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Mamannan: Battlefields for Another Future



Mari Selvaraj's *Mamannan* is a film that accurately portrays the signs of caste and community in Tamil politics and life. There is no other film that has discussed caste politics and communal practices in Tamil Nadu in such depth. The stories of strong struggles and awakenings against the arrogance of casteism and the structures that are obsessed with communal feelings are told. Politics that comes into Tamil cinema is handled completely differently in its stances. Tamil cinema and politics are intertwined. Although it is rooted in political beliefs nurtured in the roots of Dravidian politics, Dalit politics is a complex one. *Mamannan* is attempting to discuss the political ideas of Dalit identity, which seeks to advance by engaging in conflict with Dravidian politics.

Many individuals live in a state of slavery, feeling helpless because they believe

that even when they gain power, it is only through communal alliances. Mamannan (Vadivelu) has such a life. A member of the Legislative Assembly for ten years. A man who forces anyone who comes before him to sit and talk and who speaks after sitting. He has memories of the cries of helpless people with him. He is intertwined with that life until his son, Athiveeran (Udayanidhi Stalin), stands in front of him. The film passes through strong frames. Right from the beginning, the politics that the film forwards is clearly written through a very beautiful craft. Athiveeran and Ratnavel (Fahad Fazil) are introduced with great care right from the beginning through intercutting sequences. Power tries to develop its politics by creating a fear that smells of death. While he does everything he can to seize power without any cruelty or hesitation, the endless hatred of the

legacy that has been following him for ages can be seen in Ratnavel's eyes. His eagerness to preserve that legacy for the next generation is also visible.

Religion and caste being involved in politics is not a new experience for Tamil Nadu. Not only there, but in the Indian context, the people in power make the chemistry of religion, caste, colour, and community an issue. No issue that affects humans is discussed there. When you watch this film in India, its political significance is also very great. Upholding humanity is the right way to fight these collective forces. That is what is raised through Athiveeran.

Athiveeran awakens the youth and advocates attacking those who come to attack and move forward. The voice he raises becomes more powerful in places of change. Dalit politics, which must boldly enter positions of power, is raised there. Mari Selvaraj has been talking about the politics of setting aside the political business tactics of upper and lower castes and having legislative assemblies where the voice of the man is heard. The Chief Minister character played by Lal indicates that this cannot be changed quickly. There is still a long way to go.

Vadivelu, who was seen on screen after a long time, leads us through extraordinary acting moments. The intensity in his eyes is enough to disturb us. Eyes that tell stories of emotions and wounds. Although Buddha and Ambedkar appear frequently in Mamannan's screen appearances, at one point he points a gun at Ratnavel. The questions he raises are for the audience. Even then, the waves of compassion and sadness in his eyes cannot be ignored.

Fahadh Faasil has also handled the character that behaves in a way that makes him seem mentally ill. Udhayanidhi Stalin also gives a good performance. This is probably his best performance. Although Keerthy Suresh and others make an appearance, they do not become strong presences. It can be said that the story progresses through sequences that often seem male-centric.

Dogs and pigs are present throughout the story. Selvaraj uses animals as precise metaphors. Similar methods can be seen in his previous two films. *Mamannan* becomes a film that sticks in the mind through its subtle presentation, strong concept, and stunning visuals. The music composed by A R Rahman is captivating, along with the narrative. The use of Vadivelu's voice increases its intensity many times over. There is no doubt that *Mamannan* is a film that cannot be hidden in the world of cinema, especially among political films, and can become a model.

Struggling Youth

Mamannan has been an ordinary party worker and MLA, and has come up through pig farming and other such avenues of life. Many conflicts and incidents have passed through his life. Many of them he has had to witness from such helpless situations. He witnesses the trembling bodies of three children stoned to death by the community for bathing in the temple pond. He holds the body of his son, who escaped death in that incident. But he is also torn by the questions his son raises. Fifteen years of silent intimacy have followed between them. Without questioning his son's wishes, he tries to strengthen his stance.

The new era is trying to find more serious issues. In an era that is opening up the possibilities of providing a better life to all people, power is adding forms of inequality as a strong reminder. Athiveeran has been created on the ideological level to rewrite it. His struggle against thoughts that are obsessed with inferiority and customs is announced from the very beginning. The advice he gives to his students in physical training is one of empathy. He has developed his life through the experiences of injustice that have befallen him. He courageously upholds his idea for a generation that is trying to find shelter in the conditions of caste and color. Youth rises in waves around him, who dreams of a world where everything is fine in the time when pigs fly. The film presents a society that cannot deny that wave of youth.

Just as *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Karnan* have shown, *Mamannan* also reminds us how active the politics of caste is in Tamil Nadu. Mari Selvaraj's first film, *Pariyerum Perumal*, released in 2018, meticulously presents the realities of life and caste from the Tirunelveli areas through rural settings. *Karnan* (2021) presents caste-related incidents more strongly through the landscape of southern Tamil Nadu. The story we know in *Karnan*, a story that moves through incredible developments. If that film showed that the oppressed communities were kept more confined, *Mamannan* is asking what its politics are. It maintains them as an uncivilized group that should feel inferior even in name, and leaves justice as only a paper dream. Efforts to interpret the values upheld by the Indian Constitution by linking them to communal manners and customs are becoming active in the present. Such practices

challenge not only the values upheld by the Constitution, but also the very idea of humanity in a civilized society.

Life Becomes a Battlefield

Ratnavel's strategy for gaining power is primitive. The policy of keeping the people's representatives from the reserved constituencies as slaves. His political leadership opposes it. Ratnavel's response to that is growing into the biggest problem facing this country. Whatever the policy of politics, if it does not suit their established interests, they can easily reject that political party and move on to another. Not only does he say that, but he switches parties and joins the opposing party. His only opponent is Mamanan or the political ideology that he upholds. Politics is being developed into a casteist sentiment with the support of the community. That is where the strong roots of Dalit politics are found. The form of turning hatred into a political issue can be seen. The resistance lies in the strength of the youth. It points to the need to speak more loudly about democratic politics with the strength of the youth.

Mamannan's story is presented through beautiful frames from the beginning. The theme of the film is introduced at the very beginning through two intercutting sequences. Journeys from the colorful present to the black and white past enhance its enjoyment. The presentation is also made more endearing by the conviction that the present is in color and not so different from past experiences in black and white. *Mamannan* is someone who speaks from the experience of time. The intensity of Vadivelu's portrayal of that character is

indescribable. Mamannan becomes a Mannan, knowing its casteist contents, moving forward without hesitation, and at one point, through his courageous stance, he creates a group of humanity around him. He has the strength to speak the language of love, not the language of hatred. The light of moderation and empathy that he expresses when he points a gun at Ratnavel can be seen in those eyes.

The film puts forward a big political statement. It is a strong voice that reservation

is not a boon but a political right. There needs to be studies on the actual conditions of these representations beyond the ideologies of reservation principles. At a time when reservations are being raised as a question in the near future, *Mamannan* is upholding its historical importance. Those who are fascinated by the attempts to create a slave can watch this film with hope in a time when caste, community, and colour are big problems, and the hardships of human life are completely worthless.

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