

Ponniyin Selvan 1: Leveraging the Lure of History and the Power of Storytelling

Posted on

The release of the much-anticipated Ponniyin Selvan 1 (PS1) has fascinated the South Indian psyche into exploring the Chola world. It tells the story of the early days of Raja Raja Chola in the tenth century as the young prince Arunmozhi Varman. Its success at the box office has turned the spotlight on the individuals who spun their magic to make a period drama a monumental success.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. Photography Lyca Productions.



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Vikram as Aditya Karikalan.

People have a voyeuristic obsession with royalty. More so with the historical narratives of heroics and histrionics of monarchs and monarchies. It's a national pastime that reinforces sagging patriotic pride and egos. It is to that consciousness that Ramaswamy Krishnamurthy, famously known only as Kalki, tugged with his magnum opus Ponniyin Selvan (the beloved son of Ponni). Ponniyin Selvan is a five-volume novel that Krishnamurthy serialized in his magazine Kalki from October 1950 to May 1954. It became so popular that it had a cult following of readers. It's a fictional account. Some describe the story as loosely based on "quasi-historical events" of a battle for succession in the late tenth-century Chola kingdom. However, not everyone can tell a story as good as Kalki in Ponniyin Selvan against an actual historical backdrop. His masterly stroke with the pen has entrenched people's consciousness and spurred curiosity in a collective past.

What was the context when Kalki began writing his fictionalized story set in the tenth-century Chola Kingdom? Countries like India and Sri Lanka had just emerged out of British imperialism in the aftermath of the second world war. Kalki was writing to an audience in post-independent India when sentiments of patriotism were at a zenith. It was a period of mulling. A period when people debated and discoursed about their heritage and their new-found status in a no longer subjugated nation.

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Kalki's dramatization and elevation of a once powerful kingdom that stretched from Tamil Nadu and Kerala and parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and an accomplished naval power that stretched to Malaysia and Indonesia cut deep into one's tribal pride. The power and war theatrics spread far and wide, interspersed with romance and intrigue captured people's imagination.

Kalki's Ponniyin Selvan became so popular that Rajinikanth equals the readers'

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eagerness to get their hands on the story every week to movie buffs queueing excitedly to buy tickets on the first day of release. Kalki had captured the imagination of his audiences. The Tamils of India could relate to a glorious past. Tamil literature is a rich tapestry of creative minds. But Karthi, who plays Vanthiathevan, says Kalki's Ponniyin Selvan belongs to another realm in the Indian literature universe. Next to Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace, PS celebrates war and love. For Vikram, who plays Aditya Karikalan in PS1, the movie reawakens India's glorious past under the Chola rulers between the ninth and thirteenth centuries when Europeans were yet to step on American soil. It's believed that Kalki had visited Sri Lanka thrice before writing his magnum opus. That the Cholas of India were the nemesis of Sri Lanka's 1400-year-old Anuradhapura kingdom and its ultimate demise is a recurring point in Sri Lanka's history books.

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In the first week following the movie's release on 30 September, it raked in two billion INR worldwide. A high-budget movie of 2.5 INR or US\$ 30 million, PS1 has entered the so-called global "500 crore club" in Indian cinema by consolidating its earnings to five billion INR or US\$ 63 million. That would be 22 billion Sri Lankan rupees. It's the highest-grossing Tamil movie in 2022 and the second worldwide next to Rajinikanth's 2.0. The film's box office earnings within a week of release are more than some Sri Lankan companies would make in a year of operations.

As accolades and reviews poured in, the focus was on Kalki, the writer; Mani Ratnam, the director; and A. Subaskaran, the producer. Theirs is a winning combination, virtuosos in a triad who put the correct dose of everything to make a dream project a reality. Mani Ratnam is no stranger to cinemagoers having some of the most beautiful movies in Tamil cinema. The spotlight is on A. Subaskaran, the producer. Sri Lankan-born England-based Subaskaran owns Lyca Group of Companies. The cinematographer of PS1, Ravi Varman, sums up the significance of the Mani Ratnam - Subaskaran combination to Tamil cinema. Subaskaran is the "pakkisham," or the treasure of Tamil cinema for spending unsparingly for the movie. And the opportunity to work with Mani Ratnam, a "pakkiyam" or good fortune.

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Subaskaran is the “pokkisham,” or the treasure of Tamil cinema for spending unsparingly for the movie.

Mani Ratnam is the first pan-Indian director. PS1 and its sequel PS2, to be released in 2023, had taken 150 days, although it had taken a whopping three years of preparatory work to bring it to reel finally. The journey to the hinterland of the Chola kingdom had been fraught with obstacles. When the project finally took off to shooting in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic saw the project stalling, but Ratnam’s determination and attitude of never giving up led to its completion. Meanwhile, amid the struggles, producer Subaskaran from Lyca Productions has become the spark that lit a flame in Tamil cinema, giving it a great fillip in recent times.

Many don’t know that for over 60 years since Ponniyin Selvan’s rise as a serialized weekly story and subsequent publication in five volumes, it has been the dream project of Kollywood greats. For many years screen heroes of every generation, beginning with MG Ramachandran and Kamal Hassan, had dreamt of bringing Ponniyin Selvan to the big screen. Rajinikanth had dreamt of being the Chola commander in the movie. MG Ramachandran had bought the rights to the movie way back in 1959 but couldn’t adapt it to the big screen. He handed it over to Kamal Hassan, who tried to make it a reality in the 1990s. The veteran actor recalls MGR’s advice to make the movie fast. What had thwarted the making of Ponniyin Selvan was the enormity of the project. As the story is in five volumes, the challenge was to tell the story in a single movie, which wouldn’t do justice to the writer or the story. More than anything, funding for such a high-budget project was scarce.

The fact that Mani Ratnam beat him to make PS a reality on the big screen finally is a mixed feeling of sadness and elation at the same time for Kamal Hassan. He heaps praise on Mani Ratnam for his determination to resurrect a project that had been dormant for over 60 years. He describes their desire to make the film like a tug of war as both had eyes on it. There had been many conversations about making the movie, and many tried, but Mani Ratnam pursued it relentlessly for over 30 years as his ultimate quest.

Ponniyin Selvan is considered the crowning glory of Mani Ratnam’s movie-making

career. Rajinikanth, who also couldn't do his dream role in PS, said many in Tamil cinema expected someone else to undertake the project. Gushing over Subaskaran for playing a pivotal role in bringing such an enormous project to the screen by financing it, they said Sri Lanka and India's loss is England's gain. However, his esteemed status and clout as a businessman in England are a pride for the Tamils. It is solely to the genius of Mani Ratnam that Subaskaran agreed to fund the movie of such grand proportions, said Rajini. What prompted Rajini to take an interest in the movie was a story he had heard from someone else. One-time Tamil screen heroine and superstar Jayalalitha responded to a reader's question in the Kumudam newspaper on who should play the role of Vanthiyathevan should someone make a movie, and her one-word response had been Rajinikanth. Kamal Hassan supported it with a story about actor Sivaji also promoting Rajini in that role if ever the former makes the movie. The story about Jayalalitha prompted Rajini to start reading over 2000 pages of Ponniyin Selvan. Rajini recalls how he had visualized his ideal cast for his dream movie. He as Vanthiyathevan, Rekha as Nandini, Sri Devi as Kundavai, Kamal Hassan as Arunmozhi Varman and Vijayakanth as Aditya Karikalan. In the meantime, Mani Ratnam had set his sights, too, and never gave up on his dream of making a visual triumph of PS.

Fast forward to the present, Rajini recalls how he wanted to play the role of Nandini's aged husband, Periya Pazhuvettaraiyar, in the epic movie. Mani Ratnam refused him lest he earns the ire of the veteran actor's large fan base for casting him in a minor role. The director also refused his appeal to acknowledge him as a special appearance in the movie. And that he said was Mani Ratnam's character, a true gentleman who wouldn't use someone else's fame for his success.

Amid the hype of the movie's release on 30 September 2022, there was also the celebration of another stupendous 30-year partnership between two greats. Mani Ratnam and A. R Rahman's collaborative journey began with Roja. Their collaboration in PS1 marks another milestone in churning out the Rahmanian magic against the grandeur of historical drama set in the vanity of rulers and dynasties. It's as if royal rulers always bring unsurpassed opulence and chivalry. A depiction that elevates them to the godly status of nation redeemers who successfully forged power over enemies and even frenemies and spread their boundaries while still brilliantly managing romances and rendezvous with no less than beautiful women. Rahman had the challenge of matching his genius to the period story.

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Ponniyin Selvan is considered the crowning glory of Ratnam's movie-making career.

Mani Ratnam was a difficult master to please, and Rahman's initial compositions hadn't impressed Ratnam. The turning point came when they toured Bali to revisit the Chola kingdom's influence in South East Asia. It was a study tour of Chola's influence and how that knowledge could contribute to making the product better. And what Rahman has produced combines a confluence of South Indian and Tamil cultures. At the same time, he uses ample creative freedom by bringing in the Balinese ritual of the Monkey Chant to oomph the musical score in an exceptionally politically and personally emotional period drama.

It was important for Rahman to compose poignant music for a fictionalized story set against a critical historical period if he was to do justice parallel to the authentic narratives and events in the real kingdom of India. AR's efforts, as always, have borne well, and his music galvanizes the senses and takes the audiences into a universe exclusive to PS1.

In India, critics lament the absence of Chola history in their history books. But the Chola kings made sure their conquests were etched perpetually on stone. They did that with much clarity on some famous temples built during their reign. Kalki supports his storytelling with authentic accounts of Chola history written on stone. He weaves his magic mesmerizingly, bringing together the typical human traits and encounters of love and kindness, hatred, heroism, and politics into a highly charged historical drama among the kings and the queens and the prince and princesses. To the genius of Kalki and his illustrator Maniam, audiences get a glimpse of a powerful dynasty in Indian history, their way of life, dress, and culture. It's the story of everyday power struggles in the political realm beyond the thrones and scepters. Battles for power and succession are beyond the domain of fairy tales. It was yesterday's story and today's. Probably today, without much of the yesteryear bling around the bodies.

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Aishwarya Rai as Nandhini.



Jayam Ravi as Arunmozhi Varman.

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Karthi as Vandhiyathevan.

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(L-R): Girish Kumar, TIPS Music; Ashish Singh, Lyca Productions CEO; Kumar Taurani, TIPS Music; Siva Ananth, Madras Talkies (PS1 - Executive Producer); GKM Tamil Kumaran, Lyca Productions Head; Prem Sivasamy, Lyca Group Deputy Chairman; Suhasini Mani Ratnam, Madras Talkies; Mohan Raman, Actor PS1; Jeyamohan, Screenplay Writer PS1; Parthiban, Actor PS1; Jayaram, Actor PS1; Ravivarman, DOP PS1; Sarath Kumar, Actor PS1; Thotta Tharani, Art Director PS1; AR Rahman, Music Director PS1; Mani Ratnam, Director PS1; Prabhu, Actor PS1; Prema Subaskaran, Lyca Group; Subaskaran, Lyca Group Chairman; Superstar Rajinikanth, Chief Guest PS1 Audio Launch; Ulaganayagan Kamal Haasan, Chief Guest PS1 Audio Launch; Vikram, Actor PS1; Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Actor PS1; Trisha Krishnan, Actor PS1; Jayam Ravi, Actor PS1; Aishwarya Lekshmi, Actor PS1; Shobita Dhulipala, Actor PS1; Karthik Sivakumar, Actor PS1; Vikram Prabhu, Actor PS1; Rahman, Actor PS1; Ashwin Kakamanu, Actor PS1; Ashwin Rao, Actor PS1; Riyaz Khan, Actor PS1; and Arjun Chidambaram, Actor PS1.

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Siva Ananth, Madras Talkies (PS1 - Executive Producer); Ashish Singh, Lyca Productions CEO; GKM Tamil Kumaran, Lyca Productions Head; Subaskaran, Lyca Group Chairman; Mani Ratnam, Director PS1; Prem Sivasamy, Lyca Group Deputy Chairman; Gopalan, Sree Gokulam Movies (PS1 Kerala Distributor); Kumar Taurani, TIPS Music and Girish Kumar, TIPS Music.

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