



RAGING CONTROVERSY: *Tenaliraman* has comedian Vadivelu playing both the king and the jester. Vadivelu is appearing on the screen after a two-year hiatus.

Tussle over *Tenaliraman*

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Tenaliraman is a folk hero whose tales have tickled generations of Indians, the young and the old alike. He was one of the gems in the court of Emperor Krishnadevaraya, who ruled the mighty Vijayanagar Kingdom in the 16th century. *Tenaliraman* may have been a great poet, but his wit and humour were what endeared him to the court, and these stories have in turn delighted those who lived after him. They still excite and fascinate.

But *Tenaliraman* would be horrified to learn that he is now the cause of misery not mirth. A Tamil film on him – with comedian Vadivelu playing both the king and the jester and appearing on the screen after a two-year hiatus – is now at the centre of a raging controversy.

Some Telugu groups have alleged that the movie disrespects Krishnadevaraya, and have moved the Madras High Court seeking a ban on *Tenaliraman*.

Whether Krishnadevaraya has been slighted or not, the Central Board of Film Certification has certainly been. For, *Tenaliraman* has been already been given a public screening certificate.

N Pakkirisamy, Regional Officer in the Tamil Nadu Censor Board, told the media:

“Censor certificates are awarded to a movie only after detailed discussions by the committee that views it. This takes into account whether the content is respectful to the sentiments of the audience. Also, films must be viewed as an entertainment medium and there must be some freedom for the movie-maker.”

Veteran director Bharathirajaa agreed with this. He rightly said that “As creators, filmmakers and actors must have artistic liberty. Cartoonists enjoy the freedom to make caricatures of world leaders and make fun of them. Why can’t movie-makers have this as well? One of the greatest films of all time, *The Great Dictator*, by the legendary Charlie Chaplin, made fun of Hitler even when he was alive.”

But *Tenaliraman*, far from making fun of Krishnadevaraya is not even a historic representation of either the king or his reign. The movie’s producer, AGS Entertainment, has said that the film “was piece of fiction inspired by the extremely popular folk tales of *Tenaliraman*, one of the gems in the Vijayanagar court who used humour to intelligently drive home morals and messages. In fact, the movie does not mention the name Krishnadevaraya at all.”

So, one suspects that the demand for banning *Tenaliraman* has little to do with historic authenticity. What then can be the reason? Here is one view. Now, Vadivelu – after a two-year hiatus (perhaps

forced by political compulsions) – has been a staunch supporter of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (a political party in Tamil Nadu), and he had during the 2011 Assembly elections lambasted Tamil actor Vijaykanth and his Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam, an ally of current Chief Minister Jayalalithaa’s All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. There have also been legal battles between Vadivelu and Vijaykanth, who had even been accused of trying to murder the comedian.

So, could the anger against *Tenaliraman* have stemmed from political consideration?

Whatever it be, Vadivelu’s film is the latest casualty in a deeply disturbing trend in Indian society, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where movie after movie appears to be hitting a road block with one group or the other finding fault.

I wrote in a recent column here how Tamil superstar Kamal Hassan suffered while trying to release his *Viswaroopam* some time ago. A few months after this, Santosh Sivan’s undoubtedly pro-Tamil work, *Inam*, had to be taken off the theatres even before it completed a week, because some organisations felt that it was sympathetic to the Sinhala cause.

(Sri Lanka saw a 30-year civil war between the majority Sinhala population and the minority Tamils, demanding a separate homeland. The strife ended, and the Tamils did not get what they wanted, and the Tamils in India have a strong affiliation to the Tamils on the island.)

Inam, by no stretch of imagination, propagated the Sinhala point of view. Yet, it came under the scanner. Similarly, *Tenaliraman* is mere fiction, but vested interests are bent on derailing the movie.

Naan Sigappu Manithan

Much as you may wrack your brains, you will not be able to link the title, *Naan Sigappu Manithan* (I Am A Red Man) to the plot. Which, though, is really novel. About narcolepsy – a rare sleep disorder where the

patient falls asleep at the slightest excitement – the film weaves a love story that turns into a thriller. So, how would you classify it? Love thriller, maybe. Whatever it is, the movie ends up in a heap of dead bodies – men, some friends, murdered for love, lust and revenge. Director Thiru spices his story further with a gang rape, the crime here committed by paid rapists! That is new for you.

Naan Sigappu Manithan, despite the novelty of its subject, falls into the same pit that so many other Indian movies do. Thiru, who also penned the script, messes up the narrative by crowding it with silly songs and sillier situations/locales and needless subtexts, and in the end narcolepsy looks like a mere excuse to tell this tale of blood-soaked vengeance.

Indran (played well by Vishal) suffers from narcolepsy, and even a loud noise or the mildest of excitement is just enough to push him into deep sleep. He falls, time and again, but never seems to get hurt, and when Meera (Lakshmi Menon) begins to love him, her rich businessman father (Jayaprakash) tells her that he is fine with economic disparity or cast differences, but he cannot do without an heir.

So what does Meera do? She knows that Indran has an armour against his malady. Water acts as an antidote for his sleepiness, and she takes him underwater to have sex. And, viola, she gets pregnant. Thiru must have been sleep walking when he visualised this utterly bizarre solution. (In *Maan Karate*, we saw a sage meditating under the water.)

This is Tamil cinema for you. When it cannot come up with something plausible, it creates the implausible. Despite, restrained performances by Jayaprakash and Vishal, *Naan Sigappu Manithan* cannot rise above its dreary drowsiness.

● *Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and may be emailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com*