

Cinematic and Political Portrayal of Peasants in Tamil Nadu: Reflections on the Films and Politics of M.G. Ramachandran

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu is the most progressive state in India in terms of economic and social parameters. Dravidian Movement shared its role in the past significant for such development. However, the condition of peasants refuses to share such view fully remembering the past. Though the peasants remain related to village culture, their life is largely dependent on the mercy of the feudal. Their past was ridden with poverty, illiteracy, and landless conditions. They are mobilized by political parties for their own ends. The portrayal of peasants in the films of M.G. Ramachandran is one such area to be studied. Further, it should be comparative with the realities of peasant life in Tamil Nadu. Mostly, peasants in films are projected as a repressed class by the landlords. The hero is projected as a savior and a leader. Though the hero showed a path embedded in rational and modern elements, he did not dare to undermine the traditional or moral features. The films of M.G. Ramachandran have precisely taken the course that consoled both the peasants and the landlords without eliminating the other.

Keywords: peasant, landlord, inequality, tradition, village culture, Tamil cinema

Introduction

Peasants in India broadly represent a vast mass of landless agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, tenants, poor artisans and small and marginal cultivators having a close social interface with the socially deprived, such as the scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, other backward classes and women. The so-called outcastes of the Varna hierarchy in the real sense of the term form the core of the peasantry in rural India. Peasants are a socially and economically marginalized, culturally subjugated and politically disempowered social groups who are attached to land for subsistence living. In recent years, overt collective mobilization of the peasantry has been characterized by their frequent participation in meetings, processions, strikes, demonstrations, voting and voting campaigns.[1]

In the pre-independent period Indian society was predominantly agrarian society. Peasants and landlords were the main players in the economy. British colonial rule introduced three major land revenue and tenurial systems in India, namely, the Permanent Settlement, the Mahalwari system and the Ryotwari system.[2] They were resulted in exploiting the peasants. They were treated as serfs that gradually led to the revolt. Peasant movement in Tamil Nadu dates back to 1930s along with the organization of communist party. The delta region of Thanjavur was popular in peasant uprising.[3] During the

British colonial rule, that is, the pre-independent period, the Indian National Congress, Justice Party, the Communist and the Dravidar Kazhagam attempted to speak for the peasants.[4]

Cinematic Portrayal of Peasants

In India, films have reflected various dimensions of peasant life and struggles. Poverty, caste, social and economic injustice prevailed in the peasant class are the major thematic manifestation in Indian films. Peasant movements and their impact on Indian society have been a significant theme, inspiring social and political discourse as well. Hindi films Neecha Nagar (1946) exposed how the poor villagers resisted the efforts of the landlord who dumped wastes in the village to make space for his real estate.[5] The film Do Bigha Zamin (1953) revolves around an indebted poor peasant to a Zamindar who threatened him to take over his lands for his debt.[6] Both the films explored the realities of rural life and the exploitation of peasants by the landlords. There is a fundamental difference between the cinematic portrayal and the real struggle against the feudalism in Indian context. Their fights against the oppression to save their land, crops, and rights could be portrayed as nationalistic fervor in films. It happened in several films portraying the anti-colonial struggle in pre and post independent periods.[7]

The portrayal of peasants in Tamil cinema generally reflects the conflict between the poor peasantry and the landlords. The hero is portrayed as a representative of peasant class and also a victim of the oppressive nature of landlordism. He usually fights against the oppression and marries a girl from the upper strata the feudal lord. In the end the film ends with the compromise of two classes. On the contrary, the hero is a benevolent landlord who marries poor peasant girl. Thus, the films usually provide a simple solution to class compromise and set aside the everlasting class conflict in the society.

Peasants in the Films of MGR

Marudur Gopalan Ramachandran (MGR) first appeared in Sati Leelavathi (1936) with his stage experience from his boyhood years. After a decade performing as a supporting actor, he became a hero in the film Rajakumari (1947). The progress of MGR

in films was further reinforced by the DMK. In 1958 he produced his own film Nadodi Mannan which manifested the ideology of the DMK in cinematic style. He broke away with the DMK and founded AIADMK in 1972.[8] After he became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, he stopped acting in films. Though his films propagated political ideas, he took special attention to the moral teachings and heroic disposition. The life of peasants occupied significant place in his films. He himself stated that he was very careful in choosing the title of a film. The story, dialogue and lyrics of his films also formulated to fit an image which he wanted very much. He insisted that a film actor should be virtuous and follow good principles. Further he insisted that the films should highlight the reformative ideas for the society.[9]

MGR starred a series of films depicting his heroism in different characters assuming as a member of working class including a peasant. The film Thaikkupin Tharam (1956) portrays the problems involved in families of farmers. The hero upheld the ideas of communism with rationalism for a better life of peasants. The lyric Manushanai Manushan Saapiduraandaa (man exploits man) written by Maruthakasi emphasized the approach of communism.[10]

The film Vivasayee (1967) illustrates the life of educated son of a farmer who intended to use modern technology for agriculture. It also upheld the importance of cooperative venture in agricultural marketing. He also stressed that as a farmer one should follow the traditional values and respect the elders. The opening song Kadavul Ennum Mudalali was written by Maruthakasi makes that a farmer created by God is superior to all other.[11]

The central theme of the films which portrayed the life of peasants is based on the landlords who oppressed and exploited the poor peasants. In the Periya Idathu Penn, the hero was a peasant living with his widowed sister opposed the authority of the landlord who inflicted injustice to his sister. He also changed the arrogance of upper class arrogance. Through the lyric 'Paarappa Pazhaniyappa' written by Kannadasan, the hero reveals the demerits of urban civilization and how it affects human life. He cited that the rural folk influenced by the urban culture ignored the merits of rural life.[12] The lyrics say,

Wealth accumulates

Motor vehicles fly

When the wealth declines

Seek asylum in countryside

Love in the town ends in half way

Love in the countryside continues ever

The film *Urimaikkural* (1974) revolved around the competing families of landowners. The hero was a benevolent and honest person with lands and gardens. The hero stressed his rightful ownership of his lands and fought for justice with feuds. The film manifested the kinship bond as well as envy among the peasant families symbolically.[13]

The film *Idhayakani* (1975) has much political overtones to mobilize the people for his party. The opening scene and song metaphorically equated MGR with the river Cauveri for his generosity and philanthropy. The lyric *Neenga nalla irukkonum intha naadu munnera* penned by Pulamaipithan reiterated his leadership essential for the welfare of the people of Tamil Nadu. In the song sequence, the plantation workers union in the name of *Annadurai* represented from different sects and religions sang in praise of MGR. In the film the hero is an estate owner helping the poor plantation workers. Besides, his desire for serving the nation made to him to become a police officer in the film.[14]

The film *Uzhaikkum Karangal* (1976) depicts how a peasant tries to oppose and reform the corrupt and evil practices of the feudal lord and the rich. The hero as a peasant believes in hard work and insists everyone to follow his path. Though the film has lot of political implications it glorifies the farmer in particular and working class in general. The lyric written by Pulamaipithan, *Naalai Ulagai Aala Vendum* glorifies the proletariat. Through their toiling a revolution would happened for a better life. The hero says that the toiling hands should rule the world tomorrow.[15]

MGR used the lyrics of *Pattukkotai Kalyanasundaram* for his film *Nadodi Mannan* (1958) for supporting the peasant movement in general and the ideology of the DMK in particular. When the heroine asked the use of cultivation for the hard working peasants, the hero optimistically declared that the time would come to change the condition. He further said that he would make

policies for the welfare of the peasants. These cinematic portrayals are nothing to do with the realities of peasant movement. However, they helped the hero to harness the supports of the peasants very much for his political ends. When he was in power he brought out some welfare measures for the peasants. However, the critics observed that they mostly helped the large farmers and the rich, and the poor were cheated. MGR also faced bitter attacks from the film world especially from *Chandrababu* and *Kannadasan*. Though they were very close of MGR earlier they turned against him and continued to attack him personally.[16]

He was himself ambivalent in making his ideology clear. He skillfully established his desire for power through the compelling aspirations of his fans. In some of his films, the climax was set to depict how the hero renounced the power in order to serve the people. In other words, his films implied that the service did not require any power but a selfless attitude. Asserting power for the benefit of people was never projected. All the three films showed in the end, when he surrendered the kingdoms to the respective rulers, despite the people liked him to take over the kingdom. In reality, he justified for taking over the power as if it was due to the pressures from the people.[17] Though the films starred by MGR themselves provide a critical outlook of existing system, scholars do not ignore to evaluate his perception critically. It is argued that his films remain a medium of political communication.[18] Besides, his films have the capacity to create an illusion for the poor and illiterate.[19] In this connection, it is important to understand how the peasants and their organizations put forth their demands and how far they achieved their goals during the reign of MGR in Tamil Nadu from 1977 to 1987.

Peasant Movement in Tamil Nadu

Madras Presidency during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century of was mainly dependent on agriculture. Landlords had the right to extract the work and to exploit them. When the Indian National Congress formed, most of the landlords joined the Congress. The predicaments of peasants were not wiped out. When Mahatma Gandhi led the Congress, along with freedom movement he

was concerned with the poor peasants. However, the exploitation of landlords continued and justified by the elites. After the formation of the communist party was formed, the problems of working class were discussed openly. Peasants were also included to expand the category of working class.

Singaravelu was the first Communist leader to think in terms of organizing and uniting both the labourers and the kisans farmers of Tamil Nadu. He considered the peasants as the ally of the working class. He started the labour and kisan Party of Hindustan in 1923 ahead of starting the communist party in Tamil Nadu in 1925. In order to reach the working class, the communist party started *Jana Sakthi*, the newspaper in Tamil appeared in 1937 at Thanjavur.[20] From 1938 the Communists began to organize the peasants and the landless labourers. Since then the communist continued to organize the peasant to fight against oppression, exploitation, and untouchability.[21] An Union was established among poor tenants on the estate of the Uttirapadi Mutt in Thenbarai village near Mannargudi in 1943. [22] With the support of the government the Mutt opposed the union. However, the union composed of both men and women organized a procession in Mannargudi demanding reduction of rent and security of tenure. After much deliberation the members of the union were granted a reduction in the rent of wet lands, cancellation of rent arrears, the re-installment of recently dismissed tenants and compensation for future eviction. Since then agitation protest of peasants become popular in Thanjavur. The Government passed the Thanjavur Pannaiyal Protection Act in 1952. The impact of Thanjavur incident had an impact on other parts of Tamil Nadu. By the time, the name of the union was known as Vivasayigal Sangham. District level Kisan Sabhas affiliated to the Vivasayigal Sangham was established all over Tamil Nadu. The impact of the Second World War causing food crisis, and price hike further ruined the conditions of the peasants. Besides, zamindars, inamdars and mirasdars forcibly collected poor stock of the food grains in anticipation of price rise further aggravated the tenants. The small farmers and labourers found it very difficult to manage the situation owing to fall in production and rise in price. In consequence, a large scale of

lands was transferred from the peasants. Number of agitations of peasants were organised during the period.[23] B. Srinivasa Rao was instrumental in organizing the peasants of Madras State under Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangham.[24] The activities of the self-respect, league and the ideas of E.V.R Periyar had strengthened the people towards the cause of toiling masses. In 1939, E.V.R encouraged the agricultural labour to fight apart their Brahmin landlords. He also formed the Dravida Agricultural Laboures Association in 1952.[25]

After independence, the implementation of constitutional provisions and the Gandhian community development schemes, there was a gradual relief for the peasants. The Congress government attended the needs of the peasant class with its own programme. However, the communist continued to organize the peasants to fight against the oppression of the landlords. In the post independent period, several agricultural unions came up among the landlords and big farmers. They appropriated considerable benefits of agriculture that were supposed to be distributed to the poor and landless peasants. The government was helpless to change the condition.

Peasant Agitation during the Reign of MGR

MGR believed sometimes that his screen image would help the people of all sections to cooperate him in his administration. But it was not so in reality. After he assumed office, the first agitation came from the peasants. Narayanaswamy Naidu mobilized the peasants for continuous agitations. The opposition parties also worked well behind the agitations. Naidu was in news since 1957. He organized several agitations to waive the electricity tariff for the peasants. Being the leader of the Tamil Nadu Farmers Association he was called for discussion by the government in 1978. As the government could not accept his demands he walked out along with his representatives. He directed the farmers not to pay their electricity bills, co-operative credit, land tax, etc., and put forth a nine point charter of demands. He organized a state-wide agitation. When the agitators moved violent, the police fired. During the agitation and police firing five farmers and one police officer killed. The DMK leader Karunanidhi accused the

government for not engaging the representative of the farmer's association and the hasty action of the police. When the situation was alarmed the army was called. The press reported that 6000 farmers were arrested.[26] The DMK called for a commission, composing a High Court Judge and the public, to look into the grievances of the farmers and to release the detained farmers immediately. He also announced a week-long agitation from 23 April for the farmers. Amidst these circumstances, MGR decided to hold talks with the farmers. The talks were held on 24 and 25 April 1979. During the talks, Narayanasamy Naidu developed chest pain. He was admitted to a hospital. The press condemned the brutality of the police against the farmers.[27]

By the time, he sensed the organizing power of Narayanaswamy Naidu and his leadership to command the farmers all over Tamil Nadu. MGR was thinking to regain his image as a protector of peasants. On 22 May 1979, he as a chief minister announced twenty-five relief measures worth 40 crore rupees for 16 lakh farmers, including the writing-off of short-term loans. However, Karunanidhi criticized his announcement as eyewash.[28] When he found that the farmers could not be satisfied he desperately said that if 40 crore rupees of relief was not enough, even 400 crore rupees would not satisfy them.[29]

However, MGR kept his promises. The government wrote off short-term loans for small farmers, raised the exemption limit for land revenue from 5 to 10 acres for dry lands and waived agricultural income tax for non-cash crops. These benefits alone came up to 60 crore rupees. But Narayanasamy Naidu demanded all the loans, amounting to 302 crore rupees, be written-off. MGR felt that Narayanaswamy Naidu was using the poor peasants to create the problem of law and order in Tamil Nadu. He also viewed that big landlords were behind the Naidu to induce such chaos. Thus, he decided to give a freehand to the police to suppress the future agitations. The government exposed the ten members of the Farmers Association who had dues. The government also warned them by notification to cut off the power if not paid the dues in a week. The Farmers Association called for a shutdown on 31 December 1980 which led to violence and police firing. Four farmers were died. As agitation

continued, MGR invoked the National Security Act against the farmers. In protest of the police action and the invoking of the national security act, the DMK held a rally on 1 January 1981.[30]

The media criticized MGR and evaluated the police action against the farmers as ruthless. His political allies also opposed the use of force in controlling the agitation of the farmers. Meanwhile, dissenters within the farmers association emerged and the splits were unavoidable. Perhaps, MGR was happy to see the farmers association was becoming weak. However, within a year MGR tackled the situation. Narayanaswamy Naidu continued his attack on MGR for causing the splits within the farmers association. The government tightened the rules for the collection of tariff dues. An ordinance was put forth for deterrent punishment and for default of power dues. It helped the government to realize 80 per cent of the electricity dues. Another ordinance threatened no-tax campaigners with a fine of 5000 rupees or five years imprisonment or both. In addition to ordinances, the Tamil Nadu Cooperative Land Development Bank Act and the Tamil Nadu Cooperative Societies Rules were passed to recover loans. MGR with his trenchant actions weakened the farmers association in general and its leader Naidu in particular. In 1983, Naidu himself declared his failure to strengthen the association further due to factions. MGR continued to waive the loans of the farmers which amounted to 375 crore rupees. He also allowed the buses to carry the agricultural produce and also provided subsidies. He introduced additional populist schemes and supplied free saree and dhoti during Pongal. It helped the stagnated handloom cloths to be distributed at the cost of public expenditure.[31] Somewhat MGR recovered his film image among the farmers ahead of the assembly elections in 1984 with his illness.[32] But the economist evaluated that the subsidies to farmers added up to 200 crore rupees annually mostly benefited the rich farmers of the association.[33] Naidu died of a heart attack on 21 December 1984 while speaking at a meeting in Kovilpatti. After the DMK returned to power in 1989, the electricity bills for farmers were completely canceled. Their loans were also canceled. Since then farmers have been receiving free electricity for their irrigation.[34]

The successive governments continued subsidies for the peasants. These benefits came to the peasants because of the agitations of the association in which the role of Naidu was great. A memorial was built for Narayanasamy Naidu at Vaiyampalayam in Coimbatore District in 2017 by the AIADMK government led by Edappadi Palanisami.

Scholars draw a sharp line between the image and the reality in relation to the reign of M.G. Ramachandran. Though he continuously declared that he was with the poor people, his rule helped the rich largely. The subsidized electricity supplied to the agricultural sector also proved this statement. From 1979 onwards, the MGR government reduced in stages the tariff on electricity supplied for agricultural use. The loss to the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board on account of this largesse had averaged at 150 crore rupees annually during 1980–85 and has more than doubled over the period. In the same manner, public irrigation facilities on which the government had invested large amounts of public funds were also provided to the agricultural sector at heavily subsidized rates. In all, during MGR's rule, the subsidy to the agricultural sector in the state added up to 200 crore rupees every year. It benefited mostly the pumpset-owning rich farmers who had organized themselves into a powerful lobby under the banner of the Tamil Nadu Farmers Association.[35] But MGR ignored the way of public spending. He clearly knew that his actions would bring electoral gains. He proved the critical estimation of others as false as his own understanding of politics brought electoral success continuously for three terms.

Conclusion

Peasant is the one of the significant roles played by M.G. Ramachandran. In his films, the peasant class is situated in the terrain of conflict with the landlord and the role of peasant-hero to overcome the dominant group. Mostly, the peasants are portrayed as poor, illiterate, innocent, superstitious, and perhaps honest. He liked to portray himself as peasant not as illiterate, superstitious and backward looking but as educated, rational and responsible farmer. He combined both the traditional values and the rational outlook in portraying his character in his films. Both his cinematic portrayals and his political

treatment of peasants helped him to make electoral success for three terms.

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