit.

M Manikandan, wedding photographer turned cinematographer turned director, returns to the movie marquee after a seven-year hiatus with *Kadaisi Vivasayi* – aka *The Last Farmer* (Standing – emphasis mine), provides a new dimension to the existing discourse.

Manikandan, the minimalist movie maker whose films spotlight those on the fringes and margins, the less privileged lot of society, this time, turns the beacon on the Indian farmers' lot.

Not that there weren't any films focusing on farmers earlier. There were aplenty. But then, for these filmmakers, the

farmer was just an excuse to acerbically parody and poke fun at the establishment. Their trials and tribulations, preachy and prosaic, predominantly skewed towards milking the theme at the box office turnstile. But then, *Kadaisi Vivasayi*, the last farmer, stands apart. Therein lies Manikandan's perspicacity in his engagement with, and the idea of cinema, as an art form.

His astute and aesthetic approach to succinctly narrate his thematic concerns rousing the viewers' conscience to the social realities around them and ruminating thereafter on the lesser lot's inequities and their privileged status.

Manikandan, if one may say so, comes across as a rare filmmaker in Tamil cinema who believes in Robert Frost's eponymous poem *The Road Not Taken* - famous lines – *And be one traveller, long I stood, And looked down one as far as I could, I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference.*

The mercurial Mani has repeatedly proved this pithy poem's famous lines. In each of his outings as a filmmaker with a difference. His films prove there is more to cinema and movies than escapist entertainment, engaging discerning viewers with his delectable thematic concerns.

Mind you, not that Mani's *Kadaisi Vivasayi* is devoid of cheeky and biting humour and light-hearted fun elements a filmgoer aspires for in a film. But Mani's satirical and parodic plot rises above these mundanities while he drives his homily.

Subtly, sans any fanfare or right-in-your-face approach. His intended thematic concerns grow on the viewer's psyche, making him unconsciously think and

masticate about it, even as he indulges in the film's peripheral plotline.

Mani has sensibly steered himself clear of the recent events that saw the Centre eat a humble pie rescinding several of its "pro-farmer" proposals. Nor the thought it fit to do a *Peepi Live* kind of preposterous pastiche. For him, his farmer is closer to where he can find a common cause, whose stoic sufferings and Sisyphean struggles he can easily empathise with. Mani's hearing-impaired farmer stands stubbornly against a callous and nonchalant system and its mechanisation that hardly has its "ear" to the ground realities. Insufferably stubborn to the harsh realities of what the farmers' ilk must contend with.

Eschewing ostentatiousness to simplicity, languid and languorous pace to the hustle and bustle of the commercial cauldron, Mani, with his metaphorical - hard of hearing farmer - sets about to explore, in the most pugnacious manner, what the likes of the octogenarian real life farmer Mayandi must diurnally deal with, with all stoicism at their command, never for a moment losing their composure.

As a matter of fact, Mani, who took to pursue films as an assistant cinematographer in Tamil films, co-writing scripts for short films, struck gold with his very debut feature *Kaaka Muttai*, centring around two slumdog kids whose life's mission is to bite into a pizza, signalling his arrival as a director with a difference.

If social concerns of *Kaaka Muttai* lay in its efficacious contrasts between the haves and have-nots, development vs deprivation, this time, it is a farmer from a non-descript village who becomes the fulcrum of his hard-hitting, gut-wrenching, socio-political treatise

holding a mirror to society's duplicitousness in dealing with real problems.

From migration to cities chasing the chimaera of better opportunities and lifestyles to farming as a vocation on the verge of extinction given the high input costs, depleted water resources, and undue economic hardships of being a farmer.

Mani showcases in Mayandi how steadfastly resolute and determined one can be. Those to whom their land is their true identity then fall prey to the land sharks that come to gobble them up with the lure of the money.

"*Why do you have to go through so much trouble? Take the money and spend the remainder of your life as a king,*" counsels an avaricious realtor's go-to man, dangling the carrot of a price three times what was paid to others.

Mayandi, in a sage-like matter-of-fact manner, nonchalantly quips: "*It is because of that land that I wake up every morning to irrigate it. If I give it up, why would I wake up in the morning?*"

In Mayandi's sagacious repartee lies life's larger wisdom. The land is the sole reason for one to arise each waking day and more than a monetary subsistence for farmers like Mayandi. Representing all things culture, tradition, and memory of the past, he stodgily stands for and catalyst to ancient dying practice that sustains life on earth.

Rebuffed and put in his place and his clever designs exposed, the agent consoles his realtor: *The doddering old man has been hard of hearing for four decades and has hardly gained worldly wisdom; hence it's rather tough to tempt him.*

Yes, Mayandi may appear illiterate to the ways of today's dog-eat-dog world, and his life rather mundane, but blissfully contended, robust of health and fiercely independent. Such is the sagacious farmer's inner equipoise and eternal transcendence. He doesn't mistrust or judge with the tinted glasses of biases but empathically hears them, for each has his unspoken truth.

Mani's monumental and methodical *Kadaiasi Vivasayi* is, in a true sense, a genteel parable on the wayward vicissitudes of a selfish society impervious to the harsh reality of the majoritarian farming community, which, in turn, must selflessly contend with the bitterness of having to live with it.

On the one hand, you have the greed of a society's self-serving class that would do anything to usurp and dispossess the impoverished, the blinkered law of the land lost in the byzantine lanes of officialdom, a judicial system sunk in the quicksand of litigations' nitty-gritty and the commoner caught in a cleft stick trying to lead his life in the best way he knows and believes in.

Set in the dusty bowl village near Usilampatti, the film's fulcrum pivots around Mayandi, who rebuffs and fobs off gratuitous attempts to pluck his fecund land holdings resulting in a case filed of killing the National Bird and burying it in his field.

Mani's *Kaaka Muttai* was about the permeating effects of globalisation and consumerism in today's fast-paced digital-driven capitalist society. In *Kadaiasi Vivasayi*,

with the help of octogenarian, hearing-impaired Mayandi, Mani consorts viewers into deeper reflections on modernisation and development, the need to return to one's roots, and harness the wisdom of one's predecessors.

In sum, *Kadaiasi Vivasayi* wafts across as a refreshing, autumnal breeze amidst the stench of fetid factory line productions that are woe on the viewers.

"The film intends to inspire people to do farming and to convey that I have to tell a story that is close to the villager's living and lifestyle", Manikandan in his *Deep Focus* interview with Bharadwaj Rangan of *Film Companion*.

"The intention of the film is not to break many beliefs. It is to inspire people who are doing farming and people who want to do farming, to continue farming. It is to give them that confident feel. So, if I have to convey such a thing, I have to tell a story that is close to their living and lifestyle. Otherwise, it will be just a cinema. To help people take back these thoughts and feelings, we have to do certain things that are not typically done in mainstream medium," Manikandan in the same interview.

True to this stated philosophy, Manikandan's *Kadaiasi Vivasayi* stands testimony to what a director can realise to drive his homily if there is a will and wherewithal to do it. Kudos!