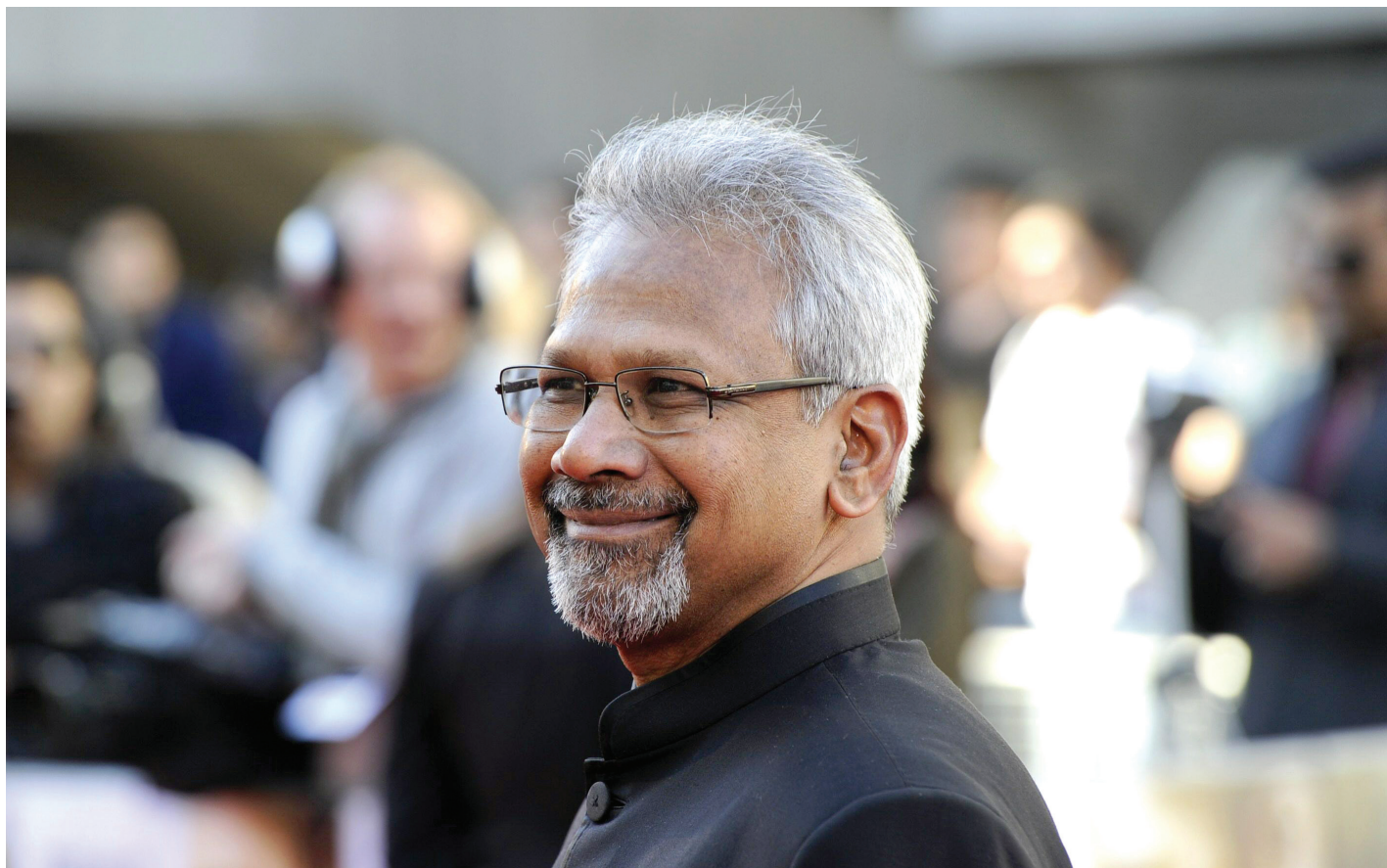


# cinema



✱ Mani Ratnam: scripting and directing *Ponniyin Selvan*.

## Mani Ratnam's next epic saga

Undaunted by the failure of *Raavan/Raavanan*, the award-winning filmmaker is painting a bigger canvas, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

One of the better known directors of India's modern-day cinema, Mani Ratnam has often been fascinated with spinning stories out real-life situations and characters. At other times, mythology and history have attracted him. His trilogy that he tore out of terror – *Roja*, *Mumbai* and *Dil Se* – made a point, with the first film mesmerising us with its magical music.

A R Rahman, who later entered the hallowed portals of Hollywood's grand gallery, debuted in Tamil as music director in *Roja*, which featured in *Time* magazine's 10 best soundtracks of all time.

Ratnam's *Nayagan* along with Satyajit Ray's *Apu* trilogy and Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* are the only Indian movies to have appeared in *Time*'s 100 greatest films of all time.

To me, *Nayagan*, with Kamal Haasan playing the underworld Mumbai don, Varadaraja Mudaliar, still remains Ratnam's best, though I quite liked his early *Mouna Raagam* and later *Alaipayuthey*. Both deal with marital woes, and were undoubtedly handled with remarkable sensitivity.

Mohan and Revathi, and Madhavan and Shalini were moulded with great finesse to slip into the roles that the helmer wrote.

Somehow Ratnam has been

marvellous with small, intimate cinema.

It is only when he widened his canvas that he seemed to slip. His last work, *Raavan/Raavanan* in Hindi and Tamil, a take-off on the epic *Ramayana*, turned out to a critic's disappointment and a box-office letdown.

Apparently not daunted by this arguable disaster, Ratnam is now attempting another movie, historic and as huge as *Raavan/Raavanan*. It is *Ponniyin Selvan*, a whopping 2,400-page Tamil historical novel written by the renowned Kalki Krishnamurthy. In no less than five volumes, the work is still regarded as one of the greatest in Tamil literature.

Serialised over three-and-a-

half years in the then popular Tamil magazine, *Kalki*, each instalment of the story was awaited with almost bated breath. In the early 1950s, when *Ponniyin Selvan* began to unfold, *Kalki* was selling 71,366 copies week after week, and one can, then, well imagine the number of Tamils who would have read this grand tale.

Ratnam has an unenviable task on hand. To begin with, it is never easy to translate a literary work of profound words into a moving string of images, more so if the piece of fiction is peppered with too many characters and has been inspired by history.

*Ponniyin Selvan* traces the life and times of Arulmozhiarman, who later became the Rajaraja Chola, one of the most venerated kings of the acclaimed Chola Dynasty in the 10th-11th century.

In many ways, Kalki's novel, though often described as a historical romance, has its echoes in modern times: there is corruption in high offices, political ambitions and intrigues, personal greed of the rulers and so on. Finally, we have a lucid picture of how these impacted the common man.

Ratnam will be writing the script along with writer Jayamohan, and the director's team will include his favourites, Rahman, Santosh Sivan and Sabu Cyril.

Ratnam is coming back into Tamil cinema with this movie, at least full-fledged, and one hopes that *Ponniyin Selvan* will not disappoint.

### Sleaze to success

Bollywood, desperate for box-office bonanza, is now looking for the sleaziest of ways to get to that. It has been including saucy dance routines (known as 'item numbers') in otherwise serious films. Mallika Sherawat is grabbing eyeballs with her sexy jig as Jalebi Bai in the soon-to-open *Double Dhamaal*. Bipasha Basu, will get us all hot in *Murder 2*. At least, so have the rumour mills. In *Dum Maaro Dum*, Deepika Padukone, who has only a guest appearance here, bares her waist that has a seductive tattoo. She does a titillating dance number, where the actress is at her curvaceous best. We saw Katrina Kaif in a raunchy number in *Tees Maar Khan*, where she mouths *Sheila ki jawani*.

Such baseness is only to be expected, despairing that producers now are with shrinking profits, nay, nil returns so very often. Believe it or not, only 2% of the movies in India are able to garner 100% of their investments. The rest, flops, lack of transparency in budgeting and accounting, and inflated fees for stars, contribute to this merry mess.

"There are lot of opportunities in the Indian entertainment industry, but due to bad scripts, bad-budgeting and bad production prices, the potential of the country's entertainment business remains untapped and investors lose," said Jane Gordon, chief executive, Moneypenny, at the recent FICCI Frames held in Mumbai. Established in 1980, Moneypenny is a group of companies, which provides specialist financial services to the global entertainment industry. Gordon was among the panellists at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry's Frames 2011.

Calling for transparency in reporting the profitability of film ventures, Bobby Bedi, managing director, Kaleidoscope Entertainment, said the fiction (about profit numbers) created by movie-makers puts off real investors. Bedi added that earlier financiers and a few corporates funded the entertainment sector, but the industry blew the money. While there was a good amount of money being invested in movies, the industry turned greedy, out-priced itself and as a result, it is now sick.

Yet, films continue to be made, 1,000-plus every year. Where does the money for this come from? According to some, the recent real estate boom, particularly in Tamil Nadu, has filled a lot many pockets, and there are those with stars in their eyes who crave to make that one film, hoping to hit the stars in the sky. Very often they fail and come crashing down. Some get up and walk away. Others, sink into solitude nursing their broken dreams and bankrupt bank balances. A few kill themselves, unable to face debts and the sense of shame that follows.

Director Mani Ratnam's brother, G Venkateswaran, was reportedly a victim of financial losses, and in 2003 he hanged himself from a ceiling fan at home. Mind you, he had made some wonderful cinema, but when ill-luck struck, it struck with unimaginable viciousness. Certainly, it was a big loss for the south Indian movie fraternity. And for Ratnam, undoubtedly so.

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