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***Maamannan* and the Voice of Resistance That Lives On**



An Adivasi woman is backed by the ruling party and elected the President of India, but when the new Parliament house is being inaugurated, that President is not invited. So, the identity that had helped secure votes now

becomes a burden they would rather hide. Similarly, in *Maamannan*, Rathnavelu makes sure that the Dalit leader who has risen to the status of an MLA with their support doesn't sit in front of them. Because he never mixes

up identity with politics and believes his legacy works only if he keeps the centuries-old practice of oppression alive. Now the rest of the film becomes about the Dalit leader's fight to ensure his rights and establish equality for all.



Just like in his earlier films *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Karnan*, director Mari Selvaraj once again uses animals as extensions of the human social hierarchy in *Maamannan*. In the opening montage, we see a shot of dogs that represent the violent upper caste, and in the next shot, we see pigs that symbolize the Dalits. And that sets the entire context. Rathnavelu, the Samathuva Samooganeedhi Makkal Kazhagam (SSMK) district secretary for Salem (Tamil Nadu) and younger son of late ex-minister Sundaram, from a dominant community, rears the dogs. Athiveeran, son of Maamannan who is an MLA from the SSMK and belongs to the Dalit community, rears the pigs. Around halfway into the film, when those dogs are unleashed to attack and kill the pigs, it feels like an embodiment of generations of upper-caste oppression against the Dalits. But one little pig survives the attack, and that reminds of an earlier flashback scene where Athiveeran and his friends were pelted with stones and killed by upper-caste men for simply bathing in the temple well. Athiveeran, like this little pig, had survived that casteist attack and later

stood up against Rathnavelu. Decades ago, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar survived and went on to change the fate of the oppressed. Because no matter how ruthless the oppressor is, you can't kill the spirit of resistance altogether. Someone will always survive and change everything for their community.

Athiveeran personifies the spirit of Ambedkarite youth that believes in revolution. In his Adimurai (martial art) class, when a student tells him he was beaten by a physically stronger classmate, Athiveeran tells him to fight back because if he doesn't resist now, he will keep getting crushed by the same power again and again. The film shows this idea of strength and hierarchy through two connected moments. For Rathnavelu, everyone who works for him is beneath him, whether humans or dogs. When his beloved dog fails to win a race, he beats it to death. As this happens, the film cuts between Rathnavelu's action and the fight in Athiveeran's class where the stronger boy beats the weaker one. The dog cannot fight back and accepts death, just like many of the oppressed who suffer in silence.



But in Athiveeran's martial arts class, the weaker boy eventually stands up for himself and defeats his oppressor. It tells us that the powerful should never take the powerless for granted, because the moment the powerless

chooses to fight, the structure of power starts to change.

However, while Athiveeran is portrayed as a hero, it's his father Maamannan who is at the center of the narrative. Through his arc, the film touches upon an important subject that's usually overlooked in mainstream Dalit-Bahujan cinema. It's the line between Marxism and Ambedkarism. Many Dalit literary figures, such as ND Rajkumar, have noted that India's leftists focus solely on economic class and emphasize little on the caste-issue. In the film, Maamannan belongs to a party whose entire vote bank is built on the promise of equality. But within the party, caste hierarchy dominates over everything else.



Rathnavelu and the upper caste people do not target Maamannan because of class, but because of caste hierarchy. Maamannan has risen from a party cadre to an MLA, and his economic status has risen simultaneously, so it's upward class mobility. But he is still treated as lesser and denied a chair at Rathnavelu's house. This becomes an Ambedkarite reminder that class power alone is not enough for social dignity. Also, there's an interesting detail that explains the whole point. In rural Tamil Nadu, Dalit people live in what is typically called a *cēri*, removed at a distance from the main locality where all the public services are available. When

Maamannan was a party cadre, he used to live in a small hut in a deserted area. Now that he is an MLA, he lives in a big mansion that still stands in a deserted area. At several points, the film uses top-angle shots of the main town and then Maamannan's house to point out that although his economic class has moved upwards, his place in society remains the same. So, in order to get his dignity, we need Ambedkar's ideals more than Marx's. And that's where Athiveeran comes. Athiveeran's insistence that his father sits on a chair in Rathnavelu's house is an Ambedkarite action that directly rejects caste hierarchy. The youth of the constituency later in the film also rebel against Rathnavelu's casteist dictates, again showing a spirit of Ambedkarite resistance. Having said that, the idea is not Marxism and Ambedkarism working in isolation. Leela, Athiveeran's love interest and an activist, challenges capitalist exploitation by running a free coaching center for underprivileged youth, while also using education as a tool to socially empower marginalized people. By the end of the film, we see Leela and Athiveeran working together for a social cause, making it clear that we need a combination of Marxism and Ambedkarism to improve society.



One of the finest aspects of the film is its storytelling through symbolism, conveying a lot without saying much. Pigs, for instance,

appear multiple times in different ways. In the opening montage, we see Athiveeran coming outside from a pigpen, with dirt all over his body.



A few moments later, a member of his father's party advises him to stop Athiveeran rearing pigs, calling it embarrassing for an MLA's son. That reflects the pigs' contradictory status we all know of. We saw a similar use of symbolism in the 2013 Marathi film *Fandry* and the 2022 Kannada film *Kantara*. As Keyoor Pathak and Dhiraj Kumar wrote in their article published on Down to Earth, "In many parts of India, pigs have been religious and cultural motifs. It is thus astonishing to note that pigs are stigmatized at the same time, as are communities rearing them. This typology is not an objective reality but a socially constructed hierarchy that reinforces caste-based exclusion and civic disabilities." Also, Athiveeran happens to be a painter who paints pigs the way he imagines them. On the wall of his room hang two paintings side by side, one of a pig sleeping peacefully, and the other of Dr. Ambedkar. Together, they tell a story that all Dalits can sleep peacefully today because of this man. He also paints a pig flying high in the sky with their wings, as if showing his dream of Dalits rising above all struggles and finding freedom. But he does know it's just a dream and not yet a reality. As he says, "I used to wonder, if the piglets

here sprouted wings, wouldn't that be the end of all troubles? But so far, that hasn't happened." To make his dream come true, revolution is the only way forward. Later in the film, we see him painting a pig in an aggressive form, overpowering a dog.

The narrative is primarily shaped by the ideologies of three figures. Ambedkar, of course, is at its heart but alongside him are Gautam Buddha and Periyar E. V. Ramasamy. In *Who Were the Shudras?*, Ambedkar argued that the Shudras were actually Kshatriyas but were pushed down to the lowest varna when the Brahmins denied them their rights. The same idea appears in the film, where Maamannan, an MLA, and his son Athiveeran, a martial artist, are denied their basic right to dignity because of Rathnavelu's idea of tradition. Ambedkar believed that the annihilation of caste could happen only when the marginalized educate themselves and use their knowledge to bring change. We see this in the film as Athiveeran reads books and advocates for free education.



The story also connects to history. In the flashback scene, as mentioned earlier, Athiveeran and his friends are attacked by upper-caste men for bathing in a temple well. This is the same injustice that Ambedkar had fought against in 1927 through his Mahad Satyagraha movement. On the other hand, Ambedkar saw Buddhism as a path to social liberation, and Buddha's message can be felt in Maamannan's philosophy. It's "Not by

birth is one an outcast, not by birth is one a brahmin. By deed one becomes an outcast, by deed one becomes a brahmin." In one of the earlier scenes, we see Athiveeran's bike keys kept beside a Buddha sculpture, as if the keys serve as a metaphor for his control over his life and his ability to choose his own path, both guided by the Buddha. And obviously, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's self-respect movement is the essence of Athiveeran fighting for his father's dignity at Rathnavelu's house.



Form and philosophy walk hand in hand in *Maamannan*. You can feel it throughout the film since every technical choice carries a bit of its soul. Rathnavelu is captured in a low-angle shot during each of his explicit acts of violence. In contrast, the oppressed (sometimes Rathnavelu's dog, sometimes a worker, and sometimes Maamannan and Athiveeran) is frequently captured in mid or high-angle shots, establishing the social gaze of subjugation. What's more interesting is how the camera angle changes as the power structure between the characters evolves. During the confrontation scene where Athiveeran fights for his father's dignity at Rathnavelu's house, it becomes more balanced and the camera no longer looks down. Also, the handheld camera at times with its close-ups creates a sense as if the caste system itself is shaking

from within. At the time, we can't help but appreciate the editing pattern that enhances the impact. It begins with longer shots, which allow the tension to grow gradually. The cuts quicken when the conflict erupts, allowing us to confront two very different human sides that exist within the same world. However, at the peak, the editing breaks away from this binary and gives Athiveeran and Maamannan more space. Their dignity was denied socially, but the director now ensures that it's reclaimed visually. This is achieved through the blocking of the characters as well. While Athiveeran is placed at the edge of the frame initially, he moves to the center and comes closer to the lens when he begins to fight. On the other hand, the sound design makes Athiveeran's personal fight feel like it belongs to everyone who has been wronged. In the beginning, the sound is mostly diegetic with only a little of non-diegetic, and as the conflict grows and Athiveeran fights back, it grows stronger with the diegetic sound blending with non-diegetic. It's as if Athiveeran's revolution is finding its voice, which reverberates as the voice of the entire community that's otherwise unheard.



This is the filmmaking grammar of *Maamannan*. Whether it's the scene juxtaposing Rathnavelu killing his dog and the fight in Athiveeran's martial arts class or

the one where the Dalit kids bathing in the temple well are attacked by upper caste men, we see similar crafts that expose centuries of oppression. Also, several parts of the film feature the Dalit-Bahujan cinema aesthetics. It uses natural light and natural color that never glorify suffering.



Use of low-key lighting in scenes of moral conflicts successfully expresses what's unsaid. And tight framings sometimes create a claustrophobic feeling like the characters are trapped within a social boundary they can't escape. Sound is also an important element here, which conveys a lot about the caste oppression. For instance, the frequent use of drums and folk beats feels like the cries of the Dalits. In the scene where Rathnavelu's dogs are unleashed to kill Athiveeran's pigs, the dogs' barking sound drowns out the pigs' cries, showing how the powerful crush the voice of the powerless. Also, if we look at the screenplay closely, we would see that it's an episodic structure rather than a traditional one. It goes through different segments, such as Athiveeran and Maamannan's broken bond, Athiveeran's love story, the flashback sequence and Athiveeran's trauma, Leela's free coaching center and its fight with a private institute, Maamannan's clash with Rathnavelu, the election, and so on. Whatever the chapter is, the voice of resistance runs through it all.

Caste oppression works as a structure; the oppressor exists and that's why the oppressed do. Now it's quite fitting that *Maamannan* uses cross-cut editing in several sequences to expose this systemic inhumanity. When the fight takes place in Athiveeran's class, a cross-cut connects it with Rathnavelu killing his dog. By cutting back and forth, it also reminds us of Eisenstein's montage theory that the meaning doesn't exist in either part alone but in the collision. In the flashback scene where the Dalit kids are attacked, it cuts between the kids in the well and the upper caste men throwing stones from up above. The cuts quicken when the stones are thrown and slow down once the kids are hit. We see the same technique when Athiveeran and his gang ride to attack the private institute, or when Maamannan recalls his humiliation by his upper-caste party members. Since this technique is repetitive, the film constantly forces us to see the oppressor and the oppressed in the same space.



Every visual motif in *Maamannan* serves a purpose. Portraits and sculptures of influential figures (for example, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy on the Chief Minister's table) connect the narrative to history and philosophy. The recurring imagery and sound of a train signify journey and also the irony that while the world moves ahead, Dalits are held back by the same world. There's a

brilliant use of mirrors that goes into the questions of identity and self-respect. In one of the earlier scenes, we see Maamannan combing his hair in front of a mirror while singing a song. The mirror and the lyrics together signify a split consciousness as Maamannan sees himself through two lenses at once - one is where he knows his worth and the other is where he is aware of being treated as inferior. But when Athiveeran looks into the mirror later in the film, the reflection of the flying pig painting appears over him. This again takes us to Buddhist philosophy, where the mirror represents clarity of mind and the ability to see one's self. In the mirror, Athiveeran sees his own existence and not the story society wrote about him. Moreover, the film's costume choices deserve a mention. Both Rathnavelu and Maamannan wear white as it's the traditional dress code for politicians in Tamil Nadu. Interestingly, both the oppressor and the oppressed wear the same clothes because politics makes it look equal on the outside. Athiveeran wearing a check shirt breaks away from the monotony of this white shirt order of the system. But as the film progresses, he transforms from a disruptor into a leader. That's why on the election results day, he wears white as he steps into the political space. His entry into the system points to the age-old belief that real change always comes from within.

The film, however, is not flawless. There's a subplot of a love story that doesn't add much value to the screenplay. A few moments could have easily been edited out. The biggest issue is that Rathnavelu's character mostly gets stuck in a single shade. However, needless to say that these shortcomings are outweighed by the

positives, especially the performances. Fahadh Faasil as Rathnavelu is menacing, but whenever feasible, he makes sure to bring out the human side of the character. It's his nuanced performance that convinces you that he is just part of the system, and if anything, his only fault is that he couldn't go above it. So, when he says to Maamannan, "You disrespected me", you feel the pain despite knowing he is the villain. Athiveeran's emotions keep changing from rage to pain to leadership as the story moves forward. The actor Udhayanidhi Stalin, who also happens to be a politician, handles these shifts perfectly through his body language. Maamannan inarguably has the most layered journey in the film, which Vadivelu brings to life. There's a moment when you almost hate him for giving up his principles just to survive in politics. But then, when he stands alone in the foreground of the frame with a slightly slouched posture, you can feel his helplessness inside the system. Vadivelu shows this change bit by bit, turning a man who once bowed down into someone who learns to raise his voice.



Another thing worth talking about is the portrayal of female characters. One could call it a flaw that the women in *Maamannan* don't get much room to shine. Then we remember that politics, especially in India, has always been about men. Even when

women are there, they are usually seen through men's sexist attitudes. Mari Selvaraj shows this imbalance and highlights the importance of women within the system. In Rathnavelu's household, the women (his mother and wife) have no dialogue, which becomes a metaphor for the patriarchal power structure. But the women in Maamannan's world have opinions and actively participate in decisions. Maamannan takes advice from his wife, while Athiveeran and Leela work together toward their goal. This is Selvaraj's commentary on the broader gender politics that any revolution must include women to succeed, and any power that excludes them is destined to fail.



In *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* by Bertolt Brecht, Arturo Ui rises only because the people let him. The choice, after all, belongs to the masses, and the rise of a fascist is always resistible if only the people choose to resist. In *Maamannan*, Rathnavelu does everything he can to win but the people of his constituency stand for good over evil. However, the Rathnavelus of our real world

are far more dangerous. They steal votes, control the media with propaganda, and spread lies until they start to be taken as truth. Watching the film in such times is almost looking into a mirror. We realize that yes, it is our voice that makes the difference.

Well, the film's opening shot is of the empty Legislative Assembly. It ends with the house full of people, and Maamannan taking his oath as the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. Now, over the past two and a half hours, there are particularly a few moments that prove exactly why Maamannan deserves his place here. All his life, he has been denied a chair by his upper-caste party members. But whenever someone of a lower status comes to meet him, he makes sure they sit before him. So, the chain of oppression ends with him, and as long as people like him are in power, equality surely has a chance to live. When he delivers his speech ("Everyone is born equal..."), the focus goes to a large portrait behind him on the wall. The man in the portrait once broke the chains of caste just like Maamannan, led the Dalit Buddhist movement, fought for women's rights, and wrote India's Constitution. In that moment, it feels like Ambedkar is watching his legacy move forward. And the fight goes on, with the hope that one day, love will win over hate.

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