

Critique

**Latha Rajasekar**

**Experiencing Director Manikandan's *Kadaisi Vivasayi***



***Kadaisi Vivasayi - The Last Farmer, Tamil, 2022, by M. Manikandan***

The title translates to ‘*The Last Farmer*’, and the movie is about ‘*The Only Farmer*’ of the village who could cultivate paddy for the village’s traditional pooja. Director Manikandan’s films are highly moralistic and predominantly rooted in the terrain he discusses. But this flick intensely focuses on ‘his’ native habitat and its religiosity, intended to relate the viewers to those simple souls.

The director embraces his ‘religious identity’ right from the opening credits, hinting at the plot’s orientation to the viewers. The title begins with a praise for the ‘Southern country’s God’, Lord Siva, followed by a dedication to Lord Muruga, The Founder of

the native language ‘Tamil’, and his followers called ‘Siddhars’. Siddhars were divine humans who attained a high degree of spiritual perfection and were acknowledged as scientists, doctors, alchemists, and mystics. Manikandan intends to credit our contemporary belief systems to our ancestors, who believed in ‘self-surrender’ to obtain ‘unity with the absolute’. Through his fluid narrative style, he guides the viewers to experience the associated ‘spiritual apprehensions’ of truths beyond intellect.

The following credit is even more interesting as the director introduces the audience to his ‘family deities’ called the ‘Kula Deivam’. The format is similar to a

typical native wedding invitation of the south. A two-column family tree-like deities list of both his parents. On his paternal side, ‘Valayapatti Chinnaakaaman’ is called upon to protect. ‘Valayapatti’ is the village of his dad’s origin and Chinnaakaaman, the deity’s name. Then comes his late grandparent’s parents, along with their town, Vilaampatti, and the director even mentions the block to which the village belongs, Usilampatti. A replica is on the adjacent column for his maternal grandparents. The 85-year-old protagonist, who sadly passed away before the film was released, also gets a placard in a similar pattern – ‘Perungamanallur village’s Late Nallandi, the son of Chinna Thevar.’

This little exercise is the true essence of the movie: a humble journey to celebrate the social structure, respect societal and spiritual practices, and focus on the need to sustain food productivity chains, as farmers are the primary source of our lives.

Cow dung-plastered floors are not just a house for the protagonist, farmer Maayandi; it is a house for two of his cows, his hen, and her chicks. Maayandi feeds the hen and her chicks, walks his cows to his farmland and checks the water level in his well before turning on the motor. He waters his land and then walks the cows back home. This detailed early morning introductory routine of the farmer becomes significant, as we are made to relate to it, while it beautifully intersects with the story in the latter half.

The director juxtaposes Mayandi’s idle gaze over the flying peacock from the hillock nearby with a young shepherd’s overlapping conversation over a mobile call in the background, who asks his friend to bring his herd to the ‘location’ he had texted on

WhatsApp. This shot composition announces to the audience that globalisation is reshaping our Indian villages, leaving the older generation behind and their ‘wisdom’ with them.



A song sung by a ‘real life fanatical devotee of Lord Muruga’ of the 1960s, Mr T.M.Soundararajan, in his magnetic voice- ‘*Karpanai Endrallum Karchilai Endralum*’, is heard on a distant radio, as the film’s credits rolls. The director aims to emphasise the religious doctrine through the song, which is based on the awareness that comes from the spirit and not through science. The song translates - ‘*Even if you are an imagination, even if you are a mere statue of stone, oh dear Lord Muruga, I would not forget you.*’ The late veteran lyricist Mr Vaali, before his venture into the films as a songwriter, was offended by constant abuses of Lord Muruga by the then-atheist political parties. In an emotional spurt, he supposedly wrote these lyrics on a postcard and posted it to Mr T.M. Soundararajan. The singer was immensely impressed with the words, and he composed the tune himself, sang it, and released it as a devotional album.

The director parallels minimalism by overlapping Maayandi’s frugal market spending on vegetables with a contrasting conversation in a fertiliser shop about a man spending lakhs towards donations and fees for



his son's college admission. Genetically modified foods are tested for their safety, but the apprehension of finding a hybrid variety, growing seedless tomatoes, seems unacceptable to the old farmer, Maayandi. He even curses the scientist for intervening in the natural process of tomatoes that usually grow from excreta. Maayandi's 'natural seed dispersal' mention is the director insisting upon the protagonist's traits, an unexploited farmer in a world of rapid diffusion of technology.



A lightning-struck tree in the village stirs the villagers' guilt conscience for not performing the annual ritual of the 'Kula Deivam' in the last fifteen years. Maayandi calculates the tree's age to be over 100 years by visualising it being around for generations, a sense of unifying our ancestry with nature.

Each family deity has a set pattern for worship, and the director effortlessly highlights his thoughts on the 'caste' as a relatively new discriminator in the otherwise inclusive ritual template. A group of middle-aged men are seen discriminating against the 'low caste born', saying that they shouldn't be a part of the festivity. But the older women are seen shutting them out by insisting upon their traditional practices of requesting a mud horse made by a potter for the pooja and inviting 'Parai' music players of the low-born men, as it is their music that would make the village's pleas heard by the Gods.

It is indeed hearty to witness the younger generation fighting with the older ones, with whom the ritual will be participated by everyone, irrespective of their caste. A typical urban scenario to echo in the village setup is a relief. Elements relating to 'God' were the root of discrimination in the recent past. When the identical elements relating to God are used to reverse the curse, unifying them as 'humans', in the current scenario, is genuinely heart-warming. By making the young generation raise their voices in support of the older generation, Manikandan promisingly indicates that 'discrimination' is dying a slow but sure death.

On the parallel, the director introduces a character named Ramaiah, who believes his dead lover is alive and that she is beside him 'always'. His lover was his cousin, who had killed herself by poisoning because her father refused her to marry Ramaiah. He carries heavy bags of belongings, wearing too many shirts on top of another and too many watches, and is often seen climbing up and down hillocks in bare feet. His aggressive behaviour when someone doubts his belief that 'his lover is alive' seems weird to the villagers and the viewers. We question his mental stability, but the director gradually analogises Ramaiah to a contemporary Siddhar, the insane looking sanest of all. I fascinatingly could smell the ashes that Ramaiah is seen smearing on people whom he acquaints, for I was reminded of my granddad 'Arunachalam', who kept the fragrant ash, 'Thiruneer' in a cloth potli bag called the 'Surrukku Pai'.

A few old and a few young lots of the village trip to the place of worship, and an

older man addresses, pointing to a deity called 'Karuppan'. He refers to 'Karuppusamy', the God of protection, often seen at the entrance of a village. The director chooses to lure the audience to the crux by making an old man fondly tag Karuppan as 'Seeyan', meaning grand-dad. The viewers are made to infer that the spirits of our ancestors are standing, ready to protect us from all evil in the form of Karuppu(black) Samy (God) and instantly, we are made to connect Ramaiah's belief that his lover isn't dead - she is with him, beside him and maybe she is protecting him. He is furious when people mock his belief, say, when he buys two cups of tea, one for him and one for 'her'. But it is mesmerised when someone acknowledges the fact, like Maayandi, who brings three plates of food, two for him and Ramaiah and the third for 'her'.

Our spiritual system is being maintained through a coherent understanding of our predecessor's life experiences. It shapes our spiritual values, beliefs, practices and the reasons behind them. Ramaiah believes his lover is 'alive', and that is his spiritual orientation. His is similar to most of the believers to date, as we believe our deities 'come alive' with the right worship pattern called 'Padaiyal'. There are set patterns, particular ways to present God, our food, freshly grown fruits and water, along with loud instrumental music or chanting to grab His attention.

The old man continues to narrate to the youngsters that the main deities Ayyan, Ayyanar, and Aaiyappan are all the same, indicating 'our fathers'. He adds, *'one who breaks free of his thoughts, perceptions, feelings and wills'* becomes God. The Kula

(family) Deivam (God) is seen as a rock lamp, and the elderly say the deity is a mere 'oil lamp' made of stone and garlanded and worshipped. Another old man claims that idol worship was later added to the primary fire worship format, summarising mankind's religious practices where 'Fire' is either worshipped or is a tool of worship across religions.

Director Manikandan tells the audience that these statues are real people who lived on earth to become our Gods. One cannot refrain from recollecting the opening credits of Manikandan's vertical family tree—deities on top, followed by his great-grandparents, grandparents, and dad. Today, it is 'him', and tomorrow, it will be his 'kids'- a simplification of *'Aham Brahmasmi'*, translating, *'I am God'*.

The reasons behind discontinuing the annual ritual were apparently the misbehaviour of a few villagers in ill-treating the lower caste men at the festival. Manikandan's emphasis on the rituals being a 'mandate of collective worship by all' highlights that festivals are hostility neutralisers. It dawned on me why my eighty-two-year-old dad goes through deliberate hardships in organising our annual ritual by pooling in all relatives, many of whom are disinterested.

Manikandan's second analogy is the corporate sector investment to that of elephant rearing. The village's wealthiest farmer sells his fifteen acres of farming land to buy an elephant for his adult son 'Thadikozhantai'; the name translates as 'plump baby', a reference to the wealthy. The analogy is in line with a Tamil saying, *'Yaannaiyai katti theeni poda mudiyaadhu'*, translating to the

fact that it is impossible to feed an elephant enough. Manikandan layers the analogy with the irony of a few other farmers selling their farmlands to a 'financing company' whose motive is to do 'organic farming'. The sorrow of felling a healthy tree by these buyers is magnified as Manikandan ends the sequence by merging an aerial shot of the lightning-struck tree, whose bark and wood fibres had exploded.

A native farmer is exploited by globalised techniques and hybrid seeds that tempt big profits. Later, he is forced to surrender his land to corporates, who proclaim to revert back to 'traditional farming practices' under the fancy banner of 'organic farming'. As a viewer, I was left puzzled, asking myself, 'Life is not coming full circle for these farmers, does it?'

When the broker offers a handsome return for his farmlands, Maayandi refuses it. His genuine reason is that if he sells his land, he may not have an urge to wake up early every day. It sounds superficially ignorant on the face of it, but it is the most simplified truth, as it defines the synchronised life of the human race as one with 'nature'. Just like the high-pitched chirping birds that welcome every dawn of our lives, Maayandi's day begins at dawn, and his simplistic routine defines his life.

The broker whines that Maayandi has been deaf for four decades and doesn't have much wisdom about what is happening around them. But his imparity has turned into a boon, as he is clinging to the piece of ancestry land amidst the evolving land mafia madness. Maayandi replies to the broker – the money in return for his land might only be used by him as his pillow and nothing much,

a deliberate featuring of minimalism. We are nodding in agreement, given the routine of Maayandi's, as to what a stash of cash would mean to a 'self-sustained' man like him, who is desireless and doesn't have any wants or needs.

Director Manikandan's illustrative demonstration of the ritualistic process of 'sowing paddy' is an inspiring compilation through his protagonist, Maayandi. A little girl is asked to take a handful of grains wrapped in a jute cloth and soaked. She is duly paid a little treat of palm sugar candy for her job. Little girls are the village's little goddesses, and their growth symbolises that the crops would grow just like them. But sadly, I couldn't help thinking, a natural biological process such as puberty would quickly snatch such privileges from them.

The 'ploughing tools' are considered divine in this part of the country. Manikandan meticulously documents the process encompassing its divinity, a keep-sake compilation for the non-farming generations to come. And it begins with a 'Karpooram' Aarthi (camphor light) for the peacock feather decorated Tamil God 'Murugan'. From washing the Ayyanaar Arivaal (the protector God's lengthy sickle) to freshly grinding fragrant sandalwood paste to decorate the iron 'Marakkal', a cylindrical measuring pot with a closed bottom that is used to store grains and is used in auspicious events such as wedding, the movie swells with aesthetics.

Maayandi cleans the plough carefully as if he would shower an infant, cleansing it with care and wielding it on the land with his two cows on either side. The lyrical song in the background supports his sentiments with words that translate the farmers' respect for

their land. The ploughed and watered land, the soaked seeds rhythmically thrown to grow into sprouts, converting the small patch into an emerald carpet, is a visual treat to the ‘soul’. The visuals intercut with Ramaiah swaying on the hillock, his vibrant coloured clothes, which fly like kites in the wind, are the director’s edit that prompts in correlation with the mood of the viewers.

The potter explaining his disability to make the mud horse for the ritual is satirical irony. The potter is no longer allowed to gather the red soil from the river bed, as the Government has banned such activities. While mafias flourish in the corruption of sand mining, the poor villagers’ livelihood and the traditions associated with their creative skills suffocate. The Director’s strength is that he is content in subliminally touching upon such issues to initiate a conversation in the viewer’s mind.

When Maayandi sees a couple of peahens and a peacock dead in his farmland, the viewers are made to infer that Maayandi had visualised them as ‘Lord Muruga’ and his two consorts ‘Valli and Deivaanai’, as the peacocks are personified as the Lord himself. One is assured of Maayandi’s thought process, as he is seen repeating the phrase, ‘one peacock and two peahens’ in more than one instance. In a natural instinct, he buries them in the scorching heat, with the crows and cuckoos as his witness.

Ramaiah, in his first meeting with Maayandi, would have fondly recited his experiences as his pilgrim to a 2000-year-old shrine of Lord Murugan in Palani. His ‘first-person narration’ of a puranic story about his very own Lord Murugan going around the world to get the golden mango from his dad is

sure to puzzle the viewers, but not Maayandi. During the second visit, Maayandi shares his grief with Ramaiah about the dead peafowls. Ramaiah is quite disturbed as it is the ‘Vahana’ - vehicle of his favourite God Murugan, and he too seems to have personified the peafowls with God. After a brief silence, he says he believes the Lord has his plans. Naively, in dramatic irony, both of them are disturbed about the death of the birds, for it belongs to their Lord, and not because the peacocks are our nation’s pride.

The first conflict in the movie arrives after forty-odd minutes of ‘lifestyle exploration’ of the eighty-two-year-old man and his village. A passerby, seemingly a peasant hunter, in the grudge that Maayandi refused to give him the dead bird and instead buried them himself, lodges a complaint in the police station that Maayandi killed those peafowls. The viewers, along with Maayandi, are made to step out of their tranquil world and step into the deceitful real world. But the beauty is that Maayandi remains in his genuine cocoon, as the film progresses with sequences of the legal proceedings.

Funnily, on realising that the khaki uniformed man is not an electric post repair man but a police due to his hearing disability, Maayandi gives a random reply that he inherited the land from his grandfather, thinking the constable asked him about his land. All the old man could relate with a police officer was a probable land dispute. When he gets ready, wearing two different slippers as a pair to accompany the constable to the police station, without any hesitation, the eerie background score wrenches the viewers of the uncertainties ahead.



Past humiliation by the villagers behind police personnel registering a case against Maayandi twists the tale. The court proceedings begin with a young magistrate. She swiftly holds the inspector responsible for his ulterior motives and sympathises with the elderly man who says he did not kill the peafowls. Director Manikandan never ceases to add positivity, even in the real-world scenario. Magistrate Mangaiyarkarasi (her name translates as ‘queen of women’) is one big hope for many, including the viewers.

The court proceedings fondly remind the director’s 2016 film, yet another gem, ‘Andavan Kattalai’. Maayandi is concerned not about him being remanded but about his saplings dying without someone to water them. The director tries to throw light on innate humanness in all characters of his. For instance, the Magistrate asks the constable to water the plants in return for his mistake of facts in haste, which leads to the old man’s remand. The youngsters readily agreed to take care of Maayandi’s cattle. The co-inmate in the prison is taking tutorials from Maayandi on farming. Unearthing kindness in human minds is sourced elegantly by the director through such sequences. While doing so, he also signals to the masses that farming is an innate quality of humans.

Manikandan also touches upon another vital quality of humans, ‘adaptability’. The constable adapts to the routine of Maayandi to the extent that he enjoys the solitude of becoming one with the village community’s annual ritual. The inmate learns to grow plants inside the prison in whatever broken cups and jars he can lay his hand on, trying to sort out his future after prison life. When Maayandi says, ‘God has given us thousands

of seeds, and anything would grow if it is sown and watered’, I was left to visualise the kinds of shrubs and weeds that menacingly grow on unkept roadsides, every fissure of rocks and walls, and even in between the creases of my freshly laid cobblestoned road.

A stranger throws a satirical remark on GST, but Raamaiah remains silent. He questions Raamaiah if he knows who rules the state, and he instantly replies, ‘It has always been Lord Murugan’. The director’s grievance on the plight of the complex taxation format on the ignorant lot hints at a pacifying solution through Ramaiah’s portrayal. ‘God will save them’.

Raamaiah meets an old Siddhar, who applies ashes on his forehead and gives some in his hand. When asked for whom the ashes were, the Siddhar turns towards the tree where Raamaiah had kept his bags and says, ‘For her who is sitting under the tree’. Raamaiah, played by actor Vijay Sethupathi, emotes with mixed emotions. He is happy that his lover is visible to the Siddhar’s eyes and, on the other hand, is sad that he either had forgotten about her or didn’t believe in her existence completely. Had he believed in her existence wholeheartedly without an ounce of doubt, he wouldn’t have left her starving by offering ‘her’ food packet to the Siddhar.

Director Manikandan organically overlaps the sequences of the youngsters regretting their actions of killing the peafowl in previous years and Maayandi’s grandson Karuppan going to Palani to pray for an obstacle-free festivity. Karuppan meets Raamaiah climbing a hill in Palani, and witnesses ‘Mysticism’ himself - the ‘mystical theology’ of Raamaiah vanishing in thin air.

Maayandi asks Karuppan about Raamaiah as Karuppan gives him the potli bag of ash. The director chooses to layer his screenplay with intercuts of actual visuals of Karuppan's narration to Maayandi. As the audience, we witness a meditative compilation captured from a camera first placed on the top of the hillock, as if we take the place of 'The Almighty' and welcome Raamaiah into our arms. He climbs, carrying the two seemingly heavy bags he is seen carrying for the entire movie run.

The music then softens, and now the camera is placed down on the rock to visualise Rammaiah from behind after he has climbed to the top of the hill. And now, he seems to be 'The Almighty' himself. He comes down briefly to give the polti bag of ash, as if he is handing over the baton to the younger generation and says (blesses) that everything will be sorted once the deity's ritual is performed.

He climbs back, and the sound of a squawking peafowl tears the wind, and the sun makes its way out of the dark cloud. The puzzling frown on Raamaiah's face is wiped off, and he smiles big. He smiles heartily like an infant. The instrumental melody compliments his 'altered state of consciousness' and his expanded spiritual awareness. When Karuppan turns back to look at Raamaiah – 'He' is gone. The music stops, and the camera freezes in its inclined angle, capturing the two heavy bags and the rays of light falling right in the middle – 'A state of spiritual perfection'. He did obtain 'Unity' with the 'Absolute' through 'Self-surrender'.

Karuppan climbs to stand where Ramaiah stood, right in between the two bags,

and now it is Director Manikandan narrating the story of our ancestors - we step into their shoes, acknowledging their experiences, and start worshipping them as our 'guiding light', our 'Kula Deivam'. Karuppan only briefly looks down in a 'scientific instinct', but as soon as he climbs up the rock, he just looks straight into the sky, the ray of light, and the heavenly abode. When he narrates to Maayandi that Raamaiah disappeared, Maayandi corrects him promptly, no, he didn't disappear, 'He flew away'. The bags sit on the top as the sun sets, indicating the soul departed, leaving his baggage behind.

Raamaiah left his baggage behind; he let go of what he was clinging on to; he let go of desires and expectations. He relinquished all attachments to become one with God, to become a divine human, a 'Siddhar'. He is gone. But continues to live in the 'ashes' that he carried with him in the blue polti - for the old and young generation to smear 'Him' on their foreheads.

The long corridor to the prison cell where the old man is 'caged' looks longingly at the distant shining moon through his prison grills - in the sorrow of being restrained. But when he is brought to the court the following day, in an urge to see his crops, just like any mother would long to see her children, he sneaks to the farmland to see the shocking sight of his dying crops. A youngster had sprayed an expired chemical compound. The constable picks him back to the court. Maayandi is not frustrated; he is just dejected.

Finally, when the magistrate says he can go home, he is not seen as happy. He is rather numb. After the release formalities, Maayandi is seen wiping hard, the thumb impression ink from his earth-filled muddy



hand. An ‘impression’ he is new to, an impression that he would relate to disputes maybe, an impression that is alien on his muddy hand, an impression that reminds him of the unreasonable restriction over a month, an impression he didn’t get when he buried a dead street dog a year back, an impression that reminds of the monetary compensation he was offered to ignore watering the saplings that were sown for their deity.

The magistrate, trying to speed up the release formalities, goes to the prison complex in person. Manikandan’s goodness showcasing never ceases. The ‘Magistrate’ did not want to visit Maayandi go home. It is ‘Mangaiaarkarasi’ who wants to be a part of liberating the innocent farmer, ‘the last farmer’. She wants to witness Maayandi return to his farmland and wants to assist him in replenishing his land with a new emerald carpet.

But when he is seen lying down on the bench outside the prison office, along with Mangayarkarasi, viewers are left with pounding heartbeats, puzzled if Director Manikandan resorted to the most common melodramatic ending for the character. Our eyes are searching for a small movement in that puny body of Maayandi.

The silence is broken by his fellow inmate, who took farming lessons from Maayandi. As he screams, asking Maayandi

to wake, we viewers, too, are screaming within, asking someone to shake the old man to come alive. But the distant peacock does that for the ones on-screen and off-screen. Maayandi wakes, all startled in a jolt, and the silence continues for us to comfort ourselves.

When Mangayarkarasi reaches Maayandi’s land, he comforts him like a mother, saying that every villager, elephant included, will assist him collectively to re-sow seeds for the deity. For generations, families were built on such simple fundamentals, right? ‘Humans with humanity’ coming together to pray to the Gods.

How can a movie so positive end without the resumed annual festivity? With the decorated lamp deity, the ‘Padayal’ of all kinds arrives. But the ‘Marakkal’ of freshly harvested paddy arrives with a hero’s welcome, with everyone cheering for our hero Mayaandi. Manikandan insists on capturing the celebrations only briefly to go back to Maayandi’s routine.

Maayandi is greeted on his routine by a peacock that is seen fanning its feathery tail from the top of a hillock. We know who it is. It is HIM, the Vahana of Subramaniayan alias Karthikeyan alias Murugan alias Raamaiah, the Siddhar, who once lived on the top of the hill.

**Latha Rajasekar is a film critics and movie blogger from Salem who predominantly writes on South Indian cinemas.**