

# Tamil cinema under the cosh

March  
13

2018 11:17 PM



★★★★★

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

It is gloomy times for cinema in Tamil Nadu. With no new Tamil film releases being allowed since March 1, because the industry has been feeling for a long time that digital service providers were charging an exorbitant rate, the fresh development of exhibitors or theatres calling for an indefinite strike from March 16 may come as a terrible blow for the industry.

Although multiplexes in the state are (as of now) undecided about jumping into the fray, single screen cinemas are all set to pull their curtains down. With most theatres having single screens — which are mostly in towns and villages — the shutdown will have far-reaching repercussions in an industry that has already been hit by the Goods and Services Taxes (GST) and, on top of it, the local body tax. This burden is passed on to the audiences, who in recent months have also been saddled with higher admissions rates. These were hiked after many, many years, with the maximum cap of Rs120 a ticket now being pushed up to Rs160 plus the taxes.

Theatres now demand that the local body tax be completely abolished. And given the current bleak scenario, with dwindling footfalls brought about by not only the recent hike in admission rates, but also a tsunami of productions and rampant piracy (which is a full-fledged industry in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry), I think that the local body levy must go.

With 200-odd Tamil movies hitting the screens in 2017 and with most of them able to create but a feeble whimper, financiers, producers and exhibitors or theatres have been tottering. I have seen film after film unable to attract anything beyond a handful of viewers, and often the slide in demand is dramatic three days into a release. Come Monday or Tuesday of an opening week, cinemas go abegging for patronage.

Obviously, strikes and hartals and bandhs are meaningless in today's era, and if the upcoming shutdown from March 16 may, at best, serve a limited purpose, the ongoing no-new-Tamil-release decision is sounding the death-knell for many halls, especially those with single screens. Forced to keep their projectors whirring with English or Hindi or old Tamil movies, some of the cinemas have had to even cancel shows when just about nobody bought a ticket or when a mere handful appeared at the counters.

Indeed, it is a sad plight for a state where cinema was so important that an ideology like the Dravidian movement was spread and strengthened through the screen. Even today, two of Tamil Nadu's most renowned actors, nay superstars, are all set to sail along the choppy waters of politics. Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan may or may not be able to row their boats as well as Annadurai or Karunanidhi or M G Ramachandran or Jayalalithaa did. But the undeniable fact is that films have been closely intertwined with the state administration.

Yet, Tamil cinema has been suffering for years, because of absolutely shortsighted policies. In a star-crazy atmosphere, where huge wooden cutouts of actors are anointed with milk, honey and sandalwood paste and garlanded with strings of jasmine and rose flowers, movie budgeting has been singularly lopsided. Often, as much as 60 per cent of the total cost goes to paying big stars, and so production values suffer. Poor scripts, shoddy direction and unimpressive mounting make a film look so unappetising.

Add to this the unrealistically large number of productions, and now the strikes. All this may well push Tamil cinema deeper and deeper into a dark abyss.

The answer to this may sound simplistic, but may well work like magic. If the local body tax must be withdrawn, a certain regime must be followed in the numbers game. Make fewer, but better movies, and cut down on costs. Some of the big stars get insane amounts as remuneration, and this must change. Otherwise, Tamil cinema may slip into the shadows.

\* \* \*

Home food:

The other evening, an elderly diabetic man was seen arguing with a gatekeeper at a well-known multiplex theatre in Chennai. He had with him some sandwiches, packed from home, but the keeper said that he could not take them inside the auditorium. He explained that his

medical condition required him to eat at frequent intervals, and that he could not stomach the junk stuff sold in the cinema — and at sky-high prices. The keeper remained unmoved, and the old man had to throw away his ticket and walk away.

I am happy that the Bombay High Court has recently come to the rescue of those cine goers who are forced to buy food from theatres. If the quality is suspect, the prices are very high. The court directed the Maharashtra government to file a reply to a Public Interest Litigation which had challenged the ban on carrying food brought from home or elsewhere into the auditoriums.

The court wanted to know the rationale behind this proscription.

Invariably, guards under the guise of security check look for food being “smuggled” in. Now, hopefully, the court may pass an order allowing people to carry food from home or bought outside a theatre. And, it is about time that a cinema patron is given to right to exercise his choice.

\* Gautaman Bhaskaran has been

writing on Indian and world cinema close to four decades, and may be e-mailed at [gautamanb@hotmail.com](mailto:gautamanb@hotmail.com)