

Plan for pen monument in sea: Would Karunanidhi like it?



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'That Pen' was the headline of an article written by former Chief Minister and DMK patriarch the late M. Karunanidhi. It was the article which proved a turning point in the leader's life, paving the way for him to get acquainted with Periyar. 'That Pen' was published in the Puducherry-based journal 'Thozhilalar Mithran' when Karunanidhi had staged his first play, 'Santha or Pazhaniappan,' in the Union Territory way back in 1945. The article revolved around the pen lost at Gandhi's ashram.

Subsequent to the article, the young Karunanidhi was attacked by some goons. In a gesture dripping with warmth, Periyar took him to Erode where the rationalist leader employed the young man in his daily 'Kudiarasu'

It was film director A.S.A. Samy, who brought Karunanidhi to the Tamil filmdom by making him write story and dialogue for the film 'Rajakumari.' Initiated into the tinsel town, Karunanidhi started wielding a mighty pen from which tumbled out 25 films including 'Abimanyu', 'Marudhanaatu Ilavarasi', 'Mandirikumari,' 'Parasakthi' and 'Manohara' some of which later turned Tamil cultural icons. His vitriolic and vivacious pen had the promise of a great leader who, as the young brother of the Dravidian ideology stalwart C. N. Annadurai or Anna, was to become the warp and woof of the Tamil Nadu politics for over half a century.

Now in fond memory of the great writer-cum-politician, a pen monument has been planned to be erected in the sea. However, the proposal has triggered serious discussions in all quarters.

Pen in Sea

Chief Minister M.K.Stalin announced in the Assembly back in 2021 that a monument for Karunanidhi would be set up on 2.21 acre at the Anna Square on Kamarajar Salai, Chennai at the cost of Rs. 39 crore in order to propagate and preserve the leader's achievements and thoughts.

Consequently, it was proposed on behalf of the Public Works Department to establish a 134-foot pen monument for Karunanidhi in the Bay of Bengal about 360 meters off the Marina beach behind the MK memorial. The Tamil Nadu Coastal Zone Management, in turn, gave the go-ahead for the project. According to the project note, a lattice bridge would also be constructed for a distance of 290 m along the shore and for 650 m in the sea to connect the visitors from the memorial to the pen monument.

The pen that wrote a history

Karunanidhi's writings began with his first novel 'Selvachandra' that he penned at age 12 under the name of T.M.Karunanidhi (TM stood for Tirukuvalaiyur Muthuvelar). He continued to write in his handwritten magazine 'Maanava Nesan' which later evolved into 'Murasoli' still published. His writings got enriched and elegantly toned up through Anna's daily 'Dravida Naadu' and Periyar's Kudiarasu.

Karunanidhi viewed writing as a weapon for him on the political battlefield. In that respect, his pen could be considered as part of ammunition that re-constructed the configuration of Tamil Nadu.

"A circus acrobat, though perched atop, will have his thoughts deeply rooted on the earth. Likewise, brother Karunanidhi is in the cinema; yet his thoughts revolve around politics," remarked Anna at the inaugural of Anbagam.

Whether he was in cinema or politics, writing played a pivotal role in his thoughts. This is what will be thrown up by a look-back at his complete oeuvre that spanned over eight decades. He wrote 10 social novels, six historicals, 21 dramas staged frequently, eight books of poetry, 12 volumes of epistles to the 'sibling' (he used to address his cadres as sibling; the 'letters to siblings' stopped in 1990s), six volumes of autobiography 'Nenjukku Neethi' (he did not continue it after 2006), 37 short stories, one travelogue and six books of prose.

His corpus is staggering, extensive and intensive.

Monument, a right move?

Fifty years ago, Karunanidhi, who was then Chief Minister, spoke after naming the flyover on Anna Salai after Anna. He said, "It needs no reiteration of the reason for naming the bridge after Anna. To me, there seems to be none who can question why the flyover was named after Anna as it was done."

Similarly, way back in 2009, inaugurating the Anna Centenary Library set up at the cost of Rs. 172 crore, Karunanidhi recalled the words from Anna's radio address (1948): "The slot next to the basic necessities of life must be given to books." These words were engraved on the statue of Anna in a reading posture erected at the entrance to the library.

It is laudable that akin to the Anna centenary library, 'Kalaingar Library' commemorating Karunanidhi is coming up at the cost of Rs. 114 crore in Madurai.

Against this background, there can be no two opinions that the pen monument is relevant in all respects for Karunanidhi, a leader who holds pride of place next to Anna as one of the lieutenants of the modern Tamil Nadu.

However, one cannot skirt the question from the society by and large if the pen monument will become part and parcel of the people's daily use as Anna's memorials such as the flyover, the library etc. have become. "What will be the use?" is the question one cannot afford to ignore. By way of refuting the probable criticism, the policy note says that the pen monument will generate direct and indirect job opportunities and also create an international identity for Tamil Nadu.

This pen monument, though, bristles with the risk to the deep-sea and shallow sea fishermen's livelihood. The monument will be situated amid risks of seashore environmental degradation that may happen down the line. This is a matter of grave concern.

Sea erosion and fishermen

The National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR) has released some dangerous data about the seamless sea erosion happening for 422.94 km along the Tamil Nadu coast spanning 991.47 km.

In terms of sea erosion, Tamil Nadu is the fourth state after West Bengal (60.5%), Puducherry (56.2 %) and Kerala (46.4 %). Tamil

Nadu, in all, lost 1,802 ha land to sea erosion in 1990-2018. All these data have figured in the shoreline change atlas for Tamil Nadu. This atlas was released by none other than TN PWD Minister E.V.Velu who has proposed the pen monument for Karunanidhi.

The crises facing the fishermen following eco problems, climate change and the government policies are so deep that they deserve a separate article.

There are 14 fishing hamlets along the Marina from the Cooum estuary to the Adyar estuary. It is known that the fishermen have not been consulted over the pen monument proposal. Incidentally, the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board has called for a public hearing on this proposal for January 31.

At present a need has arisen to plan new constructions and developmental works according to the changing environment and in keeping with the climate change. But the practice still continues of relaxing environmental laws and giving exemptions from the laws for several reasons including development, upgrading and beautification. Monuments are, of course, necessary in order to commemorate great leaders' achievements. But the question is what will be the cost of the mammoth exercises? Karunanidhi was able to adapt to the changing times. Had he been alive today, he would have taken up his pen to write an epistle to his siblings, refusing the memorial, howsoever innovative it might be, which would come up in such a place amid several environmental problems. Won't he?

Translated by V. Mariappan