Article

Latha Rajasekar

Reminiscing Bharathiraja, the Ruralist

Pathinaaru Vayathinele (1977)

An aspiring actor turned director, grabbed eyeballs in the late 70's, for his authentically raw and emotionally resonant film making, as his movies were shot in real villages, amidst real village dwellers. Unpolished aesthetics being his forte, he brought to the glamourous pretentious world of Tamil cinema, a New Wave. His work showcased real life characters, who on one hand mimicked our relatives and on the other, made us visualize the lives of those never seen 'rustic rural natives'.

Expressive rural-specific screenplays complimented by crisp village accented dialogues, makes movies of his, a treat to watch and cherish for a lifetime. The director collaborated with a bunch of writers, the prominent ones being Panchu Arunachalam, K. Bhagyaraj, his assistant and R. Slevaraj. Co-writing the story and the screenplay, works better as minds are pooled in

collaboration, to arrive at unique collective thinking. Such collective exercises seemed to have helped the director reflect the depths of societal issues that he wished to make an impact with. Director Bharatiraja's collaborative efforts didn't seem to have stopped with just his writer's community. He had even screened his work to a private group of 'women' audience, so he could assess their 'acceptance quotient', to proceed with the revolutionary endings in his movies.

In-depth characterization, detailed dialogues, critical shot composition are Bharathiraja's signature movie making traits. Watching him express his thoughts on his private YouTube channel 'En Iniya Tamil Makkale' translating, 'My dear Tamil People', (a welcome phrase in his own voice, that majority of his movies begins with, along his folded palms signature), I strongly believe, it is the director's innate compassion and love towards women in general, that had permeated while he etched his female characters. Inhibition-free exploration of vulnerability while dealing with love and deep enduring bond that arises from the sustained state of affection, is something unique to all his movies. While at it, he did incorporate arousal and physical pleasure elements, through his frames and dialogues, but only to emphasis the traits of his characters.

For instance, 'Mayil' from the movie *'Pathinaaru Vayathinele'*, the 16-year-old girl is often seen admiring herself in mirror, suggestive of pride about her beautiful self. The director's approach in portraying the subtle power dynamics of the sleazy doctor in arousing the young and beautiful village girl, is spot on and is almost poetic, as the conversation on 'touch' and 'feel transpires onscreen. And the truth is, for a moment the director makes one forget the character's ill intentions, as we audience are charmed as well, alongside the young girl. Had a hero performed the very same sequence, it might have been convincingly romantic, one would be left to think, as the young girl escapes the molester. The director makes the audience understand the psyche of both the woman victim and the predator, the very interplay between one's cognitive process and biological drive, which often dictates how one experiences arousal and intimacy.

On correlating a sequence from *'Alaigal Oivathillai'* movie's song, 'Aayiram Thaamarai', it is very a similar romantic sequence to that of the aforementioned sleazy doctor. But it goes on to become authentically romantic and captures the deep connection between two souls, maybe because the sequence is in consensus and intentions are pure. The diligent screenplays of the Director's, are spot on, irrespective of the importance of the characters, be it a lead or a supporting or an antagonist. Every character seems to have been uniquely thought through, and each of those characters would have a complete arc of its own, however small it might be.

These technical choreographies, became his trademark and he never failed the audience of their expectations. The director's visualising technique of 'vulnerable physical moments', have become highlights of his work, as he promptly aligned every physical touch by a character, to their respective trait and arc. Examples are aplenty 'Kizhakku Cheemayile', where Seenu and his cousin Pechchi are in the thorn pit, and Seenu

removes the thrones with his lips and not his fingers, as Pechchi asks him not to touch her with his fingers. Yet another sequence is from the movie *'Pasumpon'*- 'touch the nose with the tongue' challenge which every character attempts discreetly. In '*Vedham Pudhithu'* movie, it was Sankara Pandi taking the fish out of Vaidhehi's saree.

Structured intimate choreography became a distinct feature of Bharathiraja's Cinematic Pattern. Seemingly voyeuristic, these sequences sometimes did end up enforcing male gaze. It might as well be an audience puller tactic to the theaters during the 70's and 80's. But the director's multi layered female characterization, sowed in those audience's patriarchal minds, that women were not mere virtuous, submissive beings, but were resilient, independent and stronger than they were given credit for.

Distinct gestures and body languages of his characters breathed life into the onscreen visuals and contributed abundantly towards 'realism' in his movies. The director is known to cast native villagers alongside majority of his debut actors and he must have had his artists trained, by insisting them to sync with the real beings of the terrain. Movies speak differently to individuals, based on one's personal outlook and exposure in life. Bahrathiraja's native 'Theni village' days, must have been, his personal go-to treasure trove, for all his character's body language, their unique rural traits and village accents. Even in interviews, when he is seen reminiscing a particular incident during shooting, his body language immediately kicks in and he is seen to be instantly adapting to the rural accent for his narration. Only a native film makers with innate ruralism like him, could accomplish such spectacular body of work.

Music of Illayaraja's was in harmony with Bharathiraja's rural visuals, for the very same reasons too, I thought. The Director's friendship and working experience in theater along with Illayaraja and his brothers, prior to their respective movie careers, must have enabled them leave a legacy behind them. Illayaraja's songs distinctively elevated Bharathiraja's work, that predominantly advocated feminism content. But the director's unconventional climaxes stood the test of time as his premises and narrative had been uniquely refreshing. In many of his movies, the crux was established towards the climax, when the director decides to unload a rebellious, bold twist, with a bang, and it keeps lingering for a long time, some for decades. And that bang would inevitably involve a character of his, setting himself or herself free from the invisible societal shackles.

Each of Bharathiraja's movies had a vision, a purpose, and was mostly told from the perspective of women. While *'Pathinaaru Vayathinile'* spoke on infatuation, *'Mudhal Mariyathai'* spoke about compassionate love and the need of companionship. *'Kizhakke Pogum Rail'* spoke on Patriarchal superstitions, *'Alaigal Oivathillai'* spoke on calf love that goes on to defy religion. *'Kizhakku Cheemaiyile'* spoke the sibling sentiments and familial feud, *'Pasumpon'* addressed widow remarriage. While '*Karuthamma'* threw light on the pain of female infanticide, *'Nizhalgal'* spoke on consequences of unemployment, youth's societal challenges and they refusing to take up jobs other than white collar ones. *'Vedham*

Pudhithu' spoke about casteism, *'Anthimantharai'* spoke about an activist's struggle to live with his retirement companion. And '*Bommalattam'* spoke of coerced gender performativity and its dynamics in the world of cinema. Such were the versatile and rich premises, each of it narrated artistically, by the legendary director.

His scouting stories are the boldest in the industry as he was always looking for raw talents. The director did challenge that he could make any random human act, for which he was hugely criticized as, arrogant. He was trolled for undermining the craft and dedication of actors. The director's confidence in his own craft, made him blurt out blunt statements such as these, but he did prove it right, with back-to-back successes of movies that housed random new faces, as his screenplay took center stage and connected with the masses, big time.

The village stories were his forte but his thrillers 'Sigappu Rojakkal' and 'Tik Tik Tik' vouched for his resourcefulness. But his onscreen 'rural innocence' overpowered his career graph presumably and the director gave some unforgettable complex family dramas of the villagers.

Like Illayaraja's music, Bharathiraja's work are purely nostalgic. One would instantaneously relate to the cast, story, and the narration, just by hearing the movie titles. The music, gestures of the characters, intimacy sequences, naïveté of the characters, inquisitive dialogues, novel dialogue delivery rhythms, the artistic camera frames that capture the authentically conceived composition – a medley of emotions.

Here are some mental rumination of mine that evoked nostalgia - Shanakra Pandi watching Vidhehi from behind the temple pillar as she draws rangoli (*Vedam Pudhithu*). The message of Panchali to Paranjyothi wiped clean by rain (*Kizhakke Pogum Rail*). Ponnatha blowing her nose before serving food to Malaichami, which flashes upon his eyes while eating fish gravy at Kuyil's shack (*Mudhal Mariyadhai*). Shankaran asking Balu Thevar whether 'Thevar' was a degree that he had procured (*Vedham Pudhithu*). Gopi chiding his friend Hari who plays sad music while he is happy recollecting about his love interest Maha (*Nizhalgal*).

Muthupechi pulled from the pit by Verannan from a tree branch and the iconic back ground violin of Illayaraja playing soulfully to the words 'Pothi vaccha malliga mottu', translating 'jasmine bud that was safely kept' (*Mann Vaasanai*). Chinnappa Das enquiring about the good shepherd photo to Jennifer teacher (*Kadalora Kavithaigal*). Sevuli naively saying Chellakannu that there are seven oceans seven mountains beyond the horizon where no poor people lived. When she asks him why the horizon is so red in color, and he naively replies, his mom had told him, Neikarapatty village's granny spit her beetle juice there (*Mudhal Mariyadhai*).

Bharathiraja's characters were remembered by their screen names rather than the actors themselves. Such was Bharathiraja's auteur's touch. His characters were distinct, his narrations emotional, his song picturization intimate and connected, his actors emoted uninhibitedly, his frames naturally, his screenplay filled with his signature cohesiveness.

Most of Bharathiraja's climaxes, actually defined the director's intention and many were astounding. Listing a few climaxes that keeps flashing when I think of his movie titles – The limping orphan Chappani alias Gopalakrishnan kills the rogue Parattai when he misbehaves with Mayilu (*Pathinaaru Vayadhinele*). Ammavaasai untying the Mangal sutra so Jyothi could unite with Shanmugamani (*Puthiya Vaarpugal*). Vichu and Mary doing away with their respective religious symbolisms, the scared thread and the cross (*Alaigal Oivathillai*). Kuyilu smashing the head of Mayilvahanam using her coracle with a diaphragmatic scream (*Mudhal Mariyadhai*).

Seetha walks out of the house when Ram doubts his child's paternity. She meets her sister in law's son in the corner of the road, hugging his victory cup that he has won in a competition for which Seetha had trained him *(Pudhumai Penn)*. He ironically is dressed as Poet Bharathiyar, the pioneer of modern poetry, whose poetry title 'Pudhumai Penn', meaning modern woman, Bharathiraja had borrowed for that movie.

Brahmin Shankara performing the last rites for Balu Thevar, an atheist, as a bunch of kids leave their fathers hands and run towards Shankara. Bharathiraja's voiceovers – 'let superstitions die with this generation and not affect the young ones' (*Vedham Pudhithu*). A village lady's lament filled lullaby in the background and in a twilight backdrop, Karuthamma walking handcuffed with the police for murdering her brother-in-law to save her sister's children (*Karuthamma*). The son Thangapandi performing the Anthim Sanskar of pouring milk in to the mouth of his dying mother Naachiyar. He had stayed away, because she had remarried when he was young after his father had passed away (*Pasumpon*).

Bharathiraja's revolutionary movies are nothing but evergreen classics, and his cultural relevance had kept his craft alive for decades. Unique themes that he had chosen to invest his movie making years in, had been dutifully rewarded by the audience and the country. He recently breathed his last but will continue to live in the hearts of millions, through his creative endeavors. The immense impact he had created amidst the movie going population, by acknowledging rural people, their stories and their emotions are truly invaluable. His creative sensibilities will live forever, in every aspiring movie maker's craft who intends to make movies on villages and its simpletons.

Reference:
https://www.youtube.com/@eniniyatamilmakkale4674
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Latha Rajasekar is a movie blogger, predominantly writing on South Indian films.