

SUBRAMANIYAPURAM



# SUBRAMANIYAPURAM

The Tamil Film in English Translation

M. Sasikumar

Edited by Anand Pandian



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## Preface

All of us laugh and cry. Language, race, and geography cannot alter what we feel. The battlefield may change, but the war remains the same: violence, pain, strife, deceit—all of us struggle with these things.

This is why we are publishing its screenplay now in English: to take this story set in the south Indian town of Madurai to a wider global audience. I want to share this tale of love and hate, friendship and betrayal, vengeance and responsibility with as many people as possible.

I have long dreamed of carrying the lives of my people, the startling events that I have seen, to the farthest reaches of the world. Although I continue to work on many films in various capacities, *Subramaniyapuram* will always be a special chapter in the book of my creations.

This story was born from the seeds of my native soil. I am eager to fling these seeds and to watch them grow in distant lands. I welcome a response from everyone who turns these pages. And I am grateful to Anand Pandian and the many other souls who have worked so hard on this book.

M. Sasikumar  
Madurai  
December 2013



# Introduction

*Anand Pandian*

**Y**ou've probably heard already—something has been happening in Tamil cinema. So many films, all of a sudden, that seem to be tapping into that elusive thing we call “real life.” Fresh and unexpected stories of the most ordinary characters and places. Dark, gritty tales that manage still to be wildly entertaining. Complex worlds of light and sound, assembled on shoestring budgets from whatever lies at hand. This is the Tamil New Wave, many are saying. Its imprint is everywhere in contemporary Indian cinema.

Here is one film that says more about this moment than almost any other: M. Sasikumar's 2008 feature *Subramaniyapuram*. The debut production of a novice director—orchestrated with a small budget, a mostly unknown cast, and a raft of fledgling technicians—the film seized the imaginations of millions. *Subramaniyapuram* ran in Tamil Nadu theaters for a hundred days that year, garnering many critical awards and accolades, and it has since been screened at festivals in Calcutta, Rome, and Oslo, and countless other far-flung places.

*Subramaniyapuram* is a story of friendship and betrayal, love and revenge. The film follows five young men belonging to a working-class neighborhood—Subramaniyapuram—in the southern town of Madurai, and almost everything happens along a handful of its narrow, unpaved lanes. The goddess festivals and public brawls. The bitter election campaigns and the hidden perils of political machinery. The furtive, lovelorn glances, and other fleeting delights of daily life. Linger on the pages of this screenplay, on all of its textures of hope, rage, fear, and sorrow. A world of feeling comes into focus through the story of a very small place.

The wide collars and flared pants sported by these friends tell you

that this is a period film, a “time machine,” as film critic Baradwaj Rangan puts it, a vividly sketched return to the cultural and political horizons of the 1980s. There is, however, nothing nostalgic about this return. *Subramaniyapuram* is a decidedly contemporary venture in its style and outlook, one that seeks, in that historical moment, an explanation for some of the most troubling aspects of the present. “There were genuine reasons as to why the story had to take place in the eighties,” Sasikumar says: “That was when this kind of rowdiness, criminality, and gangsterism emerged as a major feature of political life.”

*Subramaniyapuram* pivots on the work of M. Sasikumar. He wrote, directed, and produced the film, and also resolved to play one of its title characters, Paraman, when no one more suitable could be found for the role. Hailing from a family of Madurai merchants, Sasikumar apprenticed with noted Tamil directors Bala and Ameer Sultan before striking out on this first venture. He belongs, in other words, to a filmmaking lineage at the heart of contemporary developments in Tamil cinema. At the same time, evident in *Subramaniyapuram* are the legacies of those other Tamil auteurs of earlier moments—K. Balachandar, Bharathiraja, Mani Ratnam—who have done so much to give Tamil films their vernacular flavor and realist texture.

Sasikumar’s first film came with a wave of recent Tamil films that have wrestled with the complexity of social and political strife in southern Tamil Nadu. *Subramaniyapuram* has since inspired many other gritty explorations of localized violence, in Tamil cinema and further afield in other Indian cinemas, such as its 2012 Kannada remake directed by Mahesh Babu, *Prem Adda*, or Anurag Kashyap’s 2012 *Gangs of Wasseypur*, which famously begins with this gesture of acknowledgment: “To the Madurai Triumvirate, Bala, Ameer Sultan & M. Sasikumar, for inspiring me to go back to my roots.”

*Subramaniyapuram* provides, no doubt, a hauntingly etched portrait of life’s vicissitudes in a particular time and place in southern India. At the same time, there is a global appeal to its sensibilities as a film, and we hope to make this further apparent to wider audiences with this English translation of its screenplay.

Filmmaking is an intensely collaborative enterprise, and cinematographers and composers have had as much to do with the inventiveness of Tamil

cinema as its marshals, the directors. We see this too in *Subramaniyapuram*, with the shadows and streetlights used so effectively by cameraman S. R. Kadhir, or the meticulous historical detailing made by the film's art department. "I am not just a robot," James Vasanthan has said, reflecting on composing his award-winning music for the film: "Suddenly it chokes my throat, and I know that in the theater it's going to happen to most of them."

*Subramaniyapuram* has been celebrated for its wrenching realism, a fidelity that can sometimes breach the very boundary between cinema and reality, film and life. I first watched the movie at the Cine Priya theatre in Madurai one August afternoon in 2008. The movie hall erupted in a cacophany of whistling when the characters in the film watch a movie themselves, *Murattu Kaalai*, the 1980 film starring Tamil celluloid deity Rajinikanth. On the screen, I could see another Madurai movie hall packed with roaring bodies, also teetering between jubilation and aggression, another hall that looked and felt so much like this one. It was suddenly impossible to distinguish the whistling of the loudspeakers from the sound of those around me. Realist cinema had spilled into the world of real experience.

Good films can do this, pulling spectacle, sound, and body together in a powerful rush of feeling. And the force of such moments in cinema can be difficult to convey in a medium such as this one here, in writing. There is, however, tremendous life even in *Subramaniyapuram's* screenplay, in the sensory detail of its scene descriptions and the vivid quality of its dialogues, all of which we have tried to preserve in this translation. There is also the chance, with a screenplay, of examining these elements at a more leisurely pace, of getting some sense of what makes their cinematic orchestration so effective.

The essays in this volume that follow the screenplay itself are meant as further ways of grappling with the film's force and significance. One recounts moments in the making of *Subramaniyapuram* based on conversations with its technicians, while another takes up the history and cultural resonance of its genre. There is an essay about the film's lingering impact on its audiences, and a visual essay that focuses on its posters. Lastly, we present a candid interview with Sasikumar himself, on the film as well as his own development as a filmmaker.

Be forewarned: *Subramaniyapuram* is a film that tracks a dark and unsettling storyline, the kind that you may not realize you're following until it's far too late to pull yourself away. You may not like all that you find in this story. You may even find yourself wondering, along with the distraught mothers, sisters, and lovers trailing its edges, why these young male protagonists insist on plunging so forcefully into the abyss of its bloodshed. These are enigmas, however, that have everything to do with the moral and political impasses of the present. Is this why so many people have been drawn into the dark and encompassing world crafted by the film?

You should watch the film, of course, to really get a sense of all this. In the meantime, whether you're new to *Subramaniyapuram* or a fan and repeat visitor, we invite you to take this book as a map and guide to its tea stalls and alleyways.

SUBRAMANIYAPURAM



INT. JAIL – DAY

*2008, Madurai Central Jail. From inside the jail, a man heads towards the exit.*

GUARD 1

What, you're getting released today?

GUARD 2

Open up the gate, man!

EXT. JAIL ENTRANCE – DAY

*It is pouring rain outside. The man comes walking through the outer gate of the jail. In the distance, another man stands in the rain, covering his head with a sack. Walking quickly, he approaches the person coming out of the jail.*

VISITOR

You doing well?

PRISONER

Mm.

M. SASIKUMAR

*Pulling out a concealed knife, the visitor stabs the released prisoner twice in the stomach. As he bleeds, the man grabs the arm of his attacker tightly. Shaking off his grip, the attacker runs away. The man who was stabbed falls to the ground. Two policemen and several bystanders run and stand over him.*



EXT. SUBRAMANIYAPURAM STREETS – DAY

*The title card “Subramaniyapuram” flashes on the screen, along with the year, 1980. Kasi is walking down the street. Some schoolgirls are also walking down the street. Two boys are playing, spinning a top, while a woman is using a water pump. Kasi crosses in front of some rickshaws parked on the corner. From one of them the sound of a radio is heard.*

RADIO

Every year the Nehru prize is awarded to the best scholars in different subjects. This year’s prize will be given to Barbara

Ward, a famous economist and writer. The announcement of the award was made by Vice President Hidayatullah. He . . .

*Kasi walks and stands in front of a shop with a board reading CHITHAN SOUND SERVICE. Inside the shop, Chithan is smoking. Kasi turns to look at him, and then starts to walk down a street to the left of the shop. He comes to the gate of the first house on the left, the home of the former ward councillor, Somu.*

INT. SOMU'S HOUSE – DAY

*People are moving around busily in the house.*

OLDER WOMAN

I packed some curd rice for you. Make sure you finish it up.

YOUNG BOY

Ayyo, curd rice every day?!\*

*Somu is sitting on the sofa, speaking on the telephone.*

SOMU

Hey man, did you see? What we were talking about at yesterday's meeting, it's in the newspaper, did you see? The chief was bursting with happiness! You didn't come to the circuit house after the meeting was over. He gave me a hug. He was praising me, you know?

*Somu's wife comes and puts a coffee on the table for him.*

SOMU

The other guy went red in the face, he was so shocked! Our chief just said one word and all the guys were shaken up!

---

\* *Ayyayyo*, or simply *ayyo*, is an exclamation of worry, grief, or exasperation, roughly equivalent to "Oh my god!", "Shit!", or "Oh dear".