Frames per Second: Supermoms and supervillains

In the final scene of ‘Thalaivii’ (2021), the recent biopic of former Tamil Nadu chief minister (CM) J Jayalalithaa, we find the protagonist in her office with all her Cabinet ministers standing in front of her. She invites them to sit, but they deferentially refuse. She invites them again, but they refuse a second time. Jaya, played by Kangana Ranaut, then asks the orderlies to remove the chairs. In one broad stroke, she has converted the CM’s office into her personal court. “Remember this,” she tells the men, “if you think of me as your mother then you will have a place in my heart. But if you consider me only a woman, then…” The men immediately start prostrating before her.

Film critic Rahul Desai, in his rather damning review of ‘Thalaivii’, describes this scene as “the culmination of a supervillain origin story”. The ending does leave room for a sequel because ‘Thalaivii’ traces only Jayalalithaa’s rise from an ingénue to a successful

actor and politician. Her performance as CM and the many triumphs and tribulations that follow would be great fodder for another hagiography. (Such a project, however, might now be scuttled in the face of poor box office collections and reviews.) ‘Thalaivii’ falls squarely within the recently popular genre of political biopics, such as ‘PM Narendra Modi’ (2019), ‘Thackeray’ (2019), and the two-part Telugu biopic of N. T. Rama Rao. While their effectiveness as propaganda art and their ability to cash in on the popularity of leaders they depict requires more in-depth study, they do raise some important questions about how we perceive our political leaders and what we expect of them.

‘Thalaivii’ dwells on politics — both good and evil — in many ways. A little more than half an hour into the two-and-a-half-hour-long film, MJR (Arvind Swami) — based on Tamil superstar and former TN CM M G Ramachandran — takes Jaya out for a drive. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam has recently won the elections, defeating the Congress for the first time in 1967; C N Annadurai is the chief minister, and his two closest aides are MJR and his friend-turned-bête noire and future CM M Karunanidhi (Nassar). There is great excitement and optimism. As MJR tries to explain the DMK philosophy to Jaya, she responds: “You and your politics. I find politics very bad.” MJRMJR agrees that politics isn’t too great, but necessary to make a difference. “We want to become the voice of the people,” he adds. “This state doesn’t need politicians but revolutionaries.” But when he invites her to join the party, she responds: “God save me from this politics!”

This attitude perhaps best reflects how most Indians perceive politics. “To many ordinary Indians, the world of politics is not necessarily captured by the high Sanskrit term ‘rajniti’ (the proper exercise of power),” writes Danish anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen in his book ‘The Law of Force: The Violent Heart of Indian Politics’ (2021). ‘The vernacular use of the English terms ‘politics’ and ‘politics karna’ (doing playing politics) is far more common… ‘Politics karna’ conveys a deeply realist and often quite cynical ethos of desiring, having and exercising political power, perhaps better captured by the Urdu term ‘siyasat’ with its connotations of strategy/trickery.” Decades of a rambunctious democracy, marked by popular leaders, monumental missteps, corruption scandals, assassinations, and widespread violence have significantly altered how Indians think of politics and politicians.

“The initial twenty-five years after India’s first elections, the period between 1952 and 1977, can best be described as a period of ‘optimism’ with a dash of naivety,” write senior journalist Prannoy Roy and psephologist Dorab R. Sopariwala in their book ‘The Verdict: Decoding India’s Elections’ (2019). This was a “pro-incumbency” period when 80 per cent of the governments at the Centre and states, usually of the Congress, would be elected back to power, “a phenomenon underwritten by high levels of trust and confidence in politicians and incumbent ruling government”. There was widespread illiteracy and little scrutiny of politicians by the media.

This “honeymoon” period would come to an end with the Emergency and ouster of the Congress government, for the first time since Independence, in 1977. The process of disillusionment began much earlier, but the belief in the possibility of a upright leader was often reflected in films. An obvious example is ‘Aandhi’ (1975), directed by Gulzar. Its protagonist Aarti Devi, with striking resemblances to Indira Gandhi, refuses to engage in corruption and violence in a political structure collapsing around her. When a journalist asks her if violence is not a part of politics, she replies: “Certainly it’s a part of bad politics.” It is her honesty that eventually carries her to victory — in personal and public life. But the post-honeymoon period of Indian politics is reflected around the same time in films such as ‘Jana Aranya’ (Satyajit Ray, 1976), ‘Sinhasan’ (Jabbar Patel, 1979), and ‘Ardh Satya’ (Govind Nihalani, 1983).

In another scene in ‘Thalaivii’, MJR tries yet again to convince Jaya to join politics. The two have been estranged for a while because as an aspiring politician, he could not earlier afford a scandal by being linked in an extramarital relation to a fellow actor. But now, it is 1980, and MJR is the chief minister. “Politics!” says Jaya. “It has taken everything away from me. I hate that word.” She adds that politics, or good politics, is like love — easy to show but difficult to keep true. When MJR appeals to her screen popularity, she adds that a woman’s desire for power is always irksome to men.

The rest of the film is a series of bullet points, as one might expect from a hagiography, illustrating Jaya's struggle in a deeply patriarchal Tamil political landscape. Her first success is in providing quality food in MJR's midday meal scheme to school students, who begin calling her Amma or mother. Electoral victories and political alliances lead to a depiction of the real incident where she is attacked in the Tamil Nadu Assembly by DMK legislators, who try to tear off her sari. She vows revenge, like Draupadi in Mahabharata. In the process, she transforms herself from the youthful and sexually attractive actor to the desexualized authority figure of a matron.

Feminist political scientist Elsa Chaney in her book 'Supermadre: Women in Politics in Latin America' (1979) argued that female leaders in Chile and Peru in the 1950s and '60s used maternalism to justify their involvement in politics. Jaya, too, seems to pursue a similar strategy. In deeply entrenched patriarchy, the mother is perhaps the only authoritarian role that a woman can assume — as female leaders through ages, from Elizabeth I to Indira Gandhi have done. Such a role also provides a licence for the dirty work of politics or "siyasat", because the mother is inherently virtuous and cannot be challenged.

Jayalalithaa's career, as we know, was marked by her populist and authoritarian tendencies, as well as corruption charges. But her continuing popularity was predicated on successfully playing the role of the benevolent mother. She could be a supermom or a supervillain.

Tamil Nadu