

cinema



* Dhanush ... the bouquets, after the brickbats.

Man behind murder

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

*Hang down your head Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Poor boy you are bound to die*

So go the lyrics of an old North Carolina folk song based on the actual 1866 murder of a young woman named Laura Foster in Wilkes County. The song is best known today — as it was decades ago — because of an extremely popular version of it recorded by the Kingston Trio in 1958. Part of the wider genre of Appalachian “Sweetheart Murder Ballad” numbers like *Down in the Willow Garden* and *Rose Connelly*, Tom Dooley, unlike the rest, was inspired by the

tragic killing of a young woman by her fiancé atop a mountain.

In the 1960s Calcutta (now Kolkata), Tom Dooley — along with the Beatles and Usha Uthup’s (then Iyer) sexy crooning — was one of those favourite Jukebox songs that my school, The Park English, decided to include in the school day function, held every December. A choir of six boys was chosen, and I was part of it.

What I remember most about that event is my headmaster’s comment after hearing one of our rehearsals. “It is a pretty blood-curdling number”, the man — a huge six-plus-foot Anglo-Indian — quipped, not quite happy with Tom Dooley intruding into the Christmas mood of joy and peace. But then, he let it be, for Tom Dooley was a chart-busting piece, selected as one of the Songs

of the Century by the Recording Industry Association of America, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Scholastic Incorporation.

Murderous lyrics similar to Tom Dooley’s are beginning to appear today. *Kolaveri Di* (in Tamil) is one. Properly said, it is “Kolai Veri Di” or This Murderous Rage, Girl! Written and sung by Tamil actor and Rajnikanth’s son-in-law Dhanush, the song is part of the yet-to-open film, 3. Sung in Tamil folk style by a drunken Dhanush’s character after being dumped by his girlfriend, *Kolaveri Di* has created a raging storm with millions of hits on YouTube and translations into several languages.

This kind of anger bordering on murderous design is quite new in Indian cinema. Ditched lovers drank themselves to destruction

(*Devdas*) or to distraction. Music diverted the mind. There were many such numbers, mournful and forlorn.

But no such woeful words for Dhanush, for, like Tom Dooley, the Tamil star is in “veri” (temper). This is if one goes by the popular perception of Tom being a killer. I am told Dooley was innocent of the murder, committed actually by his jealous lover. Tom covered up for the lover, and reportedly proclaimed his innocence just before he was hanged.

Anyway, *Kolaveri Di* has taken Dhanush to the stars, and encouraged and perhaps thrilled at this jackpot, he has composed, written the lyrics and directed the music video of another song to celebrate Sachin Tendulkar, India’s cricketing legend. Dhanush and actress Anushka will dance to the beat.

Some years ago, Dhanush was a nobody, with one movie critic describing him as a “pigeon-chested paavam (poor guy) who looks like a paanwala on probation.” Whatever the man was, this sort of barb was a typical example of an arrogant critic given to looking down on those from southern India. Dhanush must be having his last laugh today, especially after his National Award for Best Actor in the 2011 *Aadukalam* (Playground).

Be that as it may, nobody can tell me with even a trace of conviction why *Kolaveri Di* has become such a craze. There is no melody in it. It is just noise. Dhanush, who sang it, is no Manna De or Mohammed Rafi or Kishore Kumar. Why then...? Well, I suppose it is like a good movie failing to catch the audience eye and a bad one filling up theatres. Quite possibly for the wrong reasons.

Whatever be Dhanush’s score on the song (the new excitement among his fans now laced with rumours of his fling with Kamal Hassan’s daughter, Shruti), he is far from an actor. I have watched him in several films, but have always been disappointed with his unimpressive screen presence and, most notably, his absolute wooden look. Come on, an actor or even a star needs to emote with his face!

But what, what is it that drives accolades towards superstar Rajnikanth’s son-in-law? As G Promod Kumar states in his column in the *First Post*: “In almost all his movies, he cleverly played the underdog, making a virtue of his ‘bad’ and ‘puny’ looks and the poor or modest background that the protagonist came from. But the same underdog, despite the initial destitution or aimlessness, would go on to succeed and win a smashing girl through sheer persistence and hard work. For millions of average youth of his age on the streets, this clever and conscious stereotyping worked big time!”

This does not surprise me, for, in Tamil cinema (or for that matter in any other Indian language cinema) performances do not actually matter. Star value does, fan base does. Also, it counts how well connected one is in the industry.

The fact that Dhanush is Rajnikanth’s son-in-law is no mean fact. And, Rajnikanth is arguably the most popular star in India today with a humungous fan following that is miles and miles ahead of, for instance, Amitabh Bachchan’s.

Of course, we all know that Rajnikanth “stopped acting” after his initial films, getting into gimmicks that pleased crowds, not critics. So, do not be surprised or shocked if Dhanush becomes the next Rajnikanth in Tamil Nadu.

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