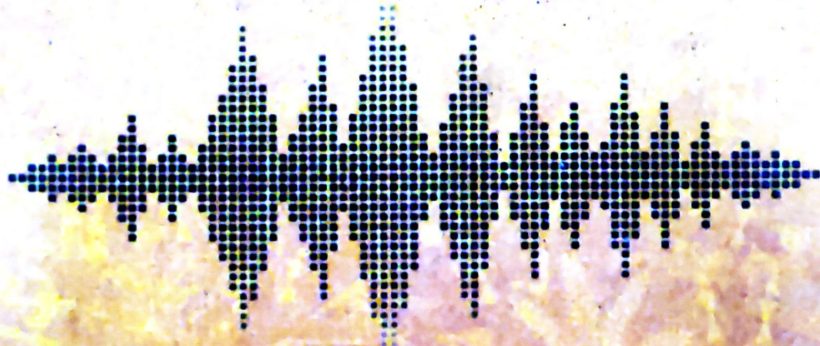




Subaltern Speak

Perspectives on Malayalam Dalit
Representations



Edited by
Dr. Binu K D

Publication Division, Government College Tripunithura

Subaltern Speak Dalit Representations in Malayalam

Editor
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Dalit Representations in Malayalam

Editor : Dr. Binu K.D.

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5

Imaging Subaltern Self: *Papilio Buddha* as a Dalit Cinema

Rajesh James

In his preface to *Joothan* (2008), Omprakash Valmiki writes that 'canonical Indian literature has always denied the deserving space to Dalit lives in its entirety and subtlety, in the vast spectrum of literary representations and transmissions' (vii). The violence of caste oppression and its trauma have rarely been present in the canonical Indian texts. Such predominant absences have reinforced the social and material violence executed over them. These representational absences are evidentially felt in the case of cinema as a cultural form. As an aesthetic and political medium, mainstream cinema in India has primarily addressed the emotional ghettos of the middle class. The turn in Malayalam cinema is also not different. As Brahma Prakash observes 'what is happening in the mainstream Malayalam cinema is a sort of colonisation. A small minority of highly empowered technicians and artists circulate the cinematic remnants of the dark feudal past' (www.bodhicommmons.org). The movies produced through this formulaic process resonate with the ideological inheritance and aspirations of the dominant caste. Though there were attempts from the margins to recuperate the ideological elision of the marginal caste self, such attempts were either suppressed or silenced. Other discursive attempts that claimed to be the voice of the voiceless, prioritised, as Spivak stated, 'the cause and interests of the supposed advocate' (120-130).

Representations of Dalits in Malayalam cinema have usually been shrouded in invisibility, and remained few and far between.

They have remained unvoiced, unseen, and misrepresented. The subsuming of Dalit's representation under the rubric of 'liberal human' obscures the tragic predicament of caste discrimination faced by them. According to A.S Ajith Kumar

a lot is being written about Dalit history, Dalit studies and caste in general. But the debate on caste is yet to make its presence felt in the visual media like cinema. How to bring the question of caste to the movies, to the screen, is the big challenge" (www.roundtableindia.co.in).

Though Malayalam cinema has a historical legacy of eight decades, beginning from *Vigathakumaran* (1928), there has been only a negligible presence of Dalit characters in the lead role. The domineering middle class Nair or Syrian Christian characters dominate the centres of filmic text at the cost of marginalising the Dalits. The problematic binary of fair hero/heroine and dark villain is a constantly employed narrative motif in Malayalam celluloid. According to Jenny Rowena.

Malayalam cinema is not a foreign technology that came in from the west forcing us to deal with it from within our given postcolonial or pre-capitalist cultural complexities. But it was a western technology that was seized and used by the powerful Shudra upper caste community of Kerala, mainly the Nairs, who had to rise out of their Shudra status and gain hegemony in the Kerala region, for which they captured all modern categories and institutions like literature, cinema, etc. (www.dalitweb.org).

In the cultural historiography of Kerala, Cinema has played a pivotal role in rephrasing and restructuring the existing socio-economic and political hegemonic networks. One of the most powerful modern technological mediums, Cinema has discursively framed the social register of Nair/Syrian codes. As Rowena says, 'At least from *Marthanda varma* (1933), the affluent class/caste systematically mirrored themselves on screen and made Kerala mirror them in their food, dress, looks, and artistic and intellectual pursuits' (www.dalitweb.org).

In *Vigathakumaran* P.K Rosy, the first heroine of Malayalam cinema, was asked to shed her Dalit identity so as to legitimize her 'right' to perform the role of a Nair lady. But such screen appropriations and patronisations were denigrated by the upper caste Nair community and she was banished from the public space as well as the Malayalam filmic history. There is not a single Dalit actress from Kerala with acknowledged credentials as an important star in Malayalam cinema in its eight decades legacy. Such continued absences invariably points to the presence of caste and gender biases in Malayalam cinema. Rowena says

"If Rosy as a Dalit Christian woman was persecuted for playing a Nair woman's role, today we do not even reach to that level. Even before that all Dalit female bodies are totally erased from the mainstream of Malayalam cinema" (www.dalitweb.org).

The year 1954 is supposedly regarded as a turning point in the history of Malayalam cinema. Malayalam cinema was placed on the high pedestals of national map with the release of *Neelakuyil*. The film was called a socially relevant cinema that narrated a perennial social theme. A pioneering film that established an identity for Malayalam cinema nationally, *Neelakuyil*, however, ironically displaced a Dalit woman character Neeli from its 'claimed humanist fold', letting herself die on the street. A host of Malayalam films after *Neelakuyil* continued the same logic of Dalit exclusivity, irrespective of the conventional art/ commercial cinema binary.

In spite of a highly casteist film culture, there were some liberating attempts in 1980s from the margins that addressed the issue of caste discriminations and violence. Film makers like TV Chandran and P.A Backer through their films could subvert and delegitimize the existing stereo types of marginalised lives, though to a limited extent. Their films consistently expose the lives and struggles of the oppressed and the underdogs, unlike other film makers of the period. P.A Backer's *Sri Narayana Guru* (1986) is a rare gem of its kind. In spite of all its liberal, leftist human sentiments, the film could attack the caste driven Malayali

psyche through the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru. None the less, in general, the portrayal of Dalit questions are largely ignored. Even when caste issues are depicted, they come of as reactionary appendages --never radically critiquing the abominable social phenomenon--as films by Ray, Ghatak and Ketan Mehta illustrate. Surprisingly, the most disgusting and filthy instances of caste oppression never become points of critical debate, in Malayalam cinema. But recently however, certain filmic attempts have emerged from the margins like *Bodhi* (2008) by G.Ajayan, *Papilio Buddha*(2013) by Jayan Cherian, *Mahatama Ayyankali* (2013) by Surya Deva, *Kari* (2015) by Shanavas Naranipuzha and documentaries of Ajith Kumar A.S. and Rupesh Kumar that highlight the Dalit consciousness of revolt and self-asserting sensibilities, so far marginalized and ignored.

Jayan Cherian's *Papilio Buddha* is an intensely political and iconoclastic film which foregrounds certain pertinent Dalit questions. The film provides a bleak vision of how our contemporary nation state and the dominant class have betrayed the lower castes in Kerala. *Papilio Buddha* is a telling chronicle of the escapades of Dalits in the Western Ghats and the paradoxes of the 'liberated' cultural practices of Kerala. Being the victims of caste discrimination and physical oppression for centuries, they embrace Buddhism as a new form of religious and cultural identity. The film tells their story through a Dalit youth named Shankaran. Though educated he is indifferent to the plight of the lives of his people. The film begins poetically, with Shankaran hunting butterflies in the mountains. He then romantically involves with an American named Jack who is in search of *Papilio Buddha*, a rare and exotic variety. While assisting Jack in collecting butterflies, he is arrested by the police. Because of his American identity Jack escapes the detainment, while Shankaran undergoes severe torture at the police station. He is comforted by Manju, a brave activist who runs a pre-school at a squatted land. An audacious woman, she drives an auto-rickshaw taxi fighting the harassment of male drivers. They fall in love. He joins Manju against the injustices and indignities committed over Dalits. Following an earlier altercation, Manju is brutally raped and

publically paraded. The Police along with other state machinery, suppresses the riots that erupt afterwards. Film ends where the camera is kept still on the march of Dalits who are forcibly evicted from the scattered lands, irrespective of their protests and resistance.

According to K. Satchidanadan

the immediate inspiration for *Papilio Buddha* came from a news report about the Dalit Human Rights Movements (DHRM) that the Police had identified as a terrorist movement; while in fact, it is a peaceful movement upholding Dalit dignity, encouraging education among Dalits and supporting subaltern struggles for basic human rights in Kerala' (www.tehelka.com).

The film combines a number of true incidents of violence and exploitation, from Dalit movements like *Chengara*, *Meppadi* and *Muthanga* land rights protests. As a Gandhism and environmental degradation in the Western Ghats. Through reflective and meditative camera angles, the film interweaves Buddhist emblems which point to a political transition in terms of religiosity among Dalits. Image of the Buddha is used as an important political weapon to defend the rights, and thereby prioritise the principles of *Ambedkarism*. Image of the Buddha functions as a symbol of defiant hope, protest and political identity for the Dalit community in the large discourse of *savarna* elitism. The consciousness *Papilio Buddha* foregrounds is the revolutionary mind-set connected with the Dalit struggles in Kerala. The unrecognised Dalit consciousness is the seed for the film. The film proposes an emerging consciousness that every Dalit individual should get the constitutional protection for freedom and dignity.

The film doubts the iconic presence of Gandhi and the way Gandhism was used to justify the vitriolic injustice done to Dalits. The film questions how Gandhism was used as a means to suppress all the dissenting and marginalised Dalit voices in India. The film problematizes the idea of peace and shows how violent was the idea of peace in the hegemonic Indian context. Arundhati

Roy says: "It is time to unveil a few truths about a person whose doctrine of nonviolence was based on the acceptance of a most brutal social hierarchy ever known, the caste system" (www.theguardian.com). *Papilio Buddha* unveils the other side of Gandhism that accepts the brutal side of caste hierarchy which is very violent. Jayen Cherian says

For me, film is a medium of expression and when I was making the film, I didn't think that we would have problems like this as I am a story teller and this is a reality that I see in Kerala. I have tried to show the sophisticated form of caste exploitation in Kerala and while the nature of caste structure has changed it still continues to strongly exist. And as far as the depiction of Gandhi goes, it cannot be denied that the Varna system found a strong place in Gandhi's writings" (quoted in Sathish C.).

In one scene a prominent group of Gandhists, accompanied by the army, try to pressure the Dalits to move from the squatted land peacefully. Towards the end of the film, there is an extremely provocative image of Gandhi's effigy being festooned with chappals, while Ramdas, a Gandhian, is refused entry into the squatter's area. Cries of 'we are not anybody's Harijans' are raised against the Gandhian discourse of classifying Dalits as Harijans. Even Shankaran says in the film "this satyagraha is a filthy, despicable pressure tactics'. The film shows how the discourse of Gandhism justifies the attack on Dalit protesters. In his letter to Ramsay MacDonald, Gandhi wrote, 'In the establishment of separate electorates for the 'depressed classes', I sense the injection of poison that is calculated to destroy Hinduism' He also wrote 'Americans should know that my politics are derived from my religion'(www.frontline.in). This Gandhian affinity with mainstream Hinduism places Dalits as the 'other'. The Film visualises this trajectory of violence in the symbolic toppling of the large statue of Buddha and burning the portrait of Ayyankali.

Awareness of caste indelibility is a constant political motif in the film. The members of an NGO working for the welfare of lower caste, scorns those who they claim speak for. An NGO

worker Issac says to Shankaran, "You folks are basically not okay. You all pariahs have to be cleansed. In reply to another NGO worker's comment Isaac says, "Even if they are converted into Christianity, they will be only pariah Christians". Dr. B.R. Ambedkar writes, "I advise you to sever your connection with Hinduism and to embrace any other religion. But, in doing so, be careful in choosing the new faith and see that equality of treatment, status and opportunities will be guaranteed to you unreservedly" (226). Film problematizes the idea of conversion and shows how Dalits are treated and viewed in the converted religions like Christianity in the light of Ambedkar's teachings. Film foregrounds Buddhism as an affirmative religious source for Dalits. For Ambedkar, religion is a process of rationalization that focuses less on the supernatural factors, and universalizes social values. Far from saving souls, religion should preserve society and the welfare of the individual. The Film places the teachings of Buddha as a rational solution for all the caste infirmities faced by the Dalits. Image of the Buddha is used as a symbolic as well as a political presence. Image of the Buddha emerges in various instances of persecution, endurance and resistance in the film. Such positioning is a courageous declaration that independent religious side of constructing the Dalit identity is not a mere denial of caste or of equality within the caste system. But a new religious politics itself.

According to K.Satchidanandan

'The film succeeds in creating a parallel space and time that permits the audience to analyse what they see objectively as a Brecht play does. Icons like Buddha, Gandhi, Ambedkar and Ayyankali are deployed carefully to depict social and ideological conflicts revealing that the battle around forms, metaphors and symbols is no less than real political battles'(www.tehelka.com)

The Film also foregrounds how the political Left of Kerala has betrayed the lower caste. There is a scene in which Kariyan, a symbol of protesting Dalits, replacing the photo of E.M.S Namboodiripad with that of Gautama Buddha, which marks a massive shift in Dalit perspectives towards the Left in Kerala.

This single scene compresses the decades of dismay that the Dalits have felt in the hands of upper caste communists. This transformative stand that Kariyan goes through points to the maturity of Dalit movements in Kerala. The fact that the other two photos on Kariyan's mantelpiece in his thatched hut-- Dr. B.R Ambedkar's and Ayyankali's-- remain constant demonstrates the emergence of pure Dalit discourse. It asserts that it's not self-denial but a self-assertion and desire for self-expression that is the *raison d'etre* of Dalit movements in Kerala

The film also discusses the case of Chitralkha, a Dalit woman from Payyannur in North Kerala who challenged the CITU dictates and drove an autorickshaw. The character of Manjushree, never flippant or overstated, is made precisely in the context of the Chitralkha episode. She is represented as a liberated Dalit woman, though initially straight jacketed as an angry and perplexed woman. In spite of the physical assaults, she emerges as an authoritative woman who tonsures her head and proceeds towards the site of land struggle. As Karen Gabriel observes about Bollywood cinema, 'Malayalam cinema has always been one of the many institutions in Kerala that generate discourse on rape' (1). Rape or rape attempts have been a visual discourse of luridly revealing the hypocrisy of the liberal Malayalis. *Papilio Buddha* breaks all conventions of representing rapes in Malayalam cinema. The narrative of the film invests its concern not over the pity of being raped, but how Manjushree emerges out after such a physical assault.

Papilio Buddha is not a conventional film that carries the dominant ideologies of the time. It's a counter cinema in the traditions of the French New Wave and other parallel films of the West that pans the hegemonic oppressive structures and its apparatuses. As a Dalit cinema it organically explores the paradoxes of the apparently emancipated Malayali land/mindscape. As a counter cinema it goes beyond the emotional ghettos of the dominant class and foregrounds the rebellious and affirmative Dalit self, which Malayalam cinema has studiously suppressed for long. What makes this film significant is the way it cinematically expresses the setbacks and advances of Dalit struggles and their strife for a fully-emerged Dalit consciousness

in the light of Buddhism and Ambedkarite politics. *Papilio Buddha* is an unseen, unparalleled and path breaking attempt in the traditions of commercial/art cinema. Its intellectual landscape is beyond the reach of the conventional filming schools and critics of Kerala. The denial of the censor certificate and the IFFK rejection testify this. Though much is written about Dalits, caste is not adequately represented in films. And the lacuna was crying to be filled. Like *Fandry* (2013) and *Court* (2014) in Maharashtra, *Papilio Buddha* (2013) brings the questions of caste and identity into the cinematic spaces and screens of Kerala, unmistakably establishing a Dalit silver screen space in the vast, hegemonic spectrum of Indian Cinema.

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