CHAPTER 6

INTERVIEWS

6.1 EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Three acclaimed Tamil film directors, with a track record of making commercially successful popular Tamil films with an ecological issue central to the film’s narrative, namely Prabhu Solomon, K.V. Anand and S.P. Jananathan, were interviewed for this study. Film historian and nature conservationist Theodore Baskaran also shared his expert comments and opinions on the subject.

Theodore Baskaran reiterated the fact that there are very few films in Tamil which are based on ecological issues.

‘….Maybe for every hundred films made, there is just one or two films based on ecology or environment. Even in these limited films which have dealt with ecological issues, like for example the film “Thanneer Thanneer”, the narrative is not solely based on an ecological issue, but it is also a political drama if we look at it in another way….’ (Baskaran Theodore, Personal Interview, 2013).

Infact, all the films analysed in this study had subplots or dealt with other social issues apart from the main plot based on an ecological issue. The fact is it is very difficult to categorize Tamil films under the already established genre conventions of Hollywood cinema as the narrative structure and duration is quite different from a Hollywood film. Hence, it is understandable that given the nature of narrative of a Tamil cinema, with all
its plots and subplots, circularities and digressions, it cannot be totally categorized into a genre like nature cinema or eco-cinema. While selecting films for analysis in this study, care was taken that the main plot dealt with an ecological issue and hence ended up only with twenty one films.

There are many reasons for the miniscule number of films on environment. The three directors interviewed confided that it is not an easy task to make a film on an ecological subject. According to the directors, they face tremendous challenges from all spheres when they take up a serious subject like ecology or environment.

Ace director and cinematographer K. V. Anand started his career as a photojournalist and ventured into cinematography in early 1990s. Before he took the plunge to direction, he was one of India’s celebrated and national award winning cinematographer, with many blockbusters to his credit. But even with all these merits, it was not easy for him when he decided to work on the issue of water crisis for his directorial debut “Kana Kandein” in the year 2005. Anand recollects his experiences when he approached actors with a film script which was based on a technological solution to the water scarcity issue in Tamil Nadu. He says:

‘……Inspite of the fact that Iam an accomplished cinematographer, when I approached actors with the story of “Kana Kandein”, whoever listened to the story rejected the offer. The hero in my script was a research scholar from Anna University, who has invented a scientific solution (i.e. cost-effective model for desalination plant), for dealing with the water crisis of Tamil Nadu and who gets entrapped by a greedy businessman in the unscrupulous interest scheme of “Kandu Vatti”. Infact, I didn’t even approach the top actors with the subject, it was upcoming actors who did not have many film offers. Many rejected my offer stating it is too technical and that the story lacks heroism. ……the role of educated, civilized, law abiding scientists is never a preferred one for heroes in Tamil cinema. Heroes have to beat upten
people and indulge in unlawful activities. Infact, my other film “Ayaan” was a phenomenal hit. The hero is a smuggler, involved in gold smuggling, but the audience loved him. Also it is not only with ecological issue, any social issue per se is difficult. In my recent hit “Ko”, which was based on the story of a photojournalist, I had same issues with some actors questioning how a photojournalist’s story can have heroism’ (Anand K.V, Personal Interview, 2013).

Hence, it is not only ecological issues which are challenging, but handling any social issue as a subject for cinema is a challenge for the directors in Tamil film industry. This fact is reiterated by Director S.P.Jananathan, known for working on shoe string budgets. His films are not just entertainers, but loaded with messages and ideology. His debut film “Iyarkai”, based on the lives of coastal communities and merchant navy men, won a National award. He went on to give hit films like “E” and “Peraanmai” in Tamil. He too had problems with actors accepting his scripts.

“….There have been instances when actors refused to do certain scenes, doubting it to be too scientific for a layman’s understanding. Actors are a medium through which we reach the message, but when actors themselves don’t understand the seriousness of the issues, it becomes a big challenge for the director” (Jananathan S.P, Personal Interview, 2013)

Secondly, producers who invest money in the films also pose a challenge to such directors. Not many are interested in investing in these well researched serious subjects. Producers or those who fund the production of films want to play it safe. When K.V.Anand was looking for producers for his “Kana Kandein”, many producers were willing to fund him if he sticks to the usual formula films. He recollects an incident on the sets of “Kana Kandein” which highlights the fear of producers who invest money in the film project. He was filming the very first scene, where the hero is defending his project paper infront of a panel of professors. He made actor Srikanth memorise an elaborate formula and use a blackboard to derive the formula. When the
producer passed by while filming this scene, he called K.V. Anand aside and asked him to “ensure that the film runs”. Finally, K.V. Anand muted the complex formula derivation by the hero and used the same in the film. He says he was happy with the film, as even after six years of its release he gets positive reviews. According to him, the film, although a low budget fare, did very well commercially and the producer did get a profit.

But the commercial nature of the film industry restricts experimentation by directors as they have the twin responsibility of giving socially responsible and commercially successful films. Sharing this view on producers, Director S.P. Jananathan said it is a business and losses will not be tolerated. Film industry is a capitalist industry and producers expect profit. Directors have to operate with a lot of restrictions due to the commercial nature of cinema. Even winning a national award could be a bane, according to S.P. Jananathan, as there is a popular belief in the Tamil film industry that a national award winning director cannot make successful commercial films. He says:

“I won a national award in my debut directorial venture “Iyarkai”. Winning an award, though a recognition, is also a bane in Tamil cinema, as there is a threat of being slotted as an award film director and not a commercial director. The producer for ‘E’ while accepting to fund the film told me “you have won the award, now win the reward for me” (Jananathan S.P, Personal Interview, 2013).

Another challenge for a director like K.V. Anand is the audience, as he defines them as a complex lot. He says he took so much pain and efforts to make “Kana Kandein” and “Maatraan”. He invested so much in research and consulted many scientists for both these projects. In ‘Maatraan’, since it was on conjoined twins, even the shooting was tough. But compared to “Maatraan” and “Kana Kandein”, the box office collection for “Ko” and “Ayaan” was much more and the films were easier to make with lesser work
in terms of script and production. Hence, according to him, audience is also
difficult to perceive. But, his understanding is that cinema is an entertainment
medium. An ordinary labourer at the end of the day wants to watch a film for
relaxation. So, he cannot get too preachy or technical in films as the audience
might not want to watch a documentary. Thus, cinema has certain limitations
due to the commercial and entertainment nature of the medium.

S.P. Jananathan feels the Censor Board is another challenge for him
as he is bent upon making socially responsible films.

“I ran into problems with the Censor Board, I had to mute
dialogues in so many places as the Board objected to the
language used on indigenous people as abusive. I argued with
them that this is the language they are subjected to on a daily
basis, but they failed to listen. Ultimately, if you look at
cinema, what we have to create and what people have to watch
is in the hands of a few people - the producers, the artists, the
censors, etc. Hence it is not easy to make socially responsible
commercial cinema”(Jananathan S P, Personal Interview,
2013).

He says that he loves to use the medium of cinema to serve the
interests of the society and he is happy that in all his films, he was able to give
a message to the people. But, the freedom of expression is curbed many a
times due to the Censor Board’s interventions.

Discussing their interests in nature and ecological issues and what
inspired these directors to repeatedly work on films based on ecological issues
inspite of the many odds, Director Prabhu Solomon says he is concerned
about the environmental damage done in the country. He was inspired to
make “Kumki” as the year 2011 saw an increased number of reports on
elephant-human conflicts, he admits in an interview.
Prabhu Solomon is a critically acclaimed and award winning Tamil film director who had given runaway hits like “Kumki” and “Mynaa” and has directed seven other Tamil films. He has also donned the role of a producer, releasing a socially responsible film like “Saatai” (whip), which questioned the education system in India.

As a nature lover who has an eye for detail, Prabhu Solomon’s films are famous for capturing the pristine beauty of nature. Though he started his directorial debut with routine films, his life changing moment came with the runaway success of the film “Mynaa”. His latest film “Kumki”, which has won many awards, was a phenomenon of its own. Set in the backdrop of forests and mountains, the film is about elephant-human conflict. Applauding his work, critics termed the film as a realistic portrayal of the issue in a visually poetic narrative.

As a travel freak and nature lover, he had travelled around 10,000 km for the film ‘Mynaa’. During his travels, he saw forest cover getting destroyed and encroached upon by buildings, he said, opining that it’s mainly due to lack of awareness on the importance of nature, especially with trees being the lungs of earth. His next venture “Kayal” is also based on an ecological issue set in a coastal community.

S.P.Jananathan strongly believes that destruction of a nation need not happen through economic embargo or an actual war, but it can be achieved by the slow destruction of nature and its resources. Once stripped of its biodiversity and natural resources, a nation cannot be self-sufficient and has to be at the mercy of another. He had read stories of bio-war even in historic times, where the tactic was to kill animals and dump the carcasses in water bodies. The resulting contamination of water bodies will easily spread diseases to the people, who would soon perish without an alternate source of drinking water, he added.
Though he doesn’t believe that films can create a revolution, S.P.Jananathan says it’s just a small way to inject something to bring about a small change in the society.

Today, there are threats to nature, especially through invasive species like “seemakaruvelam” (name of a bio-invasive plant) which has destroyed the local biodiversity. He sees this as one of the schemes by enemy nations to destroy the natural wealth of India. The problem with “seemakaruvelam” is that it has become indestructible and has sucked the ground water and destroyed all native species. “Seemakaruvelam” is just one example we know of, but there are others too. Ignorance of people on these issues disturbs him, he says, adding that he has spread this message of bio-invasive species in his film “Peraanmai”.

Likewise, his film ‘E’ was inspired by a newspaper article on clinical trials in the state of Andhra Pradesh by big pharma companies on unsuspecting poor people, who have no awareness about the motives of the big corporate powers, S.P.Jananathan said.

K.V.Anand admitted that he would by no means call himself a dedicated environmental activist, but said he is concerned about the environment like any other ordinary citizen would. When he planned to direct a film, he decided it would definitely be based on a social issue. The perennial water shortage in Tamil Nadu intrigued him as people had to struggle for such a basic necessity. Another issue that disturbed him then was the incidence of suicides by individuals and families due to “Kanduvatti” (it is a form of interest levied by unscrupulous money lenders who in the name of interest - calculated on hourly basis or daily basis –extract heavy amounts even twenty times more than the capital amount borrowed). So, he combined the two issues and thus emerged the story of “Kana Kandein”.
Regarding his inspiration for the film “Maatran”, he says he does a lot of reading and draws inspiration from events recorded in the media. The inspiration to do a story on conjoined twins was from an article he read in National Geographic magazine during a flight journey, which had a write up on the conjoined twins Ying and Yang who lived for more than 63 years. He was amazed to read the story of the twins, who married and led normal lives. He came across the concept of “baby designing”, genetic modification of food and adulteration of baby food. He combined all these concepts and the result was “Maatran”.

All the three directors have drawn inspiration for their ecology based films from new media and personal experiences. However, they had taken tremendous efforts to ensure the authenticity and credibility of the information given to audiences through their films, especially on ecological issues. Director Prabhu Solomon says:

“For the film “Kumki”, inorder to portray the lives of tribals living near forest areas, I stayed in Masinagudi in Mudhumalai forests and studied the lives of tribal people living there. I recorded their encounters with wild elephants and how they use Kumki elephants to prevent the wild jumbos from raiding their crops. Even the dressing style and lifestyle of tribals in the film were inspired from the tribal people of Masinagudi. I also spent time reading and learning about elephants, meeting mahouts and recording their experiences. Infact I can author a book on elephants …that is the amount of research I put in for the film.” (Solomon Prabhu, Personal Interview, 2013).

K.V.Anand says he was very careful with scientific facts in both his works “Maatran” and “Kana Kandein”, and had consulted physicists and scientists regarding the possibilities of setting up a desalination plant in Chennai. For “Maatran”, he had consulted biotechnologists, especially genetic scientists, to understand these technologies, as he did not want to
make conceptual mistakes. These scientific concepts are needed to take the Tamil cinema a step ahead.

For S.P. Jananathan, the greatest challenge was lack of a scientific expert to guide him through creation of technological scenes. If he had had that support and expertise, maybe he could have been more accurate with the depiction of scenes involving clinical trials, he rued, stating that in his next project, he would like to have scientists assisting him. He is not opposed to clinical trials per se, as it is necessary to find cure for diseases, but only against using poor people without their knowledge for conducting human trials on bio-weapons, he makes it clear.

As a director, K.V. Anand is well aware of his social responsibility as he is handling a very powerful medium. He accepts the fact that biotechnology is framed as a dangerous science continuously in many films, but it is so only when in wrong hands. He says “There is no bad science, there are only bad scientists. Nuclear power can be used as a bomb when used negatively and the same technology can be used to generate electricity.” The concept of desalination in the film “Kana Kandein” was given as a technological solution to the water crisis in Tamil Nadu way back in 2005 itself, long before the concept came into India.

On the possibility of the audience misconceiving the concepts, K.V. Anand says that as a director hailing from a journalistic background, he had simplified the scientific concepts and developed it into a story which even a layman can understand. He says:

“I had based my “Matraan” story on the athletes of Russia who were given genetically modified food to transform them into super humans who can easily win Olympic medals. I based it in an imaginary nation called “Ukvania”, but I realize now that our audience would have liked it and understood it
better if I had based the story in Tamil Nadu itself as the audience couldn’t relate or sympathize with some Russians, that too in the past” (Anand K.V., Personal Interview, 2013).

In “Maatran”, another concept which he felt audience didn’t like was a Tamil hero born out of genetic modification as genes from 10 of the best men in the world were used to design his gene make up. It was a culture shock as some viewers misunderstood that the hero’s birth was through a physical relationship with ten men.

Film historian and conservationist Theodore Baskaran opines that rather than raising the environmental consciousness, many films have instilled misconceptions about animals and nature among people, like snake drinking milk, elephants dancing, monkeys taking care of children and having the mental capacity of a human, but the recent film “Kumki” is an exception.

Director Prabhu Solomon was successful is breaking the cliché of portraying elephants either as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic by breathing new life into the animal-human relationship with his realistic portrayal of elephants. Unlike other films where elephants were used as a fantasy object, “Kumki” uses elephants as the main characters in the film. This makes the audience relate themselves with the elephant easily. Though the film ended on a tragic note, it was a logical ending according to the director as he wanted to maintain the ethical balance in the film.

Asked whether directors use the powerful medium of commercial cinema to raise the environmental consciousness of people in Tamil Nadu, all directors agreed that cinema is a powerful tool and had the potential to initiate change. But K.V. Anand feels that more than cinema, there are other appropriate medium for spreading of environmental awareness. Other media like short films, documentaries and magazines can present ecological information in a very creative format as these media have lot more freedom
for experimentation in narratives. Cinema has potential, but also limitations when it comes to spreading awareness on ecological issues, he added.

The directors agreed that cinema, though essentially an entertainment medium, can also be used to disseminate knowledge and information. But, cinema is also a business, a producer needs to get a profit out of his investment. So, the directors have to shoulder the dual burden of fulfilling investor demands and social responsibility towards the audience while making films.