

Critique

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Mari Selvaraj's *Vaazhai*



Aided by a brilliant narrative flow, this biopic chapter, based on a tragic event in the director's adolescent life, emanates the perpetuated pain of his adulthood that the audience was left to contemplate in his earlier work. The essence of the movie largely remains unadulterated, as the villagers-turned-actors nourish the script with their naivety and astonish with their committed performance.

The director, who had delved head-on into daring themes and voiced explicit caste politics in his previous films, chose to vent his childhood agony with 'Vaazhai' to let the audience know where his anger stemmed from. The premise is nothing new, one may think—a simple livelihood story of a boy in a village of southern Tamilnadu. Surprisingly, everything about 'Vaazhai' is new, from the visuals to the cast, from the music to the narrative style.

The conflict is 'Exploitation of the daily wagers,' and the director lets the audience see through the lens of his adolescent eyes rather than

exploring the causes and arriving at a definitive solution. Staggeringly, the journey of the humble banana bunches from the soggy farmlands to our street vendor's cart is narrated.

'Vaazhai' begins as a travel into the minds of young souls, on the lines of Abbas Kiarostami's 'The Experience' and Majid Majidi's 'Children of Heaven', but later transforms into a non-violent voice of the oppressed, leaving the audience behind, with numerous questions. These were the exact questions that the director wanted us to contemplate by knocking our conscience with every artwork of his, starting from 'Pariyerum Perumal' to 'Karnan' and 'Maamannan'. The 'form' that the director adapts to narrate his perspectives by compiling his childhood memories, attempts to walk the audience beside him, to finally reveal the toll 'exploitation' has on innocent lives.

From his 'crush' on his school teacher Poongodi to his 'tiff' with his buddy Sekar over

movie-based fandom, from the 'sibling bond' with his sister Vembu to his 'reluctance towards lugging labour', Mari Selvaraj poeticised what is a slice of his life. Director Mari's representative in the movie, Master Ponvel, plays the character Sivanaindhan authentically. The portrayal of a 'crush', especially that of an adolescent boy on his school teacher, is nothing new to Tamil cinema but is often tricky. Mari's love for cinema 'waters' his 'attraction' towards his teacher in reciprocation for the kindness she showers on him.

Sivanaindhan couldn't experience warmth from his poverty-stricken mother, but the caring soul teacher, Poongodi, makes him feel welcomed, so he begins to cling to her. Played by the gorgeously divine Nikhila Vimal, Poongodi is perhaps a saviour in Sivanaindhan's eyes, rising above the crush status of a person who would save him against all odds. The teacher's handkerchief is a 'treasure' to the child, and the sequence in which his sister helps him wash the kerchief for his own convenience compels the audience to endorse the child's emotions.

The boy is drawn to the teacher for the 'happy state' that she is in. One can infer that the child longs for his sister and mom to be in a similar state when he returns home from school. Instead, 'lugging banana bunches', an intensive labour for a child his age, is thrown at him to repay the family's debt. Mari's elaborate sequences to establish the naivety of Sivanaindhan's crush is a beautiful 'set-up' that gets 'paid off' doubly in the end.

Sivanaindhan's combinations with his friend Sekar are sheer rib ticklers, and the one where Sekar is caught for lying about his thorn-pricked foot to escape lugging over the weekend leaves you laughing, not without a cautioning pain within. The morality of the film's crux and awareness reaches a broader audience through these commercially viable comic reliefs, which is a clear success to the creator's intention.

Kani, a socialist who demands a wage hike for lugging, and his romantic angle with Sivanaindhan's sister Vembu are alluring subplots. Played by Kalaiyaran and Divya Duraisamy, the couple nail their respective roles through subtle expressions and brief eye contact. 'Marudhani (henna leaves)

messenger', Sivanaindhan, after delivering the leaves to Kani from his sister Vembu as a gesture of love, expresses his liking for Kani to her. Sivanaindhan asking his sister to marry Kani is Mari registering the boy's insecurity and yearning for a 'better tomorrow'.

Only when frames 'tell' the tale and 'guide' the audience's eyes shot compositions become meaningful. Mari threads his frames to express the mind space of his characters in all his work, more effectively so in *Vaazhai*, as the director is left to explore his adolescent self, along with his pain, hunger, agony and happiness. His 'native-self' gushes his writing in an uninterrupted flow but gives adequate time for the viewers to engage in Sivanaindhan's traits, morals, emotions and actions.

Mari Selvaraj's disclaimer announces that the movie is a perspective born from his clouded childhood memories. *Vaazhai* reiterates to the viewers what he thought as a child that might have led to the tragic incident. He slowly builds his screenplay towards a riveting climax.

I vividly remember the question my dear friend asked me after seeing Mari's debut film, 'Pariyerum Perumal'. We both were left speechless to have witnessed the daring work of the director in bringing out the pain of the oppressed after a long hiatus of such works in the Tamil industry. Viewers related to the pain in the narration and concurred with the climax that ended on a positive note – If not a 'debate' at the least, a 'dialogue' has begun between the extremes. In addition to the moral dilemma the movie left us with, my friend asked me the question that her uncle had asked her – 'The movie is a great work of art, but would you accept a lower caste boy into your family as your son-in-law?' I was baffled as I contemplated such dilemmas. I may not be a fanatic, but I still would definitely need a lot of persuasion and the right mettle to face the relatives. My educated daughter, exposed to the world, overtly expresses her likes and dislikes to me. However, I may not be able to mimic her while handling my parents, for the equation with them is not the same as mine with her. My answer to my friend was – 'We are bound to 'change' if we find ourselves in a similar situation'.

Just like all works of Mari, '*Vaazhai*' made a few people question his intentions. A doctor friend of

mine claimed that children giving a hand to parents in helping them with their burden needn't be labelled as 'labour or exploitation'. He also argued that sharing parents' burdens will only make the children aware of the parents' toiling life so they will become responsible adults. He added that many friends who have reared cattle, irrigated crops, and assisted their parents in weaving during their weekend holidays have shaped them into better individuals.

Mari's 'Vaazhai' spoke in a completely different tone. To begin with, Sivanaindhan's life was not a happy nostalgia of Mari's. Most of us would agree that the basic human needs in a child's life are safety, food, and shelter. Sivanaindhan seemingly has shelter over his head, food on his plate, and the safety of his mom. But the director urges us to 'infer' the psychological insecurities of the child.

The boy is seen sleeping under the steel cot, and it was a connotation of 'insecurity' for me. Again, his constant bed-wetting implied emotional stress in the boy's mind. The anxious child retaliates and lugs, leaving his mom and sister to coax him. Sivanaindhan expresses his feelings to his sister in more than one instance. He 'chooses' to participate in a weekend dance practice at school with his favourite teacher over the strenuous banana bunch lugging. His sister respects his 'freedom of choice', the same she had been denied in the name of 'conditioning'. She lets him jump off the lorry and 'live' literally and figuratively. Little did she know that a few in the lorry, including her, were ill-fated as the climax twists the tale.

UNICEF India says an ideal childhood in India is where children are well-nourished, physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally sound, socially competent, and ready to learn. The ever-ready-to-learn child Sivanaindhan – 'demands' nourishment in the plain carbohydrate he hogs, 'demands' health in

the neck sprain caused by lugging, 'demands' the right to choose to do what intrigues him. He is seen to stabilise his state of mind by clinging on to the teacher and ends up socially competent by inferring the injustice the meagre 'one-rupee hike' had caused. What should rightfully be his, as a child, Sivanaindhan had to demand it all from his ignorant parents and eventually transform into 'Mari Selvaraj'.

Going back to my doctor friend's perspective, I told myself that assisting parents in lessening their burden is not the same as lugging in 'someone else's farm'. The favour of running errands for parents is nothing close to a child helping parents clear the family's debts. It, to me, has the stench of 'slavery' all over it. Sivanaindhan is not complaining about rearing his cow, but he is 'made to do it' because he wants to escape lugging. It's just that the child demands 'autonomy' in doing what pleases him.

How can anyone brand a child fussy, the one who roots to break his 'shackles free'? When the doctor friend claims many of his friends from similar backgrounds as Sivanaindhan's have struggled their way to become eminent, the discreet egoist within coaxed, saying Mari Selvaraj had managed to become the voice of the oppressed through his chosen medium of movies.

Depiction of 'Hunger' is a painful watch, and when it is a child who is hungry, it leaves the on-looker's heart wrenched. It is a daring script by the director in trying to demystify the plight of his downtrodden, ignorant parent(s), who were left with no choice other than coercing their children to work with them. Some scripts leave you applauding for braving a solution, some screenplays leave you empathising with the distressed, and some directors narrate 'life' like 'Vaazhai' that leaves one numb, helpless and bewildered for bringing such untold facets of oppression to light.

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