

Iraniyan – An Anti-Caste Communist Hero

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In the 90s, there was a steady production of caste(ist) films in Kollywood. Some of these films that glorified the landlord culture of certain intermediate castes, like *Chinna Gounder* (1991), *Thevar Magan* (1992), *Yejamaan* (1993), were huge hits at the box office. Likewise, scholars have written on how Mani Ratnam's *Roja* (1994), another hit, boosted a rigid Indian nationalism and a Hindu upper-caste culture (Pandian). For Tamil teens growing up in the 90s, such films were staple diet on the various TV channels in the state. But there was one film which was released in the end of the 90s which challenged the conventional cinematic narratives of caste in that decade. Vincent Selva's *Iraniyan* (1999) is a film loosely based on the life of 'Vattakudi Iraniyan', a communist from the Tanjore district who rebelled against the local landlords and was killed by the police on May 1950. Unfortunately, in his centennial, both the rebel and the film about him have been forgotten in public discussions.

Iraniyan was born in 1920 in a lower-class family in the village of Vattakudi in Tanjore. He was named Venkatachalam on birth. He belonged to the Agamudaiyar caste, which is part of the Thevar caste cluster. Though the Thevars have been implicated in many caste clashes in the previous century, especially against the Dalits, it is worth noting that the Thevar castes like the Kallar and the Maravar were profiled under the colonial Criminal Tribes Act. Apart from being routinely harassed by the colonial police apparatus and subject to several acts of violence, the Act also hurt their socio-economic mobility. And despite their toxic caste pride, the vast majority of the Thevars continue to be in a poor state even now.

To seek better employment opportunities, Venkatachalam and few of his relatives went to Malaysia to work as manual laborers. There, he was radicalized under the influence of Tamil left leaders and changed his name to 'Iraniyan'. Significantly, 'Venkatachalam' is a

South Indian name for Vishnu, while 'Iraniyan' is the name of the asura Hiranyakashipu, who was killed by Vishnu's Narasimha avatar. In that period, several Tamil-Dravidian ideologues were engaged in subversive readings of Hindu myths, and they saw Iraniyan as a Dravidian hero who stood up to the Aryans, in the way that Jotirao Phule saw Mahabali as a subaltern hero who resisted the Brahmins. Venkatachalam's transformation to Iraniyan also saw a sharpening of his activism. He also actively took part in Subash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army.

Iraniyan returned to Tanjore around the time of India's independence and militantly organized landless peasants, most of whom were from the lower castes. He openly confronted the landlords, including those from his own caste. He defied the feudalistic caste boundaries – not by bypassing them, but by confronting them – and tried to unite the laboring classes against their oppressors. In this period, the Congress government in the then Madras Presidency sided with the big landlords and was harshly cracking down on labor organizers. Iraniyan, who was in hiding, was in their scanner. After an intense hunt, Iraniyan and three of his closest comrades, were rounded up by the Madras police and shot dead in May 1950. Years later, the Communist Party of India (CPI) erected a monument in his honor in Tanjore. Iraniyan's legacy is important because his short life was a promise of genuine comradeship and solidarity across caste-lines, for a universalist cause.

I wouldn't have heard of Iraniyan if not for the film. I could also say that *Iraniyan* was the first explicitly anti-caste film that I have seen. *Iraniyan* is an oddity in Vincent Selva's filmography. While this director's films usually dealt with flimsy and forgettable romantic stories, *Iraniyan* had a strong social theme. Its timing was also significant. While Tamil cinema was producing caste glorifying movies in the 90s like those mentioned above, the decade also saw the rise of militant Dalit leaders and organizations, most notably T. Thirumavalavan the leader of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK). VCK, formerly known as the Dalit Panthers of India, was militantly active in this period. In 1999, it decided to cease being an activist outfit and take part in elections, aligning with mainstream parties. Hugo Gorringe argues that the institutionalization of such Dalit parties also led to a significant reduction in their militancy. *Iraniyan* appears to stress the importance of militant struggles.

Iraniyan is the story of the titular character's struggle against a cruel landlord in his native village. Set in the post-independence period, the film begins with Iraniyan's return home from captivity in a British colonial prison. However, he is immediately struck by the caste hierarchies and the naked brutality of the native oppressors. The subaltern castes are forced to work for the landlord who is known by his traditional name Aandaiyan (literally, 'ruler') in slave-like conditions. Iraniyan tries to work to provide them a minimal dignified existence. But even changes like the laborers wearing slippers offends the landlord and he metes out an extremely inhumane punishment to one of Iraniyan's friends for this. He is killed by being choked with liquefied dung, which was a punishment to the lower castes who transgressed prohibitions. When Iraniyan confronts Aandaiyan, the latter tells that god created it such that it was his prerogative to rule over the class that Iraniyan belonged to. Iraniyan responds that he will burn the (varna) rule which decreed that brahmins were born from the head of Brahma, kshatriyas from the chest, vaishyas from the thighs, but condemned the working classes to the feet. He becomes a bandit-rebel then on and begins organizing people to fight for their land and wages.

In the ensuing conflict between him and Aandaiyan, several villagers are killed in a Keezhvenmani style massacre. In retaliation, Iraniyan kills Aandaiyan's kin who are complicit in such atrocities (Hindu Net Desk). After Aandaiyan poisons several dozen villagers in the course of a festival leading to their deaths, the collector is forced to step in and compels Aandaiyan to make concessions to Iraniyan's demands. However, the terrified villagers who survived the mass poisoning seek to flee the place and they beat-up Iraniyan who urges them to stay. Aandaiyan arrives to see a badly bruised Iraniyan and mocks him for fighting for the villagers. Iraniyan replies that the villagers who united to beat him up will not be afraid to do the same to Aandaiyan. An infuriated Aandaiyan shoots Iraniyan. As he dies, the collector tells the people about the rights Iraniyan has won for them. The people realize his sacrifice and they lynch Aandaiyan in an act of 'people's justice'.

Iraniyan was neither a commercial nor a critical success despite convincing performances by Murali as Iraniyan and Raghuvaran as Aandaiyan. Several sequences in the film, such as the mandatory romance and song and dance scenes, were contrived and hampered the flow. The director also took liberties with history. The real Iraniyan was a

communist who was forced to resort to armed struggle in order to support the people's movement, given that the CPI was banned in that period. In Tanjore at that time, Iraniyan and his comrades Sivaraman and Arumugam were active in the communist movement. In another part of that district, Manali Kandasamy, Periyakuppu, Venkatesa Sozhakar and Amirthalingapillai were working. Such militant leaders who tried to organize the poor peasantry faced the brunt of state repression and many were jailed or killed. In the film, while there are vague references to class struggle, Iraniyan is largely shown as a Robin Hood style social bandit. Among the powerful landlords in Tanjore, many were Brahmins. In the film, the only Brahmin shown is a casteist doctor who is coerced by Iraniyan to help a lower caste woman deliver her child. Despite its drawbacks, the film was quite remarkable because it did not try to take a liberal reformist approach to caste or landlordism, but presented both as being structurally cruel. However, several scenes, dialogues, radical slogans, and references to places and caste were cut in later prints of the film. Even the mention of the place 'Vattakudi' has been removed.

In the uncut version of the film that I saw several years back, I vividly remember a particularly provocative dialogue towards the climax of the film, which was censored later. Talking to the injured Iraniyan, Aandaiyan points out to the villagers and says 'If someone tells these creatures that they are humans, these creatures themselves will not believe it.' What was chilling about this dialogue was the casualness with which the landlord tells it. Usually, when landlords are shown as bad in Tamil cinema, they are shown as unnaturally malicious, lecherous and/or greedy. In *Iraniyan*, the landlord simply believes that it is god and nature's design that he would rule and the subaltern castes would serve. To him, a caste is inferior because it is in their nature, while his caste is superior because it is in their nature. These are not just the thoughts of a filmic villain. In a recent study of Brahmin scientists in prestigious Indian institutions, Renny Thomas found that many believed that science came 'naturally' to them and that is why they excelled at it.

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