

Article

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Polity, Propaganda and *Parasakthi*



Parasakthi (The Supreme Goddess, Tamil, 1952, 188 mins) directed by Krishnan–Panju.

Birthing a film requested to be stalled from being censored after it took shape into its visual medium is bound to go down in history. Proceeding to release a movie is no easy feat, especially when right-wing leaders thronged letters to the then Chief Minister of Madras State requesting him to curb the screening. It should have been a mammoth task for the team to surpass all obstacles and take their finished work to the theatres. While the era of dramas in the 50s was idealizing lead characters in the movies, which were primarily influenced by societal norms, the conditioned audience would have been

startled for sure, with a 'new mood realism', called 'Parasakthi'.

The 1952 *Parasakthi*'s groundbreaking storytelling and sharp dialogues attacking social inequalities and religious superstitions have influenced generations and beyond. With a recent announcement of a period film by the same name, creating a buzz in the Tamil industry, revisiting the 'trendsetter' movie only becomes relevant.

The story is based on Pavalar Balasundaram's stage play, whose primary intention should have been to portray the setbacks Tamils faced during World War II.

However, the screenplay writer efficiently tweaked the tonality of the story by adding a satirical tone to it. It was seen by many as a personal agenda of a political party's representative. The religious satires in the movie are very blunt and straightforward, given the time of the movie's release.

It was then the world was introduced to the daring and dynamic side of the 28-year-old fierce youngster, Mr M. Karunanidhi, the screenplay and dialogue writer of Parasakthi. Though his maiden venture was for an M.G. Ramachandran starrer, Rajakumari, only in Parasakthi, he proclaimed his political affiliations through rebellious dialogue composition.

Rationalists in Tamil Nadu campaigned against superstitions nearly half a century before the 'Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's Era' in the 1930s. A progressive journal, 'Tattuva Vivesini' in Tamil, meaning 'inquirer of truth' and the same in English called 'The Thinker', was published by the Madras Freethought Tract Society in British Madras as early as 1882-1888. The journal critiqued the incontrovertible religious principles and focused on social issues like caste systems in India, advocating scientific evidence. A few more 'freethinking' intellectual groups in the Old Madras Province, like the 'Hindu Freethought Union', were also critical of the Hindu Myths.

However, Periyar's rationalist views were the most challenging. He was accused of promoting godlessness, being indiscriminate and being a 'scourge' of Hinduism. Following independence in 1949, C. N. Annaduari (Anna) parted ways with Periyar and spawned a new party, DMK, just a few months before the works of 'Parasakthi' began. Anna is

supposedly the first Dravidian Parties politician to use his oratorical and writing skills to gain political mileage.



A student activist in 'Periyar's' Self-Respect Movement, born M. Dakshinamurthy, who later changed his name to M. Karunanidhi, joined hands with Anna in DMK at the age of 25. Karunanidhi, a self-described nationalist, became the propaganda voice of the newly founded party, exhibiting his reformist principles. A critique of superstitions and organized religion, the rationalist invested his reasoning and knowledge in Parasakthi's screenplay. The movie opens with a duo of girls dancing and singing the song 'Dravida Nadu' in praise of the Dravidian land, a proclaimer, propagating the orientation of the movie.

Parasakthi, apart from its political references, amongst many subplots and hidden agendas, is an honest attempt to depict a 'self-realization' journey of the three brothers who had immigrated to Myanmar. While one brother is forced to return to attend their sister's wedding in Madras, the other two are forced to evacuate war zones and later return to their homeland. The movie's main plot is the hard-hitting estranged siblings' 'rich to rag' facet. However, the writer

channelizes the screenplay so the audience would experience the common man's actual 'pain of poverty' in a crooked, women maligning society. The screenplay is a well-defined funda of polity, hinting at anti-incumbency. However, the pain-inflicting dialogues lure the viewers to sway towards the writer's desired path.



If a movie can stay relevant to date after a whooping seven decades, the team needs to be accoladed for their craft, strike the right chords 'then', and continue to do so contemporarily. The razor-sharp dialogue by the doyen exfoliates the societal inequalities off the mindset of the privileged lot, both on and off-screen. The key here is the condemning dialogue doesn't spare the protagonists either - one a learned Judge, and the other, a pampered extravagant.

The debutant thespian, Mr. Sivaji Ganesan, would have known that 'Parasakthi' was his door to a whole new world, a much mightier one than his theatrical stages. But little did he know that he was about to be proclaimed one of the greatest Indian actors of all time. Mr. Ganesan would easily be the most versatile debutant any industry would have ever witnessed. The actor excelled

because his debut character arc paved a comprehensive platform for him to perform.

The actor juggles extremities with grace and, of course, with jaw-dropping ease. The actor is introduced as a sumptuously spoilt rich kid who pities the beggars on the roads of Madras and tosses a coin to the porter in the tip. Later, he becomes a beggar himself on the pavement and then turns into a swindler under the guise of a lunatic. A dream debut character for any performer, indeed.

On the one hand, the actor connects beautifully with the audience on his dilemma of not divulging his sorry state to his widowed sister Kalyani, who dreams that her brothers will take her and her infant to the land of wealthy life someday. On the other hand, he enchants the viewers with his platonic love towards the girl, Vimala, who becomes instrumental in mending his thoughts, broadening his perspectives and aligning his focus on achieving a stable and thriving society. The actor devours his meaty role as he showcases the variety in his performance, and his nuanced facial expressions and fiery dialogue delivery leave him unparalleled.

In a posthumously published 2007 memoir, Sivaji Ganesan quoted a sound engineer who had commented on him- 'the new boy was opening his mouth like a fish, whilst speaking'. However, the audience proved this criticism wrong, as his high-pitched sound resonated well within his vocal cavity, enhancing his articulation and rendering clarity to his dialogues. It made him more relatable to real-life characters and connected him to the audience in a big way. The diaphragmatic dialogue delivery was a 'theatre artist trait' of the actor, and it made

him come alive on the silver screen, almost making him tangible.

Parasakthi's pinnacle is its 'self-realization' journey, the actual transformation of the siblings to become a newer version of themselves. The conversation with the activist Vimala refines the thoughts of Mr. Ganesan's character, Gunasekaran. She points out that, had he not thought what society might perceive of his act of losing his wealth to a fraudster while intoxicated, he wouldn't have stooped low to become a beggar or a thief himself. These dialogues by the lateral thinker Karunanidhi interplay with his onscreen characters and off-screen viewers.

The judicial elder brother, Chandrasekaran, played by the fantastic S.V. Sahasranamam, is destined for a transformation, too, but rather a painful one. He chases away his sister, whom he doesn't recognize and her baby, whom he doesn't know existed when she comes begging at his doorstep. And even sad, he shoos them away to receive an eminent guest for the dinner that he is hosting.

Viewers are left to ponder how noble-souled a person might be, like that of the character Justice Chandrasekaran. The plight of our country is that we are conditioned with a reflex to disregard a person seeking alms. Sadly, it is true that the number of hands seeking alms *was* and *is*, extremely high. In today's world, we are often in doubt if we are feeding the homeless and hungry amidst the begging mafia. We are even evaluating the physical abilities of those who are begging and are taught not to encourage any non-disabled person to beg. The incident in the story wields a judgment on ourselves in self-

scrutiny and questions our conscience even after several decades.

Chandrasekaran's is a brave role, and his transformation comes with the penalty of losing sanity after knowing that it was his 'hungry' sister and her infant he had shooed away. What could be worse is that he is the sitting judge for the case of his sister, Kalyani. She is accused of murdering her infant, as she could not find any means to feed the child.



The second brother, Gnanasekaran's character, played by S.S. Rajendran, is solution-driven. Japanese bombardment in Myanmar forces the brothers to walk towards their homeland, but Gnanasekaran loses his leg in a shelling and is lost. And, to one's sorrow, he is left with no option other than seeking alms for a living. However, he proactively aims to create an association to reform the 'begging community', steer them away from organized crimes, and facilitate their rehabilitation. The story comes full circle.

The screenplay offers solutions to societal issues, with due references to C.N. Annadurai's ideologies. In the conversation with Vimala, Gunasekaran accuses the society of an 'abode of beggars, an 'inn for lunatics' and a 'den of thieves. But Vimala replies, duly echoing the voice of

Anna's newly found political party. She accuses Gunasekaran of unknowingly letting society fool him into becoming a beggar, a madman and a thief. Vimala narrates that many people have become 'rich in the guise of mad men' and 'millionaires in the guise of beggars'. She calls Gunasekaran 'self-centred' because he is bothered only about his sister and not concerned about the innumerable destitute of society. It *was* and *is* the party's call to commoners, the 'potential' party carders.



Sensational conversations like these became the voice of Tamil Nadu's polity, initially winning people's hearts and elections thereon. These revolutionary insights lay the foundation for many state laws, such as slum replacement, legal land documents and rehabilitation of beggars through vocational training and skill development.

Though the movie was a celebration of kinship, those fiery dialogues, from the point of view of a commoner, made 'Parasakthi' a supreme force. Mr. Karunanidhi adapts a critique's tone to attack the age-old cherished beliefs and institutions. His ideologies on Religion, God and Priests permeate his writing and resonate profoundly with the discriminated masses to date. His rationalism

became an awakening call for those who internalized the pain in his writing, and it did provoke the consciences of many. Controversial elements and the rumoured ban of the film only boosted the movie's theatrical run.

Characterization becomes noteworthy when each character mouths the writer's principles and beliefs, either as satires or in a condemning tone. The archetypes of con artists, like the black-marketer and the misbehaving priest, were always paired with a helper who sympathized with the victim, duly concurring with the audience. Every dig at mythology and casteism served as subliminal coercers, questioning the 'buried' rationalist in each viewer. The movie is a sheer illustrative example, exhibiting a writer's strength.

Karunanidhi's literary prowess was explicit in the assonance of the court scene monologue. Veteran actor Sivakumar had mentioned several times that aspiring actors of that era would be expected to recite Karunanidhi's writing in auditions. The climax monologue soon became Karunanidhi's identity. All movies he wrote thereafter mandatorily featured a sequence to accommodate lengthy pieces with similar vowel sounds. This 'branding' of Karunanidhi electrified the viewers, as they aroused excitement in the theatres and led him to evolve as a cult in his political career.

Religious satires are challenging for any believer like me to comprehend. However, the sarcastic remarks registering his contempt never failed to leave the audience in awe. Every dig leaves an overwhelming amazement and admiration for the writer. He compliments the process, befittingly, using

his language proficiency, an innate trump of his.

Kalyani, the sister of the three brothers, asks her father if he can postpone the wedding since her brothers couldn't make it. The father replies, 'It would cause trouble if the astrologer's date is changed'. The astrologer's auspicious date is left to linger in the ears of the viewers as Kalyani's marriage ends abruptly, making her life a living chaos—the dialogue questions such beliefs without directly condemning them.

Had someone missed these correlations, the monologue by Gunasekaran in the pre-climax dutifully reiterates the need to make fresh digs. He claims at the court that 'Sister Kalyani's is an auspicious name (meaning good fortune and prosperity), but she is now the epitome of inauspiciousness, left without even a mangal sutra.' The viewers are made to recollect Kalyani's misfortune in becoming destitute by losing her husband in an accident (whom she had married on an auspicious date) and later losing her grieving father.

Mock on astrology continues in the 'molesting priest' sequence as well. When the priest blesses a devotee 'long life', Gunasekaran, from behind the deity, warns the priest to assess his horoscope first, as he is about to kill him. In answer to the priest's exclamation, 'Was it Goddess Ambal who spoke?', Gunasekaran replies, 'When has the Goddess spoken, you fool?'. These are highly insensitive words from any believer's perspective and were the very reason why the dialogues were requested to be axed by the censor committee. It is bound to hurt the sentiments of many, and it will continue to do so in the future. But the writer's counter-

narrative might be he intended to address the pain of the vulnerable masses in a 'commen-infested world', who are exploiting them in the name of religion and superstitions.



Nuanced variations in characterizations create a conversation within, on right or wrong, while still being invested in the movie. It almost becomes an interactive exercise after a point. For instance, the activist Vimala, played by beautiful Pandari Bai, is not mad at Gunasekaran, who runs away with her food packets, pretending to be her porter at the railway station. She pities him, thinking he should have been hungry, and even admires his interesting facets when he shares the stolen food with the crows in her backyard. In a much later scene where Kalyani is shoed away from many homes and finally by her brother, one can't stop comparing the contrasting traits of Chandrasekaran with Vimala.

The writer's ironic satires became vast highlights of the movie. His writing adorns the screenplay with several trivial-looking conscience pricklers but landed big amongst the audience. One such accoladed scene is that the name of the lady who refuses to give alms to Kalyani is 'Annapoorani', the name of a Hindu Goddess representing food and nourishment. In another instance, when

Kalyani asks for food from a man who is seen sitting outside his house, he counters he is hungry, too. He says there isn't much difference between them, for he hasn't eaten in three days. It is a satirical testimony reflecting the ill effects of hoarding and famine in the state.

The refugee camp sequence highlights the mindset of the unfortunate lot, the burden of caste on a commoner and the discriminative politics of the Northerners vs. Southerners. The refugees from Myanmar are refused a place and are mistreated. The dialogues rebel, calling out the lack of humanity, morality or love in the hearts of fellow citizens. While Gnanasekaran's character aims to tremble the government onscreen through the revolutionary Statewide Beggars Conference, demanding voting rights for beggars, the politician Mr Karunanidhi captivates the audience with his writing skills parallelly.

The celebrated climax monologue is the soul of the movie. It almost summarises the story and the ideologies, citing emotional and psychological logic in substantiation. Ganesan's diaphragmatic delivery ascertains the moral and social factors that forced his sister to attempt suicide after throwing her child in the river.

The societal accusation - 'Famine impelled his sister to kill her infant', has been thoughtfully threaded through the greedy black-market hoarder's character. Gunasekaran tries to establish the evil outcomes of hoarding in society in a beautiful 'vowel rhyme'. The dialogue rhymes, 'Was it the fault of *'Panjam'* (famine) to let the swindlers grow, or was it the fault of those

who invited famine to their *'Manjam'* (bed), indicating the rich misbehaving hoarder.

These catchy phrases result in an internal monologue in the minds of the audience, days or perhaps decades in this case, after watching the film. If warfare were the core cause of food shortage, the writer highlights the human aspect in messing the distribution chain, a major human cause resulting in horrific tragedies. The writer voices the ordinary person's perspective in resonance with their harrowing pain.

On the other hand, how does one process the fact that Gunasekaran and Kalyani were 'pressurized' to turn unlawful? How do we process the fact that it was the society that drove them to become convicts? Believers quickly consider the twisted mishaps of someone's 'fate'. But Karunanidhi, who despises supernatural and pre-destined elements, writes in assonance- "Is it the fault of *'Vidhi'* (fate) or is it the fault of *'Veenargal'* (worthless people) who thrive in the name of fate?"

Be it 'Karma' in Hinduism or 'Qadar' (God's Decree) in Islam, they all point to the broadly used term 'Fate'. What explanation do we have for 'fate' other than our religious texts? While only scientific evidence would suffice as an explanation to our interrogative young minds, are we inevitably branded as inhumane and non-empathetic as we continue to blame it all on 'Fate'? Are we pushed to theorize 'Fate' as directly proportional to lack of empathy and compassion?

Qualitative dialectical oppositions like these might prompt one to investigate 'communism' and crosscheck 'philosophical texts on reasoning'. But, if the essence of any religion is 'to spread love' and 'be kind', the

likes of Gunasekarans seem to strive for it, but it is also the same kind of ‘love’ towards fellow beings.

After exploring newer understandings in introspection, most viewers, who were open to logical transformation, acknowledged the concurrences. The writer’s words became instrumental in making the viewers pronounce inward the need to rework their algorithms to master basic humanity despite religious orientations.

On the contrary, the monologue can also be seen partly as the writer’s defence of his religious satires. Some even see it as the writer’s redemption arc—an attempt to amend atheist deliberations and address dialogues’ misconceptions.

The five-odd-minute monologue easily persuades any rational human to side with Gunasekaran’s emotional arguments. It is Karunanidhi summing up the noble intentions behind his ridicule. Nevertheless, contradictions continue to prevail despite

‘creative liberty’ and ‘freedom of speech’ justifications. Sensitive phrases questioning and ridiculing the existence of God irks believers. Still, such iron-fistedness becomes mandatory to keep a check on the mushrooming religious con artists, who exploit people by encashing their superstitions.

What is worrisome is that the writer's concerns about the dire situation of most of our people haven’t changed much in our contemporary lives, even after seven long decades. Poverty indexes dodge the real homeless nomads and alms seekers, paving the way for misrepresentation of ground realities.

The concerns worsened because of the thought that the writer’s anguish hadn’t wiped poverty off the state, even after many terms of power were in their hands. Except for making the adage true - the rich got more prosperous, and the poor became poorer with soaring price rises, history seemingly stagnated.

Reference:

The article was shaped after a detailed interview with Mr Balasubramaniam, my dad, who aspired to become an actor 7 decades ago. His textile family, hailing from a small-town Salem in Tamil Nadu, had to heave my dad from Madras during his late teens and curfewed him not to enter the movie industry. Now, at age 82, his eyesight has failed him due to a regenerative retinal disease, and he is hard of hearing, too. Yet, he watched the movie with me with great zeal, often pausing to share trivia about the film and decoding the maker’s intentions for me. His ‘common movie lover’ point of view highlighted the expectations of the youth of that era and how the writing inspired many in more than one way. Interestingly, being staunchly religious himself, he adores the monologues of M. Karunanidhi and recites them in perfection. He is an ardent fan of the versatile actor Mr. Sivaji Ganesan and the enchanter M.G. Ramachandran.

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