

THE MYSTICAL FLOW OF FOLKLORE IN THE CELLULOID STAGE

Mrs. Arokiya Anbazhagi. J

Assistant Professor

Department of History, Tourism and Travel Management

Ethiraj College for Women (Autonomous)

Chennai – 600 008

&

Dr. S. Gayathri

Assistant Professor

Department of History & Tourism

Stella Maris College (Autonomous)

Chennai – 600 086

Key Words: *Folk Tales, Genre, Myth, Story, Tamil Cinema*

If you take myth and folklore, and these things that speak in symbols, they can be interpreted in so many ways... a sort of enormous rainbow of every possible colour you could imagine.

Diana Wynne Jones

Folklore is a unique instrument of communication which connects the heart and soul of the listeners by creating a mystical aura of imagination and it also gives them a sense of oneness and belonging. It transcends beyond one's own culture, ethnicity, tradition, language and religion. Folklore has been an important part of Indian culture and heritage. It has brought in a spirit of recreating a human intuition which is common in all spheres of the globe. Folklore has been passed down through centuries together in the form of oral traditions, folk songs – lullaby, love duets, dirges, street plays and even folk dances.

During the early 1900s folklore became a popular theme for the tinsel world of cinema in India. Tamil film industry has seen a variety of storylines and plots ranging from drama, comedy, mythology, history, horror and also satire; folklore was one among the much sought out themes for the directors to bring a blockbuster.

Tamil movies made an exceptional inclusion of folktales and folk traditions. Majority of movies with folklore themes revolved around women as central characters and portrayed the significance of virtues and family ties. As such, most of the movies which were released in 1930s to 1950s had folklore/folktales as the central plot.

OBJECTIVES

- This paper tries to bring out the nature and history of folklore in Tamil cinema.
- Attempt has been made to highlight the use of folklore in Tamil movies between 1930s to 1970s.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted is purely descriptive and narrative in chronological manner. The sources used are books, journal articles, newspapers and online sources. The information about the folktales have been obtained from books whereas information on the movies has been obtained from newspapers, magazines and online sources.

LIMITATIONS

Since the movies dealt with in this paper is only from 1930s to 1960s, the movies which were released post 1960 are not discussed.

HINDU MYTHOLOGICAL FOLKLORE IN CINEMA

Mythology is an important source of Indian culture and heritage. It intertwines fact and fiction in a very intricate manner that it has been considered as part of history by many for centuries. The association of cinema with myth is not new. It often borders on history and hence many films found inspiration in mythological folktales (Chakravarty and Sumita 1993, 124). These mythological folklores and folktales thread the fascinating stories of Gods, Goddesses, demons, celestials, distinguished kings, queens and immortal heroes; it talks about boons and banes; about curses and penance; and it also lays open the thirst of attaining the divine too.

The first silent film in South India *Keechakavadham* was produced, directed, filmed and edited by R. Nataraja Mudaliar (Randor 2002). It is a folktale narrating the unfortunate episode in Panchali's life during the Pandavas days of exile, when Panchali had to work as Sairandri, a maid of Queen Sudheshna. Keechaka, the queen's brother, makes passes at Sairandri. She rebuffs him. Keechaka then appeals to his sister for help. Meanwhile, Sairandri pleads with Valalan (Bheema in disguise) to help her. Later, at night, Valalan, who is hiding under a blanket in Sairandri's room, kills Keechaka.

One can find in Tamil language a score of ballads with characters from Mahabharatha. One such ballad is *Alli Arasani Malai*. The 5000 line ballad narrates the love episode of Alli and Arjuna (Datta and Amaresh 1987. 138). The movie **Pankajavalli** portrayed this folktale as the Director and Producer S. Soundararajan was inspired by the popular folktale of Kerala called *Malayala Pankajavalli*. P.U. Chinnapa starred as Arjuna who after several trials and tribulations succeeds in subduing Queen Alli who had till then treated all the men in her kingdom as slaves. T.R. Rajakumari played the role of Queen Alli. The sequel ballad named *Pavazhakodi Mala* (Singh and Gaur 2008. 215) where Arjuna is shown in the quest of marrying Princess Pavazhakkodi of Themboor country was also shot into a movie titled *Pavazhakodi* in 1934 where M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar and S. D. Subbulakshmi played the lead as debut (Guy 2008) actors. It was remade with T.R. Mahalingam and T.R. Rajakumari in 1949.

Aravalli is a 1957 Tamil movie produced by Modern Theatres and the cast included S.G. Eshwar, G. Varalakshmi, S. Mohana, M. Saroja, A. Karunanidhi and T.P. Muthulakshmi. The story is an adapted version of a folktale of the kingdom of Nellurpattinam. It is about the disputed rulers *Aravalli* and *Sooravalli* and is a subplot of Mahabharatha, but a regional folktale of Andhra. The Mahabharatha

characters Bheema, Dharmaraja and Abimanyu play vital roles in this tale. Aravalli-Sooravalli genre is a strange story, a straight narration of 3600 lines which tells about the raid of a young prince Allirajan, son of the Pandavas' sister on an enchanted fortress (Arunachalam 1976. 108) of the women rulers.



This picture portrays the devious plans of Aravalli and Sooravalli infesting problems in the life of the prince and his wife Alangaravalli and ends with the moral that justice will always prevail.

Kiratha Arjuna was a Venus Production directed by G. Ramaseshan and Muthuswami Iyer in 1940. The film starred M.R. Krishnamurti, P.B. Rangachari and music was rendered by Bhavani. K. Sambamurthi. N.R. Desai, the writer of the screenplay adapted the story from the sub-plot of the Epic Mahabharatha of how Arjuna, the Pandava acquired the indestructible arrow which helped him in the victory over the Kauravas in the Khurushetra war. Lord Siva, in order to impress Parvathi and prove the bhakthi or devotion of Arjuna, takes the form of a hunter name Kiratha. When Arjuna shoots an arrow at a boar, Kiratha comes to the spot and claims that he was the one who shot the boar. Having been defeated in the quarrel, Arjuna prays to self-made linga and finds that the flowers offered to linga lands on Kiratha. Finally Siva reveals himself and grants Pashupatastra (Balasubramanian 2005. 34) (the weapon of Lord Siva) to Arjuna as a reward for his devotion.

The folktale of Matsyendranatha (Eliade and Mircea 2008. 114) or Minanatha, a Buddhist/Hindu saint and the founder of *hatha yoga*, was brought to light on the silver screen by Metropolitan Pictures under the direction of Raja Chandrasekhar in 1939 titled **Maya Machindra**. The story shows the journey of *Machindra*, who goes in search of the meaning of life and its purpose in the form of a fish and also as a sage. The title role was played by M.K. Radha. M.R. Krishnamurthy played the role of Gorakhnath and M.B. Radha Bai played the role of Princessraj Thillothama. The comedy track was fulfilled by the pair N.S. Krishnan and T.A. Mathuram, while M.G. Ramachandran played a minor role.

Kandhan Karunai, the 1967 film narrates the folktale of Murugan, the son of Lord Shiva. This mythological story has within itself a string of minor folklores

projecting the birth of Murugan, Soorasamharam, marriage with Devaiannai (daughter of Lord Indra) and his love marriage with Valli (a tribal girl). It also showed the folktale of the intellectual and spiritual association between Murugan and Avvaiyar (Porselvi and Mary 2016. 6). It was directed by A.P. Nagarajan and produced by A.L.S. Productions. The star-studded cast included Sivaji Ganesan, Sivakumar, K.R. Vijaya, J. Jayalalitha, S.A. Asokan, Nagesh and K.B. Sundarambal. An interesting happening of this film is that there existed a stiff competition between Sivakumar and Vijayakumar on winning over the lead role in this movie in which Sivakumar emerged successful (Vijaykumar 2018).

SOCIO-MYTHOLOGICAL FOLKLORE IN CINEMA

The story and screenplay of *Ayiram Thalai Vaangiya Aboorva Chintamani* was loosely borrowed from the story-within-a-story genre of the Arabian Nights and the locally well-known Vikramadityan-Vethalam folkloric myth about paying one's head for failing a test (Pillai 2015. 68). Princess Chintamani is convinced by her guru, an evil magician, to ask intriguing questions to the princes who comes to marry her and if failing to answer correctly, the prince would be beheaded. After the beheading of 999 princes by the Princess, the 100th candidate, Prince Meyyazhagan come to take revenge for his brothers who were in the deceased 999. The story goes on to show how the Prince with his shrewdness exposes the magician and foils his game plan. P.S. Govindan, V.N. Janaki, S. Varalakshmi and M.G. Chakrapani starred in this fascinating film directed by T.R. Sundaram.

One of the widely popularized folklore of the Middle East is the Arabian Nights which is a compilation of the stories narrated by the fictitious Queen Scherherazade to her husband and the brutal king Shahryar. The story of Alibaba is one among them.

woodcutter who finds the secret cave where 40 the plundered brother Kasim is dacoits, when he treasure like 40 dacoits come in their plan is Marijawna, the Alibaba and they inside oil drums. adaptation of this was done in 1941 Asoka Films with T.A. Madhuram in **Alibabavum** 40

This was the first film made by played Ali Baba. leading Kannada actor, K. Hiranaiyah, to star in the film (Guy 2011). It was again remade under the same title with M.G.R. and Bhanumathi in 1956. The 1956 version was the first South-Indian colour film shot in Geva Colour (Anon. 2017).



Alibaba was a finds the secret dacoits have stored treasure booty. His killed by the 40 tries to steal the Alibaba. When the search of Alibaba, stymied by love interest of are burned alive The first film folktale in Tamil by K.S. Mani under N.S. Krishnan and lead titled **Thirudarkalum**.

full-length feature N.S.K in which he He roped in a stage and film

The Rajasthani folklore *Prithviraj Raso ka Lok-Tatwik Adhyayan* (Handoo 1983, 33) which narrates the legendary love fantasy between Prithviraj, the king of Kanauj and Samyuktha, the princess of Delhi was brought to screen in 1942 by the Central Studios and Haran Talkies, directed by B. Sampathkumar. Prithvirajan, played by P.U. Chinnappa, falls in love with the princess Samyuktha (Sakunthala). Her father opposes their love and conducts swayamvaram for her, where he installs Prithvirajan's statue to insult him. Prithvirajan storms on the day of swayavaram and carries away the princess. Though the film was not a success, it is remembered for Chinnappa's impressive music and comedy track by N.S. Krishnan, T.A. Madhuram and Kali N. Rathnam.

The Christian German folktale of a beautiful princess plotted to be killed by the envious stepmother Queen was recorded in the Grimm Brothers's Fairy Tales as Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. This story was slightly altered and adopted by Citadel and F. Nagoor and Joseph Thaliath Jr. who also directed it in 1948 in the form of **Gnana Soundari**, after watching it as a play produced by S. Thambimuttu Pillai (Rajah 1988, 27, 32). At the same time, S.S. Vasana was shooting a film with the same story and name under Gemini Studios. It is important to mention here that the Citadel production with T.R. Mahalingam and M.V. Rajamma in lead was a box office hit whereas the Gemini version (Dhananjayan 2014, 77) with M.K. Radha, Sudheela and P. Kannamba was a complete disaster and was pulled back from screening after few shows.

A popular folk myth drawn from Buddhist tales built around Asoka the Great, his son Veer Kunal and young amorous wife was filmed more than once as a silent film in Hindi as Veer Kunal and in Tamil as **Ashok Kumar**. (Kunal became Gunaalan in Tamil.) However, there is no historic proof of the story which has many parallels with another oft-filmed folk myth *Sarangadhara*. Ashok Kumar is about Asoka's son Gunaalan, whom Tishyarakshita, the Emperor's young wife, lusts after (Guy 2008). Not able to seduce the prince, the Queen falsely accuses Kunal of amorous advancement. The enraged emperor orders him to be blinded and banished from the kingdom. After much sufferings his sight and family is restored by Lord Buddha. The movie was directed by Raja Chandrasekar and produced by Murugan Talkies Film Company in 1945. M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavata played the role of Gunaalan and Nagaiah acted as Ashoka. A surprise element of this film is that Kannamba played the role of a vicious queen.

The story of **Madurai Veeran**, a local folk hero around Madurai region was quite popular through ages. He is given an immortal status and is worshipped as a native folk deity. The folktale (Sugirtharajah 2015, 21) talks about the appointment of Veeran to end the troubles faced by the people in Madurai by the Kallar bandits, but soon due to misunderstanding and jealousy the king orders death sentence for Veeran. The virtues of *Bommi* and *Vellaiyammal* brings back Veeran to life and all the three of them were taken into heaven. The story of Madurai Veeran was adapted twice by the Tamil film industry in 1939 and 1956. The 1939 production was starred by V.A. Chellappa and T.P. Rajalakshmi, whereas M.G.Ramachandran, Bhanumathi and Padmini starred in the 1956 version.

Uthama Puthiran was another movie which had 2 versions; one with P.U. Chinnappa (1940) and the later one with Sivaji Ganesan (1958) in lead. According to

a French folklore *Man in the Iron Mask* (Bell et al. 1995), the twin brother of the King is imprisoned and made to wear an iron mask throughout his life. It goes on to say how he escapes and takes the place of his evil brother and brings justice. This was incorporated in the classic novel of Alexander Dumas in *The Vicomte of Bragelonne: Ten Years Later*. Slight alteration was made in both the films. The 1940 movie was the first Tamil film with the main actor playing a dual role. This folktale also inspired Dumas to write another novel *The Corsican Brothers* which inspired the Tamil film stalwarts to direct movies like *Apoorva Sagotharargal* (1949) and *Neerum Neruppum* (1958).

The folktales associated with feral child (Feral children are children who have lived with limited or no human contact due to abandonment or confinement by their parents. They have often been represented in folklore and children's stories as living in the wild and being raised by animals. themes are present in all cultures and the best example is Tarzan and Mowgli. Tamil filmmakers were also intrigued by this theme. The movies like *Vana Mohini*, *Vanaraja Karzan* and *Thanga Malai Ragasiyam* showcases the story of an abandoned child growing up in a forest in the company of the animals and his/her contact with the civilized world and finally uniting with the departed biological family. **Vanaraja Karzan** was the Tamilized form of Tarzan. It was jointly produced by Wadia Movietone and Madras United Artists Corporation in 1938 and was the first south-Indian **jungle movie**. The lead actors of this movie were John Cawas and K.R. Chellam. **Vana Mohini**, a 1941 film was produced by N. Viswanatha Iyer and directed by the hindi filmmaker Bhagwan. It was a story about a feral child growing with an elephant who falls in love with a prince who actually comes to the forest in search of his uncle. The movie ends with the rescues of the uncle, defeat of the villain and marriage of the lovers. The heroine Thavamani Devi (Ramachandran 1982. 31) was from Jaffna who won honorific title *Singlathu Kuyil* and the elephant Chandru played an important role in the film.

The Sivaji-Jamuna starrer 1957 movie *Thangamalai Ragasiyam* was also about a feral child. It was directed by B.R. Panthulu and produced by Padmini Pictures. It was a folktale of kings, queens, princesses and ambitious women. The Director also weaved in the Greek tale of 'King Midas and his Donkey's Ears' into this film. M.G. Ramachandran played the character of a compulsive eavesdropper. A magician gives him the donkey's ears! (Guy 2011) is quite interesting.

In fact, in majority of the Tamil folklore and folktales the concepts of ethics, valour, chastity, devotion and sacrifice is utmost emphasized and at the same time it throws light on the nature and temper of the society in the then contemporary period. The obstacles



brazen out by ordinary and extraordinary men are conspicuously ricocheted through folklore and folktales. Tamil folklore envelops a fundamental nature of consciousness and zeal. The dimension of imminent, information and facts which is established in oral folklore is astonishingly immense, but Tamil cinema has somehow succeeded in transforming and catering it visually. Though the emergence of secular storyline in cinema started in the 1950's, it became a common trend from 1970s onwards. Tamil cinema slowly started to concentrate on the social dramas portraying the struggles and crisis faced by common man and woman. Social evils and class struggles were the trending themes which were fuelled by the influence and domination of Dravidian ideology and Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu which emphasized on rationalism.

Cinema had been triumphant in preserving and transmitting the rich heritage of folktales and folklores through generations. Though in the recent years the tinsel-world has shunned away from creating outset folklore based cinema, few directors are still making movies where the storyline is sparingly inspired from folklore.

REFERENCES

1. Anon. 2017. Flashback: Kaadal Duetil Banumathiyudan aadiya MGRin doop
Cinema
<http://cinema.dinamalar.com/tamil-news/61843/cinema/Kollywood/Alibabavum-40-thirudargalum--Shooting-without-MGR.htm>
2. Arunachalam, M, 1976. *Ballad Poetry*, s.l.: Gandhi Vidyalayam.
3. Balasubramanian Lalitha 2005, *Kerala - The Divine Destination*. Mumbai: Leadstart Publishing Pvt. Ltd.,
4. Bell, A. Craig, Alexandre 1995. *Dumas: Le Vicomte de Bragelonne (The Man in the Iron Mask): A Critical Study*, England: Merlin Books
5. Chakravarty Sumita S. 1993. *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*, Texas: University of Texas Press.
6. Datta, Amaresh. 1987. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature: A-Devo*, Chennai: Sahitya Akademi.
7. Dhananjayan, G., 2014. *Pride of Tamil Cinema: 1931 to 2013: Tamil Films that have earned National and International Recognition*, Royston: Blue Ocean Publishers Eliade, Mircea 2008, *Myth and Reality*, Long Grove: Waveland Press
8. Guy, Randor. 2011. *Ali Babavum Naarpathu Thirudargalum 1941*, The Hindu. May 1, Cinema Plus, Chennai Edition.
9. Guy, Randor, 2008. *Ashok Kumar 1941*, The Hindu, January 25, Cinema Plus.
10. Guy, Randor. 2011. Interesting Screenplay Thangamalai Rahasiyam
<http://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/thangamalai-rahasiyam-1957/article2037720.ece>
11. Guy, Randor, 2008. *Pavalakodi 1949*, The Hindu. November 7, Cinema Plus, Chennai edition.
12. Guy, Randor, 2002. Remembering a Pioneer. *The Hindu*, May 9, Metroplus, Chennai edition
<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mp/2002/05/09/stories/2002050900170300.htm>.
13. Handoo, Jawaharlal. 1983. *Folklore of Rajasthan*, Mysuru: Central Institute of Indian Languages

14. Kumar Vijay 2018, Kandan Karunai Padathil Muruganaaga nadippadu jaar? Sivakumarudan betti.
<https://cinema.maalaimalar.com/Cinema/CineHistory/2018/03/05220846/1149177/cinima-history-vijayakumar.vpf> (accessed 6 March 2018)
15. Pillai, Swarnavel Eswaran, 2015. *Madras Studios: Narrative, Genre, and Ideology in Tamil Cinema*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications India
16. Rajah, Soosapillai John. 1988. *A Life-sketch of Mr. S. Tambimuttu Pillay, Philanthropist, Editor, Poet, Author, Playwright, and Physician*, Virginia: University of Virginia
17. Ramachandran, T.M., 1982. *Film World*, Virginia: University of Virginia
18. Sugirthharajah, 2015. R.S., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the World*, New York: Orbis Books
19. Surinder Singh and Gaur. I.D., 2008. *Popular Literature and Pre-modern Societies in South Asia*, Delhi: Pearson Education India.
20. Vidya Porselvi, P. Mary. 2016. *Nature, Culture and Gender: Re-reading the Folktale*, New Delhi: Routledge