

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE COMMANDER (THALAPATHI) 1991

Mani Ratnam

(Tamil)

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OVERVIEW

This is a story of conflicting loyalties and competing visions of justice. Surya, who is abandoned by his mother at birth, joins up with Devraj, a 'good' crime boss to help poor people and fight the government. Their key struggle is with a newly-arrived government official (who turns out to be Surya's brother). After beatings, reprisals and murder, Surya is reunited with his mother and the official is transferred to another post.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This is a film that explores the power of family bonds, especially motherly love and fraternal loyalty. As such, it addresses issues that run deep in Indian culture and history. In particular, the film makes explicit visual references to the *Mahabharata* epic story: from time to time, we see armies dressed in medieval armour about to engage on the battlefield, a scene from the epic known as the *Bhagavad Gita*. This allows us to draw parallels between the characters in the film with those in the epic. Surya, for example, is analogous to Karna, whose father is Surya (the Sun god) and who is abandoned at birth. Devraj is Duryodhana, the older and wiser brother in the epic. The brothers in the epic are also soldiers in a war, which is why Devraj calls Karna his 'commander' (*thalapathi*), the title of the film.

STORY

Surya The story opens when fourteen-year-old Kalyani places her new-born baby in the carriage of a goods train carriage and weeps. She fears the opprobrium of her family and village if it is discovered that she got pregnant and gave birth outside marriage. The child is discovered by a group of villagers washing their clothes in a river. It turns out that some children saw it when they tried to steal rice and put it in a straw raft and let it float (like the baby Moses in the Bible). The villagers raise him collectively and name him Surya. Meanwhile, Kalyani agonises about him, not knowing his fate.

Devraj Then we learn about a gang of thugs run by Devraj. Under his control, these men extort money from shops and offer loans to poor people. One of Devraj's henchmen, Ramana, is killed by Surya because Ramana was ruthless in beating up another man who couldn't repay a loan due to high medical expenses for his child. Surya is now fully grown, rough and brutal, but he has a sense of justice. When Devraj discovers that Surya eliminated his associate, he orders his underlings to fetch him. Surya beats up the men and says if Devraj wants to see him, then the boss must come to him, not the other way around.

Arrest Following Ramana's death, the police search for and arrest Surya. He is released when another man walks into the police station and confesses to the murder. 'Why?' Surya asks this man, who gives a one-word answer: 'Devraj.'

Confrontation In the next scene, Devraj confronts Surya. Although the two men are wary, they share a commitment to social justice and come to respect each other. In time, Devraj calls Surya his *thalapathi* his 'commander.'

Arjun Arjun, a new government official, the Collector, arrives in the city and wants to clean up the criminal gangs. We learn that he is the second son of Kalyani and thus Surya's brother; but neither Arjun nor Surya is aware that they are brothers. In a flashback, we see that Kalyani married a man who accepted her despite her past; she was happy yet still grieved for her first-born son, Surya, whom she abandoned. She worked long hours as a volunteer in a field hospital helping mothers care for their young children.

Subbu Surya falls in love with Subbu, who is also taken by his kindness. Devraj tries to arrange a marriage between them, but Subbu's father refuses because Surya is an orphan and manages to marry Subbu to Arjun, the government official.

Murder investigation Surya and Devraj combine forces to support poor people who are mistreated by the government or criminals. In particular, they fight against a rival gang, who nearly kill Devraj in one attack. In retaliation, Surya and his men kill a member of the rival gang. Arjun investigates this murder but does not succeed because not a single person will 'squeal' on Surya.

Eye-witness Finally, one witness comes forward and is asked to identify Surya in the police station. However, he hears Surya explain to the police that he is an orphan and gives details of how he was abandoned. The witness, who is married to Kalyani, realises that this is his step-son and now says that he cannot identify him as the culprit.

Meeting Arjun, the government official, summons Devraj and Surya to a meeting, where he asks them to stop their illegal activities. They say they cannot stop helping people who come to them, that they mete out justice because the people trust them and not the government. They leave without agreement, and later Devraj and the police end up fighting each other.

Marriage Devraj is approached by Padma, the widow of Ramana, the man whom Surya killed. Living alone with a small child, she is taken advantage of by men and seeks protection. Devraj calls Surya and asks him to marry her, to protect her for the rest of his life. Surya, who already feels some guilt for killing her husband, accepts and they are married. Surya explains how badly he felt when he saw Ramana's daughter. 'I killed her father with the same hand that today I give to you in marriage.'

Request Surya meets Subbu, his former love interest, by accident. She asks him to stop this stupid war with the police (that is with Arjun, her now-husband). 'My husband is a good man,' she says. 'Funny, but I think you and me are like.' Surya then goes to Arjun and asks him to request a transfer, so that he doesn't get hurt in the unending war. Arjun refuses. 'You are a good man,' Surya says. 'We are dangerous. Please, remove yourself from harm.'

Recognition When Padma meets Kalyani at the field hospital, they are strangers. But Padma is carrying the yellow shawl that Kalyani had wrapped Surya in when she abandoned him as a baby. Padma explains that her husband gave her that shawl. Later, Kalyani's husband tells Surya that his mother is alive and in the same city. Surya has a hard time accepting this and then makes his step-father promise not to tell his mother that her son has become a thug.

Reunion and Revelations Surya finally meets his mother and hears from her why he was abandoned. Devraj is arrested when one of his men gives evidence to the police. A full-scale riot breaks out and many people are injured. When Devraj is released, Arjun is told that he has failed and is being transferred. Devraj wants revenge against Arjun, but Surya says no. 'Why?' Devraj asks. 'Because his wife is your ex-girlfriend? You don't want her to be a widow?' Surya is hurt that Devraj would doubt his loyalty and says that he will remain his friend forever and that he is more important than anyone, even his mother. 'Then, kill Arjun for me,' Devraj says. Surya explains that he can't because Arjun is his brother. Devraj then says that he will call off the war because he won't fight against Surya's brother.

Death At the same time, Arjun's police chief promises that tomorrow his men will kill both Surya and Devraj. Arjun's mother, Kalyani, falls at his feet and begs him not to kill Surya because he is her son. Arjun promises not to harm Surya (but says nothing about Devraj). Surya and Devraj go to Arjun's

house. Devraj says he is surrendering because 'Surya's family is my family.' As he utters those words, he is shot down by a man from the rival gang. Surya retaliates by killing the gang leader.

Finale After lighting the pyre for Devraj's funeral, Surya surrenders to Arjun for killing the gang leader. Arjun says there's no evidence against him and he is free. Arjun leaves town, but Kalyani stays behind with Surya, her first-born.

THEMES

Human bonds This film is a complex examination of the strength of various kinds of human bonds. The most obvious is the case of Surya, an orphan, who is raised 'collectively' by a slum neighbourhood. At one point, when Devraj invites him to stay in his large, modern house, Surya refuses, saying, 'These are my family. They raised me.' The lack of parents causes Surya severe anxiety; in a country, where family defines your identity, he is a nobody. Into that kinship void steps Devraj, whom Surya repeatedly says is his family. Surya is accepted by Devraj as his *thalapathi*, that is, his 'general' or 'commander'. We might call it his 'bosom buddy.' The point is that the two men form a bond so close, so unquestioning and so trusting that it equals that of brothers. Their relationship, the central bond in the film, is tested time and time again. In one instance, Surya declares that Devraj is more important to him than any family he might have had. For instance, when Surya's attempt to marry Subbu is thwarted by the girl's conservative father, Devraj consoles him. 'I'm sorry,' he says. 'Don't be,' replies Surya. 'Who is she, anyway? I don't need her. Not when I have you.'

An even more difficult test takes place when the backstory is revealed and Surya finds himself fighting against his own brother, Arjun. Devraj orders Surya to kill Arjun, in retaliation for beating him (Devraj). Now, and for the first time, Surya, the loyal commander, refuses to carry out his superior's orders and explains that Arjun is his brother. When that fraternal bond is revealed, Devraj withdraws his order. 'Your family,' he says, 'is my family.' In addition to this central male bond, the maternal bond is also explored. Kalyani, Surya's mother, suffers as much as her abandoned son. She compensates by volunteering at a field hospital for young mothers. One of the nurses says, 'Your unconditional love for these children, who you don't know, is amazing.' And Kalyani replies, 'I care for others' children, hoping that others will care for mine.' This is exactly what has happened with Surya.

Justice The other major theme of the film is the nature of justice, especially the contrast between legal justice and vigilante justice. Surya and Devraj represent a people's justice, an unofficial system of deciding right and wrong, and dispensing appropriate punishment. That sometimes requires violence, which puts them in conflict with the 'official' system of justice, represented by Arjun and the police. Both parties occasionally use brutal methods when doing what each feels is 'right.' But can these two systems co-exist? And which is preferable? These questions are discussed in a key scene, when Devraj and Surya are summoned to Arjun's office. Arjun asks them to give up their vigilante justice. 'Your private house is the law court,' Arjun says. 'Everything is decided there. You have your own police force. You are kings, running your own kingdom. Your word is law. Land disputes, domestic squabbles, debts, licences, everything's in your hands.' Devraj answers, 'People seek our help, sir, and we try to help.' When Arjun retorts that justice is the job of the government, Surya makes a powerful speech: 'When you're poor and tired, you can't walk up the steps to a courtroom, let alone afford a lawyer. All they want is justice. And they seek it wherever they can. You beat up someone, it's justice; we beat up someone, it's a crime. And there's only one reason for that. You have authority. You have titles, but we have something better. We have trust.' At the end of the story, Devraj and Surya surrender but only because they do not want to harm Arjun, Surya's brother. Thus, the film leaves open the question of which system of justice is preferable. Or whether they can co-exist.

CHARACTERS

Surya Surya is Kalyani's first son. Surya is a man damaged by his past. He is kind-hearted but without maternal (or paternal) love, he is capable of anger and violence. He sometimes crosses the line of his own code and feels guilty for his actions. He is also capable of deep affection toward many types of people. He may be brutal in dispensing what he sees as justice, but underneath we know

that has a heart of gold. As one of the famous songs in this film explains, 'He was a thorn that grew into a brave rose.'

Loyal Surya is a man of strong emotions, both positive and negative. One of his deepest feelings is loyalty toward those who care for him. This quality is displayed in a scene, midway through the film, when Devraj comes to the slum where Surya lives. It is rundown, with garbage and poor housing. Devraj invites Surya to move out and come live in his comfortable home. Surya refuses, saying, 'Thanks, but I can't do that. These people are my kith and kin. They found me and raised me. When I had no food, they fed me. When I was sick, they took care of me.' He treats Devraj as a brother, but a prior bond was established with the people in the neighbourhood. He remains loyal to his 'collective parents.'

Principled The first example we have of his principled character occurs when a little girl tells him that her mother has been hospitalised and that their family have no money to pay for her treatment. Surya is playing cards with a bunch of petty criminals. Immediately, he forces them to hand over what cash they have. But it is not enough. He sees a young woman and asks for her golden bracelet. 'I can't,' she says, afraid that he is a common thief. 'It belongs to my mother.' Surya is adamant. 'Give it to me,' he says, 'and if this little girl's mother survives, I'll return it.' When he does return it, the young woman says she can't take it back home since she lied to her parents about how it got lost. She tells Surya to give it to the family of the girl with the ill mother. Surya looks at her like a teacher and says, 'No. If you want to do something good, do it yourself.' That is Surya's moral code and the slogan of the entire film: If you need something good done, you have to do it yourself.

Vulnerable Surya often wears a scowl. He looks weather-beaten and tough. Yet, there is also pain in his face because he has suffered the humiliation of not knowing who his parents are and why his mother abandoned him. Beneath the thick surface, he is vulnerable. We sense this from the beginning, but the first illustration arrives when he is arrested for the murder of Ramana. Surya stands before a clerk who asks him the basic biographical details necessary to fill in the police charge sheet. 'Name?' 'Surya.' 'Father's name?' 'I don't know.' 'Mother's name?' 'I don't know.' His face is lined with hurt and shame. Another policeman suspects he is toying with them and insults him. Unable to control his anger, Surya lashes out at the policeman, but he is wrestled to the ground and subjected to severe beatings. The police think he is refusing to cooperate, when the simple truth is that he does not know his real parents' names. The physical pain he suffers is one thing, but this scene reveals the even greater psychological scar of not knowing who his parents are.

Devraj Devraj is the head of gang. Devraj is similar in character to Surya, except that he has a full set of family and kin relations and he is well-off financially. He is more measured, less prone to sudden bouts of anger and has a certain charisma. He also has a strong sense of justice and does not hesitate to use violent means to achieve it.

Moral vigilante Devraj is an outlaw in the literal sense. He stands beyond legal structures and dispenses his own brand of community justice. We have no doubt that he has a strong moral compass and that he alone sets its course. The first clear illustration of his uncompromising commitment to justice occurs when he meets Surya. Surya has killed Ramana because the latter took another man's wife as payment for a debt. Surya was jailed, severely beaten and then inexplicably he is then released. The reason, he discovers, is Devraj. Surya asks him why he had him released, and Devraj says, 'I am not a good man. But I respect justice. Ramana crossed that line. What you did was right.' This declaration seals the bond between the two men. They have a common purpose to do what is right and punish those who do wrong.

Grateful Devraj is the older of the two men, the general, to whom Surya is the *thalapathi*, or second-in-command. But Devraj has enough confidence and depth to recognise another's superior qualities. This is what he sees in Surya. A good illustration of his gratitude occurs in a scene when the two men walk together through the slum neighbourhood and people pay their respects to both. Devraj notices this and says, 'Surya, you have made me a better person. People used to fear me. Now they respect me.' Up to this point, Devraj was a dictator, albeit a moral dictator, with no one to advise and caution him. Surya has played that role and Devraj is happy to acknowledge it.

Loyal We have already noted Surya's loyalty to Devraj, but the reverse is also noteworthy. From the first moment he meets Surya, Devraj remains loyal to him, praising him and offering him money and resources. His deep trust in Surya is tested toward the end of the story when he asks his friend to kill the Collector, whose men have given him a severe beating. Devraj asks Surya if he is his friend, and Surya says it's an absurd question. Of course, he is. 'Then,' Devraj says, 'I want you to do something for me. Kill the Collector.' Surya explains that he cannot because the Collector, Arjun, is his brother. Now, Devraj is in a dilemma. He wants to take revenge for the beating but not against Surya's brother. He broods about this and declares, 'Right. We can't hurt Arjun. He's your family. That means he's my family.' In this, one of the most dramatic scenes in the film, loyalty triumphs over revenge.

- Kalyani** Kalyani is the young girl who gives birth to Surya and abandons him.
Arjun Arjun is Kalyani's second son and also the local government official, called the Collector.
Ramana Ramana is one of Devraj's henchmen
Subbu Subbu is Arjun's wife, although she first loved Surya.
Padma Padma is Ramana's widow and later marries Surya.



(Surya)



(top: Devraj, left, and Surya. Below: Surya, left, and Devraj)



(Surya, left, and Devraj)



(Arjun)