

cinema



* Kamal Haasan and Rati Agnihotri in the bilingual 1981 hit *Ek Duuje Ke Liye*, directed by K Balachander.



* K Balachander: his forays into the world of entertainment were through the stage.

Filming the radical

Dadasaheb Phalke award-winning director K Balachander's contribution to Indian cinema is epoch-making, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

As much as cinema is a magic of movement whose flashing visuals are a sheer treat to our eyes, films must travel beyond mere imagery to engage our minds. Otherwise they would disappear into a hazy hodgepodge of pictures, ceasing to make much of a meaning. Titles could disappear, plots blur and actors sink into shadows.

Some moviemakers understand this well enough to make a mark that is almost indelible. Kailasam Balachander is one of them. His contribution to especially Tamil cinema is unforgettable, and the Dadasaheb Phalke Award, Indian cinema's highest honour, that was conferred on him last week could not have been but more appropriate. Yes, a little late in the day, though.

For some of Balachander best films came in the 1970s and 1980s. They were disquieting, even bold, and were set in the heartland of conservative Tamil community with staunchly Tamil protagonists playing contentious roles. The movies rewrote social rules.

In his 1977 *Avargal*, Anu (essayed with a touch of brilliance by the late Sujatha) divorces her sadistic husband, Ramanathan (also played with great finesse by Rajnikanth sans the trademark gimmicks he was yet to evolve then) and finds herself facing her

former boyfriend. With an office colleague of hers, widower Janardhan (Kamal Hassan), also in love with Anu, and Ramanathan begging her forgiveness, she is in a dilemma. Balachander pilots the movie to a very logical, though radical end.

The director, who is now 81, had the guts to shake society with such revolutionary scripting and story-telling that also underlined, promoted and propagated in no uncertain terms the supremacy of women and their right to live the way they wanted to.

In *Aval Oru Thodar Kathai* – often considered Sujatha's career best performance as Kavitha – the travails of a female breadwinner are examined with artistic excellence. Forced to take care of her mother, a couple of sisters, a blind brother and a wayward brother, Kavitha finds her unmarried life synonymous with a never-ending-story. Yes, Balachander does let the curtain drop and give us a climax that only he could have thought of. If I remember right, the closing shots in a bus were beautifully poignant.

Balachander was bold enough to do the kind of cinema he believed in, and what is more, to cast actors that others may have hesitated to. Rajnikanth and Hassan among others were either part of Balachander's discoveries or men he moulded into fine

performers. I think Rajnikanth's finer acting sensibilities were never to be seen after his Balachander days.

Chiranjeevi and Jayapradha appeared in one of their best works in the director's *47 Natkal*, based on a story by Sivasankari. Here Vaishali (Jayapradha) discovers her husband, Kumar's (Chiranjeevi), philandering ways in a French country manor. Told in a flashback, the film's title denotes the 47 days the marriage lasts. Mind you this was made in 1981, when divorce and induced abortion could invite social ostracism of sorts in Tamil society. But Balachander's Vaishali seemed not to care.

Sindhu was yet another exceptional character that Balachander created. In the 1985 *Sindhu Bhairavi*, Suhasini's Sindhu is a young school teacher who falls in love with the married and gifted Carnatic musician (JKB/ Sivakumar). Though Sindhu does not want to wreck his home, she bears his child and gives it away to JKB and his wife who do not have any. The film's music was hypnotic and its ideas were stormy, battering as it did the citadel of the self-righteous Tamil.

Some of the helmer's cinema was political or quasi-political. *Varumayin Niram Sivappu* came in 1980 raising a debate on unemployment and the disillusionment of youth within prevailing social structures.

The following year, he made *Thaneer Thaneer*, which was both political and universally human. About a village thirsting for water, the story stresses the apathy of the administration to the people's plight. A wonderful contrast is drawn between power/greed and powerlessness.

Balachander's work was in many ways truly auteur cinema. He commanded total control over just about every department of his movies, and never bowed to either the studio bosses or stars. And he was daring enough to step beyond his own Tamil territory. He made films in Telugu, Kannada and Hindi.

His *Ek Duuje Ke Liye* (Hindi) examines romantic love between a Tamil boy (Hassan) and a Punjabi girl (Rati Agnihotri), and how parental opposition destroys their children's lives.

It has never been clear how Balachander developed his passion for a cinema that provoked rather than just entertained. Maybe, his early association with M G Ramachandran – who along with Muthuvel Karunanidhi and Annadurai used the medium as an effective platform to spread their Dravidian political doctrine – sowed the seeds of meaningful cinema in Balachander.

He got a break as a writer for Ramachandran's *Deivathai* in 1964, and the director made his first movie the next year. It was *Neerkumizhi*, based on one of his own plays.

There could have been another reason for Balachander's cinema for social cause. Growing up in a very traditional Brahminical environment, Balachander saw in the plays he wrote early on and the movies he made later a great opportunity to present his non-conformist views and ideas. In a significant way, his cinema helped him to fly free. He was able to rid himself of the suffocating shackles around him. The man must have been only too happy to step out of the old-fashioned "agraharam" or the area around a Hindu temple – and into the arc-lamp lit world of painted men and women.

His attraction for cinema began early in his life, when he was working at the Accountant General's Office in Chennai, and his forays into the world of entertainment were through the stage. His Ragini Recreations was renowned for deeply inspiring plays like *Server Sundaram* and *Major Chandrakanth*. Popular acceptance for these emboldened him to get more daring with the medium and the message. The enormous possibilities of films were too alluring for a man who ultimately broke the monopolistic melodrama of Tamil cinema by giving us a cinema of substance, though quietly and rather gently.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)