

# Hindu Religious Practices Exposed in Malaysian Tamil Movies

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## Abstract

Late 19th and early 20th centuries marks the mass migration of people from India to Malaya to work in estates while minority of them came as merchants and to work in civil service. The majority group started their religious practice by worshipping the demigods. On the other hand, the minority group settled in urban areas and they initiated the proper religious practice by building temples for the main deities such as Lord Siva, Lord Muruga as well as Lord Vishnu. After the independence of Malaya, many of those residing in the estates began to shift to urban areas for improvements in their life. These people began to have realisation on the actual way of religious practice and were attracted to the prayers to the main deities such as Lord Shiva and Lord Muruga. Currently, besides the prayers to the main deities, Malaysian Indians have high level or spiritual awareness such as meditation and Siddha philosophy. Though there is a significant evidence or religious awareness among Malaysian Indians, Tamil movies produced in Malaysia still centres in the olden religious practice and the worship to demigods. As such, this research intends to explore the reason for the production of such themes in local Tamil movies. Besides, the researcher also wants to find out the reality in comparison to the movie projections. This research also would shed light the movie of the local Tamil movie producer in exposing the olden religious practice rather than the reality.

Keywords: Hindu Religious, Malaysian Tamil Movies, Malaysian Indians, Beliefs, Great Traditions

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## Introduction

The most influential tool in the information sector among society is film (Raja Ahmad Alaudin, 2002, pp. 17). As far as historical events are concerned, films have the ability to create an impact among the viewers. Movies also have the ability to show current events and take the viewers to the imaginary future (Short KRM, 1981, p.16).

Scenes from movies can create a great force and belief among the audience. Movies also have the ability to register an identity of a society that can last forever (Anuar Nor Arai, 2007, pp. 1-2). Therefore, it is extremely important for the people in the film industry to be cautious when it comes to storyline and movie settings (Howard Hall, 1993, p.7).

System of belief controls peoples' sense and these beliefs are very sensitive to the people concerned with it. Therefore, people who are involved in the film industry such as directors and producers should have clear vision and view on the scenes portrayed in their movies (Darwis Harahap, 1993, p.13). Otherwise, it can cause serious impact in immediately or in the long term.

This paper is written with this view by taking a look at the locally produced Tamil movies. In order to establish effect of Hinduism in Malaysia, firstly developments of Hindu religion in Malaysia need to be understood.

## Development of Religion in Malaysia

Most of the Indians migrated to Malaya between the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century were common people from villages in India (K. Sandhu. 1969. pp. 3-4). Apart from this group, a minority group of people from India came to Malaya as professionals in the civil service and traders. These people found their settlement in urban areas. This group of people initiated proper Hindu religious practice by worshipping the main deities such as Lord Shiva, Muruga and Vishnu in temples built by them. Researchers refer to such practices as Great Tradition or Text Religion (Rajantheran, M. & Manimaran, S. 2006. pp. 43). On the other hand, people who came from villages and reside in estates built their temples based on the soil brought from India. This group of people worshipped demigods such as Mariamman and Muniswaran. Generally, anthropologists refer to this sort of belief as Little Tradition (Rajantheran, M. & Manimaran, S. 1994. pp. 1-3).

After independence in the 70's, people from estates were forced to migrate/move to urban areas due to various reasons such as implementation of New Economic Policy, progress in education system, economic development, job opportunities, political situation, business opportunities and so forth (Sinnapah Arasaratnam.1994. & Jain Ravindran, K. 1970). Upon moving to the urban areas, these people realised that the practice of worshipping the demigod Mariamman is actually based on Sakthi religious zeal. Moreover, they were attracted to the Text Religion and started to understand the fundamentals and principles of Hinduism. This led way to formation of various religious movements and associations (Rajantheran, M. & Manimaran, S. 1994. pp. 1-3).

Currently, Malaysian Indians had started to show keen interest in the way of siddhas, worship Guru/ Spiritual leader and also meditation. This reflects the growth of religious awareness in Hinduism among Malaysian Indians (Rajantheran, M. 2008. p.2).

## Malaysian Tamil Movies

Malaysia's Tamil film industry began in the 1960's through drama production (an interview with former officer of RTM, Mr. L. Raman). The first Malaysian Tamil film was produced in 1991 entitled, "*Naan Oru Malaysian*." Following this many Tamil Telemovies were produced. At the initial stage, Tamil telemovies were taken based on India's movie style. Later, this changed in order to portray the identity of Malaysian Indians. As such, religious aspect of Malaysian Indians was not ignored in the telemovies (An interview with film producer Mr. Suhan Panchatcharam).

Currently, though Malaysian Indians have a good knowledge and well aware of the religious aspect, scenes and storyline in the local Tamil movies still give importance to earlier faith and practices of Malaysian Indians. The earlier practices are such as worshipping certain deities that protect their villages and also seeking solutions from demigods (observational research on local Tamil telemovies).

As such, this research intends to explore the reasons behind producing such storylines, the reality of portrayed scenes, exaggerations, and also the movie production team's view on this matter.

## Researched Movies

Five movies were selected for this research purpose:

1. *Naan Oru Malaysian* – This movie surrounds a youth who grew up in an estate. He meets an arrogant young girl from town. The storyline is about this youth educating and humbling the town girl and marrying her at the end.
2. *Manjari* – This is a serial murder story. It is a thriller story about how the authorities uncover the mystery behind the murders and finding the murderer.
3. *Rutratcha Kaali* – This is a complete devotional movie. The story revolves around a powerful Kaali temple in an estate. There's a powerful *rudraksh* (blue olive berry, normally worn by Lord Shiva devotees) in the temple and an evil shaman wanted to get it. He tries to use the Kaali's devotee to achieve his purpose. Finally, he dies in the hands of Goddess Kaali.
4. *Yantra* – There's a powerful yantra (a symbol of mantra) placed under idols for power at a famous hill temple. Then, there's a group of people who wanted to steal it from the temple. As such, this story is about how Goddess Amman uses a couple who serves the temple to curb this group of thieves.
5. *Atma* – A man murders his girlfriend in midst of anger and buries her. However, the soul of the dead girlfriend takes over his current girlfriend's body and reveals the truth.

The first two movies are based on social issues and shows religious practice in a practical manner. The following two movies are completely spiritual based stories. The final movie is based on horror/ghost story.

## Religion in Malaysian Tamil Movies

Malaysian Indians Hindu religious rituals, beliefs and norms are exposed in all the above mentioned movies. Though some of the exposed scenes are current practices

among the said population, it is undeniable that there are over exaggerated scenes in the movies. Both of these elements are important aspects of the movies (Hodgon, Dana, H, & Kaminsky Stuart, M. 1981. p.127).

### Practical Scenes in the Movies

Based on research, it is found that all the said five movies expose reality and religious practices among Malaysian Indians. The practices are based on temple rituals, festivals and superstitious beliefs.

Since Malaysian Indians, who reside in estates came from villages in India, the religious practices and festivals are based on how they are done in India such as entry restriction rituals for temple festival, fire walking ceremony and turmeric water event as a form of purification (Manimaran Subramaniam, 2006. p.210).

As such, the actual practice for Amman temple festivals as celebrated in estates were portrayed in the movie, "*Naan Oru Malaysian*." On the other hand, the same portrayal of events could be seen in the movie, *Yantra* where by festival celebrated for Lord Muruga on Sannasi hill in Malacca. The movie depicts on how fire ritual (*yakam*), paying penance and taking kavadi are carried out according to vedhas. These practices are shown as how it is practiced by Malaysian Indians.

Apart from that, Indians also believe in the supernatural powers. The believers try to seek immediate solution from problems such as exorcism, effects of negative powers and so on from those whom they believe to possess supernatural powers (Rajantharan, M. 1997. p.52-61). As such, in the movie, *Atma*, scene about the heroin seeking help from such a spiritual person to obtain explanation and protection from a ghost that keeps haunting her is shown. This scene shows how Malaysian Indians react when they face similar situations.

Generally, Hindus have the habit of pouring their heart out to God in temple when they face problems or difficulties or even for peace in life. This is something that happens in daily life. Base on this, scenes from the movies such as *Manjari* and *Yantra* that portrays the heroin seeking console from temple for their problems and peace resembles what is happening in daily life.

### Exaggerated Scenes

Though Malaysian Tamil movies show what is being practiced in daily life, they also sometimes portray exaggerated scenes in their movies. In order to fulfil this sector, animation graphics are sought to cater for this aspect.

This technique was used in movies such as *Rutraksha Kaali* and *Yantra*. In *Yantra*, animation graphic was widely used in the scenes where the people try to find the *yantra* through a shaman and also at the climax scene when the God in the temple showed the power. Though these things are not practical, but the scenes were maintained as they suit the storyline and situation. In an interview with the producer of the movie, K. Anand, he admitted that such scenes were necessary for commercial value. According to him again, though the scenes were exaggerated, they ensure the success of the movies. Apart from that, it also instils the strong belief among Hindus that God will always protect those who belief in Him. These scenes are shown with such concern.

The movie, *Rutraksha Kaali* has a weak storyline. Furthermore, scenes portrayed in the movie are non-realistic. As such, an interview with the producer of *Rutraksha*

*Kaali*, Mr. Vijay reveals following information. Mr. Vijay admits that the storyline was weak as the movie was the first spiritual movie produced in the country. Therefore, they could not get proper advice or guidance for the movie. Furthermore, due to expenses, time for the movie was reduced from 1 ½ hours to 55 minutes. Despite that, the movie was well received by the audience because of the animation graphics. He also quoted that animation graphics and special effects are rather important for commercial purpose.

Animation graphics and special visuals are not something uncommon in spiritual movies. Spiritual and devotional movies produced in India use such techniques extensively. These effects can be seen in India produced movies such as *Amman* and *Bannari Amman*. Thus, it can be safely said that animation graphics in local Tamil movie producers are influenced by movies from India.

*Naan Oru Malaysian*, there is a scene whereby the heroin proves her virginity by performing a fire walking ritual. Though such practice is not performed in Malaysia, the producer of the movie, Suhan Pancatcharam says that this was in accordance to the great epic Ramayana where Sita Devi gets into fire to proof her purity. Field research reveals many negative views among females for such scene. These are considered as exaggerated scenes in movies.

### **Attitudes of Directors and Producers of Religious Movies**

Based on this research, researcher finds that directors and producers of religious Tamil movies do not possess deep knowledge on the subject matter. Though they have gathered some information for the movie purpose, their knowledge is quite shallow. This was admitted by one of the producers himself (an interview with producer K. Anand).

On the other hand, their research and knowledge on estate life and beliefs of the people proves to be the success point in their movies. Besides, as the movies do not contradict with peoples' beliefs and proves the power of God ensures the acceptability of the movies among audience.

Generally, stories portrayed in the local Tamil movies can be vastly found in Hindu ancient stories and epics. Therefore, the religious associations and societies do not show their protest against these movies.

### **Absence of Views on Text Based Religion / Great Tradition in Malaysian Tamil Movies**

Malaysian Indians have become knowledgeable in terms of religion due to the influence of urban life. Despite that, Malaysian Tamil movies still portrays Little Tradition in the storyline and scenes of the movies. This is due to great commercial expectations.

Majority of the movie producers believe that audience seek such values in movies. Moreover, the producers believe that interest in the movie and subject matter could only be drawn through animation graphics which explains why special effect is the focus in such spiritual movies (interviews with film producers).

As many Malaysian Indians are still residing in estates, movies that surround their values and beliefs are focused. This could also be another reason as to why Text Based Religion movies are rarely produced. In spite of that, though people in urban area have awareness on Text Based Religion, it can hardly be said that they have

obtained sufficient knowledge to practice it, (Rajantharan, M. & Manimaran, S. 2006, p.53). Though there are some spiritual organisations conduct classes on siddhas, level of awareness is still considered low.

Film producers believe that Text Based Religion and Siddha philosophies only meant for individual practices and liberation of soul and not suitable for film industry. Producing movies on such themes could be seen as dictation of philosophies. Therefore, the producers believe that such movies may not be received well by viewers.

Due to such reasons, film producers do not feel secure to put forth philosophical themes or ideas in their movies.

## Conclusion

Based on the interview conducted among the film producers, it is found that the producers have the intention of producing good religious and spiritual movies. Unfortunately, they also believe that such movies would not earn them any profit as the movies would not contain any commercial value in them. As audience welcome movies based on beliefs of people residing in estates and animation graphics, scenes in movies are also based on such themes. Therefore, in this materialistic world, it is almost impossible to expect a good spiritual philosophical religious movie and the reasons are justified. Ironically, even in India, where film industry is strong, producers are not coming up with such movies. Whatever the reasons are, it is indeed heart warming to note that Malaysian Tamil movies have not deviated from the essence of Hindu religion and scenes depicts practicality of Malaysian Indians norms.

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One way of working creatively in making the use of Forum Theatre in schools is through a didactic approach in action research design. However, the use of Forum Theatre can play a role in reasoning among secondary school students. The use of Forum Theatre were used in Malay secondary schools as a result of the study support for the use of Forum Theatre in schools that Forum Theatre gives room for the students in reasoning. The process of moral reasoning through development of reasonable thought, careful weighing of reasons, and justification for the action taken.

Keywords: Forum Theatre, action research, didactic approach, and moral play; Reason, Intervention

Introduction

Moral Education program in Malaysia focus on building the character and moral strength of students through the appreciation of religious, philosophical and cultural values (Moral Education Syllabus, 2004). The program also aims to produce individuals who have a moral and social obligation to the community and nation (Moral Education Syllabus, 2004). Decision and judgement about moral issues depend on the capabilities of reasoning the situation and the moral context (Culley & Kurlberg, 2011). Moral reasoning pertains to the process of an individual to reach an informed decision about what is good, right or wrong (Flynn, 1974).

Many studies prove the effectiveness of moral reasoning of good reasoning in moral education (Rajanthran, 2012; Wai, 2011). The researchers in moral education in a social situation and is morally, morally, religious, and the development of thinking

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