

Article

Latha Rajasekar

## Imagi(ni)ng Nine Decades of MGR Movies



Puratchi Thalaivar, translates ‘Revolutionary Leader’, is the title given to the actor turned Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, the first of its kind in the country, his roots being debated to be from today’s neighboring state of Kerala, **Maruthur Gopalan Ramachandran**, better known by his initials **MGR**.

When my mentor asked me write an article on this legendary hero, I was left with dilemma. To begin with I was fond of Sivaji Ganesan’s body of work, an actor who paralleled MGR’s timeline. I began watching the work of MGR on platforms, to see if the actor would make an impact now that I was revisiting his work chronologically. I sought

my dad’s help, an avid movie goer, belonging to that era, to discuss what the actor MGR and his work meant to him as a teen and now as an eighty-three old.

MGR’s big screen career began nearly nine long decades ago and we have a Tamil film that released early this year, named ‘Vaa Vathiyar’ translating ‘Come on Teacher’, ‘Vaathiyar’ being another adage that his fans used to address him. They considered him their mentor. The movie ‘Vaa Vathiyar’ is an ode to the legend, his charisma, his morally inspiring traits on and off-screen. The maker seems to have a vision of making MGR, the questioning conscience of every con-man’s.

The very thought of a premise to celebrate MGR's virtues in its crux, showcases the phenomenon that he WAS and still IS.

A drama troupe trainee MGR, had strived hard to be casted in roles in cinema, we read. Eventually he had managed to rise to a larger-than-life person, not just in reel-life but also in the real. He had sculpted his career by having writers write morally inspiring stories for him and every other technician in the production house, seems to have shouldered his vision. The lyricist's words turned quotations, music composer's songs became anthems, stunt choreographer's movements propagated him as an ever-ready revolutionary by showcasing his disciplined fitness regimes and the costume designer's colors symbolized his political affiliations.

Gandhian principled influencer who joined the political party DMK and later started his own party AIADMK, a believer turned rationalist, a Malayali Nair turned Tamilian Vellalar claiming his ancestor were Tamil, ruled the Tamilians for a decade and died when in power.

MGR apparently seems like he had directed himself in all kinds of dream roles in every film that he worked in, housing rebellious cruxes in almost all his films, except a very few, early on in his career. While cinema became a propaganda tool, slowly the movie going population were introduced to the philanthrope in the actor and they soon turned his political supporters. Crores of unpublicized charity amidst a pioneering politically acclaimed 'mid-day meal' scheme for school children in Tamilnadu, would remain his eternal identity in the state.

The actor's acting career and his political career were almost parallel. It is said

that he refused to act in a play named '*Sivaji Kanda Hindu Samrajyam*' very early in his career, as he was reluctant to be associated himself with a radical Dravidian movement of that time. But ironically, in a span of just three odd decades he went on to start a new Dravidian party himself and become the chief minister. A news article reads that whenever there was a slump in MGR's movie career, his political ideologies and affiliation gave his career a boost. Irrespective of what his strategy was, he gave unimaginable runs at the box office with his careful choice of genres, switching to the social cruxes from his rebellious knight-ship characters to keep pace with the audience's expectations and his competitors.



Breaking the fourth wall and acknowledging the audience seemed to me as MGR's working pattern ever since he embodied the rebellious prototype. He intentionally seems to have broken the barrier between the fictional world and reality, as his character traits were often curated. From being an action hero in the 1950 '*Mandhiri Kumari*' to an outlaw in the 1954 '*Malaikallan*', a protector of the poor in 1958 '*Naadodi Mannan*', a champion of social justice in the 1969 '*Adimai Penn*', a social leader in 1969 '*Nam Naadu*', to a protector of

women in 1965 'Enga Veettu Pillai', the moral idealist, had been watchful of his choices.

The actor has an innate blatant innocence that he transfers to all his characters. Dravidian ideologies when uttered by a fair skinned outsider, must have created an unimaginable magic on and off screen and the actor seems he was 'true' to both. The actor's charisma not just elevated him as an actor but also as a human and that must have echoed in his real-life politics too making people grow fond of him.

He seems to have taken hints from his failed attempts as his movies bounced back at the box office right after every low buzz response. Movies seems to have become his campaigning grounds, eventually taking him closer to people in reality, as he was addressed, 'Makkal Thilagam', a people's Chief minister.

A deliberate restriction on portraying morally weaker roles, as the actor was certain that cinema influenced society at large, had been often critiqued. Though the actor didn't venture into exploring human complexities like his peer Sivaji Ganesan did, MGR's energetic body language, his coy smiles, his onscreen ideologies, his on-screen naivety as a son and a lover, must have magnetized the masses of that era.

The actor's roles were always straightforward and uncomplicated. Outsmarting powerful villains were often through simple disguises, as small as a mere mustache or a side beard and it seems to have become his cinematic tool to influence the masses through entertainment mode. The audience might have felt empowered and liberated themselves, as the actor hand-led

them into forbidden places through his disguised character.

Common man raising above odds, political symbols brimming dialogues and welfare boosting songs seems to have become the template of the actor's roles. His powerful dialogues had transformed into political speeches. A soft campaign indeed, looking directly at the eyes of the masses through the camera lenses. It must have been a tool stronger than what today's social media could dream of, as the actor never broke his moral code ever.

The beauty was he never disrupted the story's illusion and yet managed to create a niche to reveal his 'own self' where possible. The audience must have turned participants as he often fused fiction with reality. His sword fighting stunts with swift movements should have landed him as a macho personality in the hearts of young adults. They must have been wooed by his nationalist principles and patriotism, big time.



The 1954 'Malaikallan', a purest adaptation of the Robinhood template of the west, must have laid foundation to the people's hero image for MGR. He plays a transformed thief protecting villagers from exploitation, and the makers showcase his agile swag in contrast to

his lowered gaze out of respect around his mother in the climax. The unique social justice genre of MGR's rightfully must have begun with this venture and it sure became a never dying template as many heroes had followed suit in making similar storied films to Malaikallan, right from the 'Chandraleka' fame R Ranjan's 'Neela Malai Thirudan' to the super star Rajinikanth's 'Sivaji' the Boss. 'Ethanai kaalam than yemattruvaar intha naatille' song, which briefly translates, 'How long will they cheat us', beautifully resonate with his social justice theme and emotionally targets the audience to join hands with Malai Kallan and there on MGR himself.



The voice against untouchability in the 1956 'Madurai Veeran', must have been a riot among the audience as MGR represents the deeply rooted legendary folk story of a brave warrior who challenged tyranny. A story that speaks about caste dynamics and guardian deity named Madurai Veeran, is yet another fine choice to reach out to the masses and break record at the box office. The chieftain's son born with an unlucky mark ends up in the desert, is rescued and named as Veeran (warrior) by a cobbler couple. As a grown adult when he saves the princess from drowning her uncle confronts the hero asking

why he touched her. MGR, replies with his trademark chuckle saying, how could one save someone drowning without touching. A soldier asks him to stay at a distance as he is an untouchable. MGR's sarcasm in his reply, - 'You people have to change one day or the other' indicating the context of the prevalent discrimination in the society at that time, is a fine example of how the screenplay confronted societal issues by using his character interacting with the masses, literally.

After his leading roles in 'Rajakumaari' and 'Maruthanaattu Ilavarasi', the 1957 movie 'Mandhiri Kumari', formerly a play by Mr. Karunanidhi based on the 10<sup>th</sup> century Tamil Buddhist Epic Kundalakesi, casted MGR as a valiant army general. The screenplay and the story were the highlights, but MGR's 'good vs evil' story did land him as an undeniable hero among his fans. The antagonist characters - Raja Guru's son and his wife who is the minister's daughter, seem super powerful than the army general's. S. A. Natarajan playing the Raja Guru's son, sure outdoes MGR's character by playing a marauder, a dejected soul, ranting anti-social dialogues and to me it even reminded of Rajinikanth's villain character 'Parattai' from '16 vayadhinele'. Also, the Minister's daughter performed by Madhuri Devi is the one who finally gets to kill the villain, her marauding husband. Both these roles especially the Minister daughter, her redemption in becoming a Buddhist nun is a role that could easily over shadow the hero's role. And the super hit song of this duo, 'Vaarai nee vaarai', again has nothing to do with the lead role of MGR's. In fact, it is she who exonerates MGR's character Veera

Mohan, from the accusation that he attempted to kill the King.

In such a complex story with equally meaty roles to other actors, MGR challengingly manages to give an unforgettable performance. His duality portrayal of a warrior and a gentleman lover, his contrasting swift action amidst compassionate body language, his motivating speech to his soldiers, though the words belong to Karunanidhi, MGR's contained anger adds beauty to his Army General's role. His plea from the witness box to clear his name, without much pompous, the actor makes a mark, his presence felt and his voice heard, both to the courtiers in the movie and the audience in the theater.



Right after that, the 1958 'Naadodi Mannan' movie's dual role duly lands as a complete package as the actor turns director and producer himself, apparently to grab the attention of the audience in a way that he envisioned, maybe. Given the time frame, it seems like the actor's independent agenda not just to pull the movie goes towards him but also to prove his mettle among the party carders. An outright entertainer, a template that again had paved way for many movies for decades across Indian languages, was

critiqued as a pompous rhetoric by a few. Apart from the speculation of its intention at that time of MGR's career, it sure must have set the stage for celebration and sent his audience crazy.

Saroja Devi's debut as one of the lead ladies in 'Naadodi Mannan', seems to have laid foundation for the duo's blockbuster classics that followed much later in both their career, such as 'Padagotti' and 'Anbe Vaa'. The 'Thoongathay Thambi' song translating 'do not sleep oh brother', is so very popular as an aphorism. And the transformation of the look alike, shaving his beard to become the coronating king, is a textbook sequence that we would find in movies across decades later. The character's mannerism of sniffing his nose does seem like a forceful trait, kind of autistic at times and an amateur director's compulsion, but his make-believe tactic seems to have made him win hands down.

Though his moral standards restrict him from having more than one love interest, his philosophy broadly seems to imply, "I don't chase, I attract," highlighting a sense of self-worth and confidence that draws women naturally. The tweaks from the Prisoner of Zenda on which 'Naadodi Manna' was based on, involving a King's look alike, after the swap, the character addresses his queen – 'Sister', a perfect example of the sensibilities of MGR's moral code.

The 1964 movie 'Thozhilali' was centred around motor transport worker's welfare. Slogan by the workers against the oppression of its owner, is duly stopped by MGR who plays the manager of the company, on accounts that 'if not for such big companies and their owners, many of the workers many not had a livelihood to begin

with'. MGR's inclusive perspectives seems to stand out in every simple role of his, instilling positivity and reassurance in the common man's inner thought. To invest the provident funds of drivers to begin their own cooperative bus services in the movie is bound to boost the morale of the audience - a sneak peek in to the actor's future political manifesto on economic empowerment.

The actor's character choices helped the audience look at issues that different sections of the masses were left to tackle, as he came full circle in respecting folks from all walks of life. The coastal district was duly represented in his outing named 'Padagotti' translating boatsman, in 1964. He portrays a fisherman and deals with the politics of two fishermen groups. The story templates itself, as MGR a head of one group, falls in love with the daughter of the other group's head, whereas the antagonist Nambiar wants to marry her. But the evergreen 'Thottal Poo Malarum' song that explores the theme of intimacy and touch, its catchy visuals along with trendy cinematography, the actor's favorites 'disguise' tool, and a brave female lead character, made the movie an unmatched experience.

Silambama, the Tamil martial art, gave the title 'guardian of culture' to MGR, as he incorporated it in every social reform crux of his. His fitness discipline became popular and in support of his onscreen 'Vaathiyar' persona. The actor's fluid movements and quick foot work are poetically inspiring, till date.

MGR's filmography was soaring with back-to-back reformative movies set in different backdrops and year 1965 release 'Enga Veetu Pillai' must have been the

biggest Pongal treat, an entertainer for any movie goer irrespective of their political affiliation. MGR's dual role movies are many, especially the timid vs heroic ones. But this one seemed to have given him superstardom, especially the iconic whiplashing song with the DMK party colored attire, uttering politically relevant lyrics, 'Naan aanaiyittal, Adhu nadanthu vittal, Ingu ezhaigal, Vethanai padamaatar', that pretty much translates a political opening speech, yet again breaking the fourth wall and communicate to the voting public, promising that- 'If I command, the poor wouldn't have to go through hardship'. Call it a propaganda tool in an era of cinema being the sole medium of direct visual dialogue with the masses. The actor's aura magically was audience driven, as they were reluctant to believe that he was a 'performing artist' and instead saw him a 'true liberator' set to redeem them.



The second half of the same year saw another contrasting sword-fighting blockbuster 'Aayirathil Oruvan', and the people saw the return of the swashbuckler template of the silent era, except this movie was more than the mere damsel in distress kind. The rebel hero's noble premise included slavery, dictatorship and forced piracy. A pirate film might have been a dream-project

and when it was associated with leading the slaves to fight for their rights in a period era, it sure must have been an added bonus. The movie had made yet another record as people were revisiting the era of their ‘sword fighting’ MGR. The iconic songs, rebellious crux in a pirate film backdrop, his much-loved villain combo with M.N. Nambiyar as the antagonist, should have made his already enthusiastic fanbase, revolutionized.

The social reformer in MGR must have made him seek plots for his movies, systematically. The political inclination must have driven him to address manifesto issues and ‘Vivasayi’ translating ‘Farmer’ in 1967 is a significant premise that spoke about the agrarian tension. ‘Kudiiirundha Koil’ in 1968 a remake of China town, sported a twin, tasked to apprehend his long-lost criminal brother, which aptly fell in to the ‘conscience questioning’ moral template of the actor’s.

The 1969 Telugu remake ‘Nam Naadu’, a fight against corruption plot, set in its contemporary time, a go to template for any hero with huge fan base, must have been in the check list for the doyen. While the plot was a borrowed one, the addition of the song, ‘Nalla Perai Vaanga Vendum pillaigale’, translating, ‘Children, you should earn a good name’, soon turned what is called a ‘paappa paattu’, a rhyme, for school going children and still remains afresh after five odd decades after its release, as it resonates at many modern-day schools cultural.

When an actor is adored by the masses, children begin to mimic their parents, then mimic the hero that the parents are fond of, until that hero is sown into the child’s memory cells, converting the children to become followers of tomorrow, turning

doyens to leaders. Is that how it happens, I wondered.



A Labour-day release the same year in 1969, ironically titled ‘Adimai Penn’ a historical action drama, had all the virtues to become a MGR film, starting from the grandeur as it was his home production, his pairing with his ‘Aayirathil Oruvan’ heroine Jayalalitha, return to an authentic and crowd pleasing historic premise, a desi inspiration of the west’s Tarzan series in the 1960s and a slavery premise for the emerging leader who might have been steadily marching towards becoming a leader himself in the real life. The spine straightening sequence in the movie after the captured ‘hunchback’ prince was left to live in a low ceiling prison cell, should be a frame that would remain in the eyes of the masses forever. It aptly symbolizes the liberation of the under privileged and motivate them to stand ‘tall’ in the fight against oppression. The borrowed plot sequence of a mother of a twin, tied down by iron shackles by the evil uncle, from the ancient Greek mythology, Antiope, the very visual aid emphasises slavery at its best, went on to become an iconic plot point nearly five decades later for the blockbuster movie ‘Bahubali’.

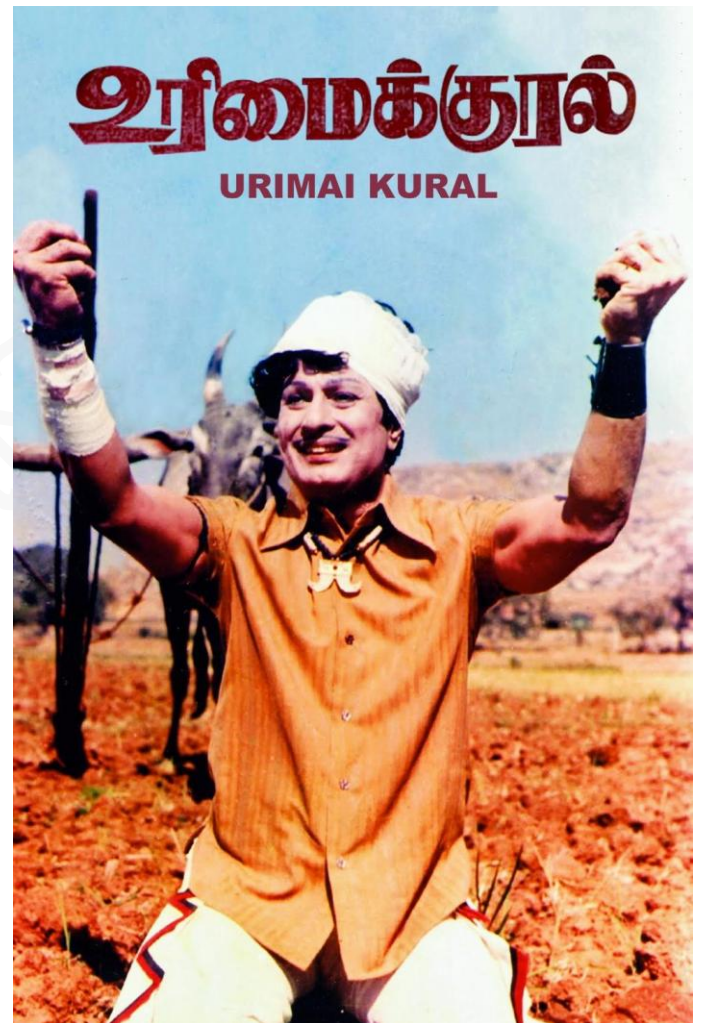
The next backdrop to explore for the 54-year-old actor at that time, was to celebrate the integrity and the righteousness of the

masses of the Rikshaw pulling community in the year 1971's 'Rikshakaran'. The movie's crux was to fight the corrupt judiciary but the entertainment value should have multiplied by casting a new face Manjula opposite him in those glittery dreamy songs. While the song "Ange Siripavargal Sirikattum", translating 'let people laugh', was for the political masses, the 'Azhagiya Tamizh Magal', translating 'beautiful Tamil daughter', was for the fantasy loving cinema followers and surprisingly both were written by the legendary poet Vaali and sung by TM Soundarrajan. Two versatile people who seems to have had a large role in shaping the actor's 'messiah of the poor' image as the former penned the lyrics in concurrence to the political situations and ideologies and the latter's voice mesmerised the masses matching MGR's charisma. Working together in sequence with MS Vishwanathan's magical tunes, MGR was elevated to a protector status, yet staying close to the common man.

The 1973 'Ulagam Suttrum Vaaliban', a year after the actor floating his own political party after being expelled from DMK, chooses a global backdrop as the hero voluntarily shifts from being a mere protector of the masses to becoming a 'protector of mankind'. For this as the title translates, he needs to trot the globe and he does, in this second directorial venture in his home production. The dual hero subject, a scientist and a CBCID, intensifies the story with juicy sequences in this sci fi genre, giving the audience a grand reason to throng to the cinema halls. But it all begins only after duly crediting the leaders in the opening credits like Nehru, Sashtri and Annadurai with clips

of their real-life speeches on the need of a 'scientific rationale' for the betterment of human race.

All of MGR's character have a list of 'must have traits, including endorser of humanity, an advocate of human rights, prioritizing community's welfare over personal gain, commitment to the under privileged. And this movie, ups those elements along with an intriguing screenplay that must have left the audience in awe.



Noteworthy films like 'Urimai Kural' (Voice for rights) to 'Uzhaikkum Karangal' (Toiling hands) were all aimed to restore the faith in tomorrow's leader, right from the title choices to female leads to character's messiah arcs. By then, the new wave in Tamil cinema had started echoing independent voices and social realism with less hero centric narratives

and broke the formulaic writing, through story driven nuanced plots, the birth of the so-called 'modern cinema'. And by then, MGR's newly found party shifted its focus to larger canvas and ventured in to reality, uplifting and empowering women, children and the have nots.



The debate is an ongoing one whether it was the movies that helped the doyen to become a real-life hero, a leader, or if it was the other way around. There are several articles that proclaim that the actor used the party's affinity to up his film career. But the actor is an undeniable phenomenon, an inevitable chapter of Indian cinema, who made news, who created history, who continues to be used as an icon to gain political mileage. And he seems to live in the hearts of millions, for he is the hero that each one in the audience wished to become, someday. A mentor to many, a hero to many and an 'avenger kind super hero' to the likes of the film maker Nalan Kumarasamy who made the movie 'Vaa Vaathiyar'.

A well-off looking, fourteen-year-old boy who had come to the Jan 2026 movie 'Vaa Vaathiyar' alone, as his parents were in the adjacent theatre watching 2026 Parasakthi, was seated next to us. The movie's premise houses a grandpa's attempt to mentor his grandson, through emphasising the kind of moralistic person, MGR and his film characters were. When I asked the teen boy why he had come to see this movie and not go to watch the other movie with his parents. He said, 'I always belong to AIADMK and I wanted to be truthful by watching this movie rather than what looks like a DMK movie'. I was speechless for a while and then asked who his dad was and he said his dad works for the IT wing for the AIADMK party.

Family upbringing did make the child affiliate himself with the party I silently thought. On the contrary, MGR, an epitome of integrity, could that have influenced the child? I wasn't sure.

Maybe, gen alphas can themselves mimic their favourite hero, until that very hero is sown in their memory, paving way to turn doyens to leaders of tomorrow. We will have to wait for another decade to see if they can make yet another actor their leader and then their chief minister, as there are quite a few in the making, in this part of the country.

**Latha Rajasekar is a movie blogger, writes on South Indian language films.**