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Interview

Mapping the Margins: An Interview with Meena Kandasamy

Conducted at Sacred Heart College in Kochi, India on 12 November 2015[1]

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Abstract: Caste-based discrimination is a grotesque socio-political reality in India. The term "Dalit" (or "untouchable") refers to a person belonging to the lowest caste in the traditional Indian caste system. Inspired by B. R. Ambedkar, a Western-educated intellectual and the chief architect of the Indian constitution, Dalit writers have produced stories of resistance, stories of caste discrimination and social ostracization, and alternative and parallel visions of casteless societies. As an author of contemporary Dalit writings, Meena Kandasamy describes a broad spectrum of Dalit experiences, and she voices concerns that are often unarticulated in the mainstream Indian literary canon. In so doing, Kandasamy not only helps to interpret the reality confronting Dalits but also reclaims their lost voices and identity. In conversation, Kandasamy speaks very much the way she writes—with bluntness and warmth.

Keywords: Dalit, caste system, autobiography, translation, *The Gypsy Goddess*

Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, translator, fiction writer, and Dalit activist based in Chennai, India. Unlike many of her contemporaries such as Preeti Shenoy, Kiran Manral, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, her oeuvre is a response to issues related to caste politics, feminism, and gender violence that plague contemporary India. As the first Indian woman writer to champion the cause of Dalit individuals and their com-

munities in an upper-caste majoritarian India, Kandasamy is an outspoken critic of the establishment and a spokesperson for the "others" and underprivileged in her society. She is known for her piercing wit, radical quips, and satirical stabs. Her two collections of verse, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), are vibrant intellectual sites that challenge the patriarchy and interpret the social disparities and political injustices that trouble Indian society. Mature and assertive, Kandasamy's debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), which draws on a real-life massacre, offers a fictionalized version of the predicament of Dalit peasants under the feudal upper-caste landlords in the village of Kilvenmani (in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu in southern India) on Christmas day, 1968. Kandasany is the former editor of *The Dalit*, a bi-monthly English-language magazine and, along with M. Nisar, co-authored a biography of Kerala's foremost Dalit revolutionary and civil rights champion, Ayyankali. Kandasamy has also translated the writings and speeches of Thol. Thirumaavalavan, leader of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), or the Dalit Panthers of India, and the works of Tamil Eelam writers. In addition, she has been a British Council-Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow at the University of Kent, a Visiting Fellow at Newcastle University, and a writer-in-residence at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. In this interview, Kandasamy discusses her experience as a Dalit woman writer and a translator of Dalit literature; the implications of the term "Dalit" in the modern Indian literary context; and her identity as both a Dalit feminist and a woman writer in India.

There are two major ideas about writing: one, art for art's sake and the other, art for social purpose. Writers like Kamala Das and Arundhati Roy hold different views [from each other]. How would you locate yourself along these lines?

Kandasamy: The idea that there is art for art's sake and art for society's sake is a false dictum. It is easy for literature professors to come and make these differences; some people write for art's sake, some for society's sake. But contrary to this division, like for instance, in the example that you mentioned, both Madhavikutty [Kamala Das] and Arundhati

Roy, brilliant writers as they are, give as much importance to the craft as they give importance to the society that they are trying to represent. The person who is very committed to society will take the utmost care to use the most beautiful words, aesthetics, the loveliest form of writing, to be able to reach out to more people. I do not think that writing for . . . society makes it any less of an art or literature. I [also] don't believe that writing can exist in a vacuum; even if you say that you aren't writing for . . . society, you are making a choice—a conscious choice to distance yourself from . . . society as something about it makes you step away from it. After all, everybody is within . . . society, nobody is outside it.

You are an accomplished translator. For instance, you have translated the works of Tamil Eelam writers, [including] Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, among others. What does translation mean to you? Is translation difficult and fraught in practice?

Kandasamy: Translation is an intense process. When you are translating, you are inhabiting two worlds at the same time. You are trying to understand the complexities of one world and trying to represent it in another. Even if you are working with the source text, you are also working with its culture; you are trying to form something here and put it across to another culture. You are trying to get it across to somebody who does not know anything about the struggle, the places of conflict, or the culture. If you are working with living authors, it becomes all the more challenging, as you would have to satisfy them, too. It is a complex task, to achieve a good translation.

What were the challenges you encountered as a translator of Dalit literature from vernacular/regional originals to a metropolitan language such as English? You might have faced semantic and stylistic differences while translating. Share your experiences.

Kandasamy: While I translated from the Tamil originals, I often asked my father what certain words meant. The experiences of the Dalits were experiences far removed from the experiences of the middle class and the bourgeoisie experience. There are words that cannot even be translated. In D. Ravikumar's poetry, there is the mention of a word, "*eravaanam*,"

which is used to show the place where you place things in your hut between the roof and the walls because it is a safe place to keep things. I never knew that such a place existed as I did not live in a village at any point in my life and did not know the name for such a place in the homes I had been to. There is no English word to describe what it actually means. The "eave" of the roof comes close, but it doesn't fit. These were linguistic gaps which couldn't be overcome. These gaps always exist in a translation.

When I read Dalit autobiographies translated by middle-class people who have no idea of the Dalit experience, the huge gap of understanding and the gap of language is felt. English, after all, is not a local or regional language. In V. Kadambari's translation of K. A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* (*The Scar*), she uses the word "*paraya*" [a lower-caste group found in the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu] instead of "*parayan*." In Tamil, the singular form of the word is used so as to insult, while the plural form of the word, "*parayar*," is used to show respect. There is no word that exists in between, the way the translator has used it. The "n" suffix or the "r" suffix does not exist in English, but does . . . in the regional language. How is it that this could be converted? It could be a single word that hold[s] these stories, but they are intense stories, hidden in the words. Translations limit the whole game of mediations, where you are trying to talk from a position of complete ignorance of the reader, or in the least, a reader who doesn't care.

Most of the translations of Dalit works are done by non-Dalits, which is hugely problematic. It is not merely the translation that is problematic but the complete absence of Dalits in the production process. Even the brilliant author is not often consulted. How could this process actually happen outside the author?

How has translation as an experience and as a process tempered your perception as a writer? And what are your observations about translation as far as Dalit identity is concerned?

Kandasamy: As a translator, I encounter the situation in which writing about politics is not seen as literature, which leaves Dalits at a disadvantage. While I translated the works of the Dalit leader, Thol.

Thirumaavalavan, he would tell me that because of the field of his work, because he has to speak, the literature that he creates is not the literature he got from reading books or referring to the works of scholars. The literature he creates does not have the "mood" of literature. Instead, the literature he creates is the literature created from the people he meets, from their collective resistance. "How then," he asked me, "could this work be called literary?"

The people outside the Dalit struggle do not know the Dalit struggle for what it is. When I had to translate [Thol. Thirumaavalavan's] *Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation* (2003), a book of essays, the essays were thirty in number or so, but the footnotes for each essay ran for nine pages, when each essay was merely three pages or so. As a translator, I say this not to show that I had done my work, but rather, with deep humility, that the world we are living in is a completely isolated world. Venmani [the Kilvenmani massacre] would hold a complete memory and understanding for a Dalit person, but need not be so for a non-Dalit person. For a non-Dalit, and especially someone who has no link [to] or understanding of the anti-caste struggle, it is just a noun; there is no history, no anger, no story to be told about Venmani or Theni or Meenakshipuram [villages in Tamil Nadu].

What are the implications of the term "Dalit" in the modern literary context? And how do you characterize contemporary Dalit politics?

Kandasamy: The very word "Dalit" is under much debate and discussion in the modern context. Recently, Dalit politics have come under criticism in the same context. But this question is the beginning of approaching Dalit feminism or literature. Some criticize current Dalit politics, believing that it is merely trying to satisfy the aspirations of elite and educated bourgeoisie in the society instead of serving the Dalits in their class struggle. But instead of recounting and repeating the language of Marx to understand the condition of the Dalits, what is to be done is to see it for what it is, which is the caste struggle, included within which is the class struggle. But then, putting caste within such a paradigm is not easy. I believe that instead of saying that Dalit politics has taken the convenient or the brahmanical approach [upper-caste ways], what

is more important is to see the revolutionary aspects of Dalit politics, the struggle that Dalits were fighting . . . even before *The Communist Manifesto* came into being or the Russian revolution happened.

Yet you are called a Dalit writer when there are [those] who believe that you are a non-Dalit. How do you respond to such critical pronouncement[s]?

Kandasamy: I have been extremely honest, as the jury is out there, and the jury . . . has to decide. Until then, I really cannot say anything. It's for the people to decide. I've been very honest, especially in making known the fact that my parents are from two different backgrounds. My mother is a *shudra* [the fourth and lowest of the traditional social classes in India]; she has been waging a war against IIT [the Indian Institute of Technology], [so that they will accept] reservation.[2] She has openly gone to court and filed a case and has openly called herself an OBC [Other Backward Class], so I have nothing to hide. My father belongs to a more mixed background. His father comes from the *andipandaram* [a migrant community that belongs to the Scheduled Caste] which, according to the Ministry of Social Justice (another metaphor from the Indian State), is classified under "Nomadic Tribes." Nomadic Tribes, Semi-Nomadic Tribes, and the Denotified Tribes (or the so-called Criminal Tribes of the British colonial era) have all been flattened by the Ministry of Social Justice, and every state in India reserves the right to classify these tribes as Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, or Most Backward Caste. It is not a straight[forward] classification at all. These people do not have a settled life; they do not come under the blanket of caste. All these nomadic tribes cannot be called *adivasi* [indigenous people in India], either, as they don't stay [in] one place; *adivasis* are settled in some place. There is a commission which said that the population of the nomadic tribes in Tamil Nadu after independence was half a million, about 400,000 or so, a minority.

In Tamil Nadu, it so happens that this caste involves itself in begging, reading horoscopes, or some priestly work related to death and other things, [and] they are classified as the Most Backward Caste. In Kerala, these same *pandarams* are Dalits or Scheduled Castes. Another *pandaram* in Kerala comes under Scheduled Tribes. Those who know

Malayalam know that even today, "*pandaram*" is a very common caste slur. It literally means "beggar." It's used in conversation; I have heard even comrades use it without flinching. At times like that I hang my head in shame. The history of stigma envelopes the nomad.

These people have an interesting origin. They are originally Telugu speakers who migrated to Kerala via Tamil Nadu. Their history is interesting as they are not even related to one place. My father, I can say, is from Tanjore [a town in Tamil Nadu], but how long has he been there? The past one generation? The past two generations? Before that, where was he? Where were my ancestors? There is a complete dislocation. There is also [the issue of] the terms of alienation . . . not being in the same language in which you operate and also the history of caste. If you go back to Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, there are photographs of *andipandarams* begging for their livelihoods. For me it becomes very interesting to see how the community is classified today. So now, you decide whether this is Dalit or not. Again, in terms of development, you can say that there are no IAS [Indian Administrative Service] or IPS [Indian Police Service] officers, no politicians from my community. Also, what is special about this minority community is that it adopted the deaf, dumb, or the so-called handicapped of the land-owning caste-Hindu community and brought them up as their children. So even the caste purity didn't matter to them. It was a very heterogeneous group. For this reason, I think it is up to the people to decide what is right. You really know that this is an intensely marginalised community; there can be no two opinions about that. The question is whether they are Dalit or not. What exactly is Dalit? Is it merely the scheduled castes, or does it involve other marginalised sections, too?

Another interesting study would be that of the *narikkuravar* or the gypsy community of Tamil Nadu, who are classified not along with the Dalits but along with the Most Backward Castes. It's the same type of anomaly to call a tribe . . . a "caste." How can the nomad people be classified in the same lines as the *Kallar* or *Thevar* [two related castes of southern India]? There are many tribes [who], just by the virtue of their nomadic nature, are added to this [category].

I've been honest about what my dad's caste is, and what my mom's caste is. I come from a privileged background, but this is my background. I align myself with the Dalit struggle, I identify with it, but the whole question of my caste is something that other people have to decide. I can only perceive this truth and tell you what it is; I cannot go one step further in saying that this is the effective answer.

How would you trace the literary genre of autobiography as part of Dalit literary expression?

Kandasamy: I wish to address [at] the outset the left's critique of the Dalit autobiography. The strongest voice amidst this was the voice of Anand Teltumbde. He critiqued the Dalit autobiography by bringing forth the role of neoliberalism and markets in making the Dalit autobiography the default language of Dalit literature. The Dalit autobiography has become what the Indian middle-class consumer wants to read. As autobiographies, they are often criticized as the literature of compassion. Dalit autobiography has become the site where the middle class nurtures its sympathy.

Could you elaborate [on] the middle-class position in [the] Indian literary scene vis-à-vis Dalit literature?

Kandasamy: The middle class in India has something similar to "white guilt," [which] it overcomes [with] tokenisms. That is why it reads Vasant Moon's book, which provides an evocative incident in which he never got ghee, or saw it, until he was a teenager. They say, "Oh, I have read this book, and what a sorry state of affairs it is." But contradictory to what they say, the middle class are the first to oppose the reservation policy or bring in the idea of a "creamy layer" [a term used to refer to the relatively wealthier and better educated members of the Other Backward Class]. What I mean here is that they want Dalits to remain Dalits—they want them to remain impoverished, unhealthy, [and] oppressed so that it maintains their own status quo and allows them to offer their sympathies. Rarely do we see them celebrate Dalit resistance in the same way. Rarely do we see them consume a Dalit manifesto or war-cry in the same way. Technically and structurally, the autobiography

is the least political thing; that is why the middle class, to some extent, read[s] it. The middle class does not have a keen interest in the Dalit struggle, nor does it in the least want to recognise it as a struggle [that is] political in nature, at all. They are happy as long as it remains at the level of the individual chronicle.

Dalit histories are maligned and distorted. To quote B. R. Ambedkar, "If you want to destroy a society, destroy its history and the society will get destroyed automatically" (qtd. in Attri). What are your observations?

Kandasamy: Dalit histories are not taken or recorded. When the Dalit Panthers . . . started laying claims to the Dalit history of Tamil Nadu, . . . when they said that they wanted to go and commemorate the death of the many Dalits who had been martyred in Kilvenmani, the Marxists completely opposed it. The VCK cadres were actually beaten up. This did not happen long ago; just ten years or so has passed since this incident. This is the caste society that has pervaded for a long time, which has annihilated the history of the Dalits. It is important to write the lived stories of the Dalits into history, so tomorrow people cannot completely erase . . . their stories. The novel, by default, tells you that it is fiction; it tells you that it is not real, and yet it is based on reality. All political writing involves people at the grassroots. We live in a world where "literature," whatever it means in its purest sense, has become reserved for the drawing room chatter of middle-class intellectuals.

In your novel about the Kilvenmani massacre, The Gypsy Goddess *(2014), one of the chapters ends in cursing, thus: "Fuck these postmodern writers." Why do you say so? After all, you have resorted to the same postmodern techniques in your work.*

Kandasamy: I was meaning it in the most sarcastic, ironic manner. There is the whole game about the title, and it runs for about six pages or so. I'm playing with the idea of the title, and at the end of the rather elaborate exercise, I'm like, "I'm sorry to waste your time." In response to which the reader says, "Fuck these postmodern writers." That is supposed to be the response of the reader when s/he comes to know that s/he has been taken on a ride. That is why it has been italicised.

When it comes to writing, especially postmodernist writing, there is no apparent sentence structure. In some cases, the readers find it challenging even to comprehend. In traditional writing, the sentences are structured, running to a maximum length of one or two lines. We term it "sophisticated." Yet in The Gypsy Goddess, you have sentences that run a page long. Is that not sophistication?

Kandasamy: Why is that sophisticated? That's how people talk. For instance, if you set fire to a hut, that is how people would respond; they would speak breathlessly and tell you what happened. I don't think it is sophistication; it is the opposite of it. Sophistication is when you edit, when you make it a product for somebody else. Sophistication is a man in a suit with a BBC accent; it is a woman who sips her tea while she complains of the sun in her eyes and the bad service in the restaurant. Sophistication is not the enumeration of suffering or the anger of the people. These are raw.

I think the word "sophisticated" is not the word. I think the word that needs to be used is "complex." When I use sophistication, I mean it as a middle-class trait. I do not know what the word means for you. Coming to your question about that chapter in *The Gypsy Goddess*, it is literary writing; it is more advanced and complex, of course. But it is experimental. It goes against the conventional style of writing. For me, to use it as a kind of tool of writing, it is to explore the idea of long sentences which people would actually use while they are speaking.

Who are your favourite writers?

Kandasamy: Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, the poet Kamala Das—the usual suspects.

In your first collection of poetry Touch*, Kamala Das in her foreword . . . and showers praise on you. To quote her: "Once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Meena Kandasamy's anthology of verse." What do you feel about her observation, and what does Kamala Das' writing mean to you?*

Kandasamy: I think it is a deeply humbling experience to hear that from her, a writer of such stature. Her writing is potent and beautiful, so when she says that, it is like she has given me a gift. Her writings are very influential as she was one of the first writers to put the body at the centre. In many ways she did not adhere to . . . society, was a very radical person—a fact I really like about her. Moreover, her writings tend to look at herself from completely outside of social mores, and in this way, poke fun at . . . society's hypocrisy. She is a very honest writer.

Are you a feminist? If so, could you define feminism? Kamala Das had said that she wasn't a feminist and, in fact, she never accepted the title. What is your take on this?

Kandasamy: Yes, I am a feminist. There are so many definitions. For me, feminism is in the fact that women and men are equal and that they should hence have the same rights. I will not compromise on this. If you care about society and want everybody to be equal, you cannot but accept this fact as natural. Regarding Madhavikutty's [Kamala Das'] stance, that was her choice; it is anybody's choice to accept a word or not to accept it.

Your poems are simultaneously blatant, awkward, militant, and radical. You speak and write everything in an unadorned and blunt way, like Kamala Das and many other confessional poets in the West. Do you consider yourself [to be] a confessional poet?

Kandasamy: I'm not sure I can call myself a confessional poet as the element of autobiography that comes into my writing is very limited; it's not a lot. There are a few of my poems that are confessional in nature.

Of the several poems that you have written, which are the ones that are dear to you?

Kandasamy: I like a lot of poems in *Ms. Militancy* and some of the poems which a lot of people like. For instance, . . . "Scewtiny" and "Once my silence held you spell-bound." The audiences love them, so because of that, [they] become all the more close to me.

Notes

1 Interview edited by the author with Kandasamy's permission; additional edits for clarity made by *ARIEL*. We also wish to thank Brigitte Clarke for her professional assistance.

2 Reservation is a measure of reserving seats in educational institutions and government jobs to favour the economically disadvantaged Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

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Casting Caste

Dalit Identity, *Papilio Buddha,* and Malayalam Cinema

SATHYARAJ VENKATESAN, RAJESH JAMES

Caste in Kerala has been under-represented both in canonical Malayalam literature as well as in Malayalam cinema. This article reviews the representational absence of Dalits in Malayalam cinema, explores how this absence perpetuates the structural violence against Dalits, and analyses Jayan K Cherian's *Papilio Buddha*. This is a rare film that tackles the contentious question of caste, reveals the ineffectualness of Gandhism and left politics vis-à-vis Dalit issues, and points to Ambedkarism and Buddhism as ways to forge a coherent Dalit consciousness.

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As an aesthetic and social medium, mainstream Malayalam cinema is guilty of addressing the emotional lives and aspirations of only the middle class. Although caste is a grotesque sociopolitical reality in Kerala, it is often under-represented and disowned in canonical Malayalam literature as well as Malayalam filmic narratives. This denial of "Dalit lives in [their] entirety and subtlety" (Valmiki 2003: vii) is indicative of the narrow concerns of Malayalam cinema. The representational absence of Dalit lives perpetuates the symbolic/structural violence against Dalits. Malayalam cinema, with its historical legacy of eight decades, lamentably repeats the mainstream Bollywood formula[1] and thus remains faithful to the ideological inheritance and desideratum of the dominant castes. If, on the one hand, any purposive interventions to recuperate the marginalised "caste self" are suppressed, then, on the other, attempts to redeem the voice of the voiceless serve only "the causes and interests of the supposed advocate" (Menon 2009). The present article reviews the (absence of) representation of Dalits in Malayalam cinema, and then closely examines Jayan K Cherian's *Papilio Buddha* (2013) to analyse the contentious question of caste and the ineffectualness of Gandhism and left politics vis-à-vis Dalit issues. Displacing existing political ideologies, the film offers Ambedkarism and Buddhism as an alternative way to forge a coherent Dalit consciousness.

Story of Neglect

Dalits in Malayalam cinema are shrouded in invisibility, or remain nondescript characters, their concerns unvoiced, unseen, and misrepresented. There is also a tendency to subsume Dalit concerns under the rubric of liberal humanism, thereby obscuring the predicament of caste discrimination and subjugation. Although the Malayalam film industry has a cinematic legacy of eight decades, beginning from *Vigathakumaran*,[2] Dalit characters have had a negligible presence. In *Vigathakumaran*, for instance, P K Rosy, the first heroine of Malayalam cinema and a Dalit Christian, was persuaded to shed her Dalit identity in order to legitimise her "right" to perform the role of a Nair lady. Nevertheless, Rosy offended the upper caste Nair community, leading to her persecution within the film industry. Reflecting on Rosy's plight, Jenny Rowena (2013) observes that "all Dalit female bodies are totally erased from the mainstream of Malayalam cinema." In essence, middle class Nair/Syrian Christian characters populated Malayalam cinema at the cost of marginalising Dalits and sharpening the problematic binary of fair hero/heroine (usually Nair/Syrian Christian) and dark villain (usually Dalit). Examining the elision of caste in Malayalam cinema, Rowena (2013) observes:

> 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.

In no time, at least from *Marthanda Varma* (1933) onwards, Malayalam cinema discursively and visually privileged Nair/Syrian Christian registers to the extent that "the affluent class/caste systematically mirrored themselves on screen and made Kerala mirror them in their food, dress, looks, and artistic and intellectual pursuits" (Rowena 2013). Later, although *Neelakuyil* (1954) paved a new path for Malayalam cinema by breaking away from the earlier tradition of adapting plots from Hindi films and religious myths and addressing socially relevant themes such as untouchability and feudalism, the movie, ironically, displaces Neeli (a Dalit woman), letting her die in a street. A host of other Malayalam

films released after *Neelakuyil* reiterated the same logic of Dalit denial, irrespective of the art/commercial status of the film. Such continued absences not only signify the entrenched caste and gender biases in Malayalam cinema but also the interpellation by hegemonic structures within the film industry.

In spite of the casteist film culture, there were some attempts in the early 1980s to address issues of Dalit life, caste discrimination and Dalit violence. The films of T V Chandran and P A Backer, for instance, delegitimised stereotypes about Dalits in a limited way. Backer's *Sree Narayana Guru* (1986), immersed in liberal and leftist sentiments, laid bare the casteist fabric of Kerala society and the tragic predicament of the Dalits, while Lenin Rajendran's *Meenamasathile Sooryan* (1986) discussed subaltern issues through the leftist prism. P N Menon's film *Malamukalile Daivam* dwelt on the life of an indigenous tribal community in the context of emerging modernity. The mainstream films produced after the 1990s reproduced the Dalit body, occupation, and names in socially demeaning ways—for instance, as a villain (Vinayakan in *Big B*), as a comedian (Salim Kumar in *Thenkasipattanam*), as a blind man (Kalabhavan Mani in *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum*), or as a thief (Chemban Vinod in *Tamaar Padaar*). These movies are guilty of subordinating subaltern histories and world views to the concerns of megastars and their feudal episteme. Post-millennial Malayalam cinema[3] (also known as new generation films[4]) is no different, showing a "preferential bias for white skin, manliness, suave aristocracy and feudal nostalgia" (Parayil 2014: 68). As Parayil (2014: 68) elaborates

> [i]t employs such indirect yet legitimised narrative/visual signs like name, habit, body and occupation to re-establish the preconceived cultural notions of a typified subaltern caste.

In effect, millennial Malayalam cinema ensures and rehearses casteism and continues with the abjection of Dalits.

Thus, the portrayal of Dalit issues in cinema has been minimal and limited, if not altogether absent. Even when Dalit issues find a visual language, they are mostly reactionary appendages, never a radical critique of abominable social realities as found in the films of Bimal Roy (*Sujata*), Satyajit Ray (*Sadgati*), Bikas Mishra and Neeraj Ghaywan. According to A S Ajith Kumar (2013),

> 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.

Sensitive to such glaring absences, as it were, movies such as *Bodhi* (2008) by G Ajayan, *Papilio Buddha* (2013), *Mahatama Ayyankali* (2013) by Surya Deva, *Kari* (2015) by Shanavas Naranipuzha and the documentaries of A S Ajith Kumar and Rupesh Kumar attempt to cultivate Dalit consciousness through an examination of hegemonic cultural politics and extant historical legacies. Although these filmic narratives are different in terms of content, audience and form, what binds them is their bold representation and critique of the failure of social institutions and political discourses to address Dalit issues. Besides offering strident critiques of the legacy of casteism, they also imagine possibilities for Dalit emancipation, empowerment and social liberation.

Papilio Buddha: Representing Kerala Dalits

Cherian's *Papilio Buddha* archives the lives of Dalits in the Western Ghats and traverses through the experiences of an educated Dalit youth named Shankaran. The film is an intensely political and iconoclastic film which provides a bleak vision of how the contemporary nation state and dominant political class/discourse have collectively betrayed the lower castes in Kerala. At another level, the film critiques new forms of inclusivity, which echo the earlier mechanisms of oppression even as they provide a vision for liberation. Although the immediate inspiration for *Papilio Buddha* came from a news report about the Dalit Human Rights Movement (DHRM) which the police had identified as a "terrorist movement" (Satchidanandan 2013), the film deftly deploys an array of icons, ranging from the Buddha to Ayyankali, to not only map the ideological shifts and fissures that characterise Dalit struggles in Kerala but to emphasise how "the battle around forms, metaphors and symbols is no less than real political battles" (Satchidanandan 2013). Although the film is set in the fictional town of Meppara, it intermeshes a number of actual incidents of violence and exploitation against Dalits, especially events that occurred in Chengara, Meppadi and Muthanga in the Western Ghats.

As the film begins, Shankaran, a Dalit youth, is helping an American named Jack to hunt a rare species of butterfly named Papilio Buddha, which is found in the mountains. While assisting Jack in collecting butterflies, Shankaran is arrested by the police. While Jack's American identity helps him avoid detention, Shankaran undergoes brutal torture at the police station. He is comforted by Manjusree, a brave activist and an audacious autorickshaw driver, who later falls in love with Shankaran. Reciprocating, as it were, Shankaran joins Manjusree in battling the injustice against Dalits. Following an earlier altercation, Manjusree is brutally raped and publicly paraded by the male autorickshaw drivers of the region. Reacting to this patriarchal assault on Manjusree, a protest is organised by local Dalits demanding justice for her. Later, Manjusree and Shankaran reject Hinduism and convert to Buddhism along with other Dalits. The police and state machinery suppress the protest that demands justice for Manjusree and Dalits at large. While the movie is self-explanatory, it also deftly exposes the regressive role of Gandhism and the ineffectual nature of leftism vis-à-vis Dalits.

Anti-Gandhism?

The film deconstructs the normative image of Gandhi and the premises governing Gandhism. Specifically, *Papilio Buddha* demonstrates how Gandhism was interpellated to suppress the dissenting and marginalised Dalit voices in India and, in so doing, the film problematises Gandhism and Gandhian methods in favour of rebellion and protest. Although this stance of the movie attracted vitriolic criticism and gathered, to borrow an

expression from J Devika (2012), a "constituency of hurt," the director characterises the movie as "not anti-Gandhi" (qtd in Trivedi 2013). Refusing to mince words, Cherian observes that "there is a deliberate attempt to present a counter-narrative to the official narrative of Gandhi as a blemish-less embodiment of non-violence and a champion of the Dalit cause" (qtd in Trivedi 2013). Elsewhere, Arundhati Roy expresses similar sentiments and arraigns Gandhi of discrimination: "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" (qtd in Burke 2014). The film finds triumphalist narratives about Gandhism beguiling the reality of the Dalit experience of social segregation and severe brutality. In ideological terms, the movie exposes how Gandhism implicitly perpetuated and collaborated with caste-based racism.

For instance, towards the end of the film, there is a provocative scene of Gandhi's effigy being festooned with footwear, while Ramdas, a Gandhian, is refused entry into the squatter's area. Cries of "we are not anybody's Harijans" are raised, reminding the audience of the Gandhian discourse of classifying and equating Dalits as/with Harijans. Even Shankaran, an educated Jawaharlal Nehru University dropout, abhors and repudiates the much-venerated Gandhian method of *satyagraha* (or "insistence of truth"). To quote Shankaran, "This satyagraha is a filthy, despicable pressure tactic." Historically speaking, in a letter to Ramsay MacDonald, Gandhi wrote: "[I]n the establishment of separate electorates for the 'depressed classes,' I sense the injection of poison that is calculated to destroy Hinduism." Elsewhere, conceding that his political logic is a derivative of Hindu religion, Gandhi in a cable to William Shirer stated: "Americans should know that my politics are derived from my religion" (qtd in Noorani 2015). It is this stance that draws Jayan Cherian to summarise, "As far as the depiction of Gandhi goes, it cannot be denied that the varna system found a strong place in Gandhi's writings" (qtd in Sathish 2014). Of course, the film appropriates as well as exposes the Gandhian affinity with mainstream Hinduism which treats Dalits as the "other" and, in so doing, *Papilio Buddha* illustrates how the discourse of Gandhism facilitated and promoted a culture of segregation based on caste. Cherian not only dismisses but also contests the idealised and normative image of Gandhi to unmask the racial/caste foundations of Gandhism itself. This viewpoint is dramatised towards the end of the film when the Dalit rights activists station a Buddha idol and conclude the meeting by stating that they are not anybody's Harijans.

Leftist Chimera

Papilio Buddha also foregrounds how the political left has consistently betrayed the causes and concerns of the lower castes in Kerala. Although the supreme concern of the communist party was the elimination of the evils of private property and the inauguration of a classless society, there has been a blatant neglect of Dalit causes in Kerala. Specifically, the film problematises all the progressive claims of the left in Kerala by marking the decades of Dalit dismay in places like Chengara and Muthanga and also by demonstrating how the epistemological privileging of class over caste by the communists functioned against the interests of the Dalits. For instance, when Jack reaches Shankaran's house he notices a framed photo of E M S Namboodiripad and enquires about it. Shankaran replies, "That's my father's god." As a rejoinder to Shankaran's remark, his father Kandal Kariyan sarcastically remarks, "He was my god once. Later, when the issue of land rights came up, he became a Namboodiri and me a Pulayan as in old times." When Kariyan leaves, Jack, confusing E M S Namboodiripad with Sankaracharya, enquires whether Kariyan was referring to Sankaracharya. Clearing the mix-up, Shankaran explains that his father was referring to E M S Namboodiripad, the first chief minister of Kerala, and puts it in context: "My father was his fan and gave me an upper caste name. Now I live as a Dalit with an upper caste name." Signifying the inexorable caste biases of the leaders of the communist party in Kerala and shedding light on the communist attitude towards Dalits, the director of the film observes:

> Dalit colonies in Kerala are the best examples of social segregation of Dalits. These colonies historically serve as the main sources of muscle power for traditional parties including the communists. Naturally, they [the communists] see Dalit activism as a threat to their existence. (qtd in Trivedi 2013)

Kallen Pokkudan, the renowned environmentalist, plays the role of Kandal Kariyan in the film. As Sachindev reminds, "Pokkudan himself was a staunch communist who later turned to Dalit activism. He left the communist party because of the caste discrimination in the party" (Sachindev 2014: 149). In intermeshing the real life story of Kallen Pokkudan and the intentions of Kandal Kariyan, the film curates the age-old history of communist deceit. There is a particular scene in which Kariyan, symbolising protesting Dalits, replaces the photo of E M S Namboodiripad with that of Gautama Buddha. This replacement of a venerated communist leader in Kerala with a spiritual icon not only reflects the massive and absolute shift in Dalit perspectives towards the left in Kerala but also indicates the growing maturity of Dalit movements. As such, this single scene compresses the spells of ennui that the Dalits have felt at the hands of upper caste communists. Elsewhere, the presence of images of Ambedkar and Ayyankali in Kariyan's thatched hut signifies the emergence of pure Dalit discourse which is predicated on progressive self-assertion and self-expression.

Further, through the character of 39-year-old Manjusree, the movie allegorises the starkness of patriarchy and its intersection with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]). Manjusree's story is based on the real-life story of Chithralekha, an autorickshaw driver in Payyannur (in Kannur, Kerala), who fought a legal battle against her ostracisation at the hands of male autorickshaw drivers. Incidentally, these male driver-miscreants were local leaders and members affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the CPI(M)-affiliated trade union. While the real Chithralekha was racially abused because of her layered identity

and prevented from performing her duties as an autorickshaw driver, her cinematic avatar, Manjusree, is brutally raped. Although in the film Manjusree survives the trauma of rape and refashions her life, her story demonstrates the insidious intersection of caste and patriarchy as it operates within the left.

In Search of Ideological Purity: Dalit Alternatives

Nationalist tropes/icons are abandoned and replaced in the film with the emblems of Ambedkar, Ayyankali and Buddha, not merely as rebellious figures but as (political/cultural) symbols of self-assertion and Dalit collective identity. Semiotically speaking, such displacements are a creative cinematic way of reclaiming the lost spaces—physical and virtual, public and private—that are long overdue for Dalits. Buddha is a recurring royal motif in the film. As a matter of fact, mainstream Malayalam cinema has neither represented Buddha (his teachings) nor the violent colonial past of elite Hinduism owing to the conscious rendering of Savarna virtues and the privileging of Brahmanic traditions (Shankaran 2016: 50). In its limited representation, Buddha and his teachings have always served as an exotic icon embodying East Asian sensibilities. From the very outset, through reflective and meditative use of camera angles, *Papilio Buddha* weaves Buddhist emblems into the narrative. In many contexts, the image of Buddha is mobilised as a significant political/cultural emblem to defend Dalit rights and thereby prioritise the tenets of Ambedkarism. Rhetorically, the insignia of the Buddha functions as a symbol of defiant hope and protest, suggesting the transition of Dalits in terms of religion. In the context of *Papilio Buddha*, owing to continuing caste discrimination and physical oppression, Dalits embrace Buddhism as a new religion and cultural identity.

As if emphasising the ethos and tenets of Buddhism, the very title of the film (in the trailer as well as the movie poster) appears against a large statue of the Buddha. Technically, the image of the Buddha is deftly inlaid in the visual geography of the movie, particularly in various instances of persecution, endurance and resistance. For instance, when Manjusree is sexually assaulted, the image of Buddha emerges prominently against the images of Gandhi, Lord Shiva and Che Guevara, who ironically appear in the vehicles of the assaulters. Again, when Kandal Kariyan speaks at the Meppara agitation site demanding justice for Dalits, an image of Buddha is introduced. Elsewhere, the coupling scene of Shankaran and Manjusree is evocative of the venerated tantric Buddhist image of Tara Devi and Buddha. As they make love, a sculpture of Buddha in Manjusree's hut rotates and a *yab-yum* (Tibetan term which literally means father–mother) image of Buddha/Tara is invoked, suggesting the character's initiation into Dalit identity (Sachindev 2014: 145). As Sreekumar T T (2012: 19) observes,

> *Papilio Buddha* foregrounds the idea that the existing Dalit politics has a powerful stream that understands and imbibes the philosophical and religious levels of meaning that Ambedkar brought to Indian politics by the introduction of Buddhist philosophy.

The final scene of the exodus of the protesters lasts for several minutes and ends with the Buddhist *Tisarana* (the Three Refuges)—*Buddham Saranam Gachami, Dharmam Saranam Gachami, Sangham Saranam Gachami*—reiterating the centrality of Buddhism to Dalits. The invocation of the figure of the Buddha at various instances of the film underscores the emergence of Dalit identity predicated on religion.

While the film, on the one hand, characterises Buddhism and the teachings of Buddha as a social panacea for caste infirmities, on the other hand, it also problematises conversion of Dalits to Christianity in the light of Ambedkar's writings. For Ambedkar, religion is a process of rationalisation and universalisation of social values that should focus less on supernaturalism and metaphysics. 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. (Zelliot 1972: 85)

In the context of the film, Ambedkar's obdurate stance of disdain becomes explicit when the members of an non-governmental organisation (NGO) working for the welfare of the lower castes scorn those who claim to speak for the Dalits. For instance, Issac, in reply to another NGO worker, says, "Even if they are converted to Christianity, they will be only pariah Christians."

Papilio Buddha alludes to the role of Ambedkar in the formulation of an assertive and separate identity for Dalits in India by strategic placement of his images and words throughout the film. In foregrounding the Constitution as Ambedkar's contribution to the Dalits, the film revolves around Ambedkar and his interventions in the hegemonic Indian polity. According to Sreekumar,

> *Papilio Buddha* foregrounds the idea that the existing Dalit politics has a powerful stream that understands and imbibes the philosophical and religious levels of meaning that Ambedkar brought to Indian politics by the introduction of Buddhist philosophy. (2012: 19)

As a matter of fact, the film problematises Gandhi and his principles in the light of Ambedkar's writings and reproduces the Ambedkarite idea of religious conversion

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to Buddhism as an effective strategy to challenge the hegemony of the social elites (Wankhede 2008: 50). Historically speaking, Ambedkar denounced the term Harijan as patronising and offensive and instead emphasised the need for a separate nomenclature and identity for Dalits. At the site of the agitation, Kariyan calls Ambedkar "our seen God" (*kan kanda daivam*) and elsewhere quotes Ambedkar extensively—for instance, "Why are we denied food and water promised in the Constitution?" At critical junctures of the film, either images of Ambedkar or his words are invoked to suggest the emergence of the independent religious side of Dalits (Sreekumar 2012: 19). Arundhati Roy (2014) states:

> History has been unkind to Ambedkar. First it contained him, and then it glorified him. It has made him India's Leader of the Untouchables, the king of the ghetto. It has hidden away his writings. It has stripped away the radical intellect and the searing insolence. All the same, Ambedkar's followers have kept his legacy alive in creative ways. One of those ways is to turn him into a million mass-produced statues.

While *Papilio Buddha* invokes Ambedkar and upholds his legacy, it also deploys the image of Ayyankali who undertook the historic "walk for freedom" to Puthen Market in Kerala for the civil liberties of Dalits. The film provocatively places portraits of Ayyankali both in Kariyan's hut and at the agitation spots as an attempt to punctuate Ayyankali's pre-independence crusades for Dalits in Kerala.

Conclusions

To conclude, *Papilio Buddha* is not a conventional film that rehearses the dominant ideologies of the times. It is a subversive film in the tradition of the New Wave and other parallel/protest films (such as Godard's *Weekend* and Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied*) that expose hegemonic structures and their attendant apparatuses. While as Dalit cinema it organically explores the paradoxes and political positions of Kerala, it also foregrounds the emergence of the rebellious and affirmative Dalit self. At a socio-political level, *Papilio Buddha* expresses the hindrances as well as advances of Dalit struggles and their quest for a fully-formed Dalit consciousness. Intriguingly, the movie is not only sceptical about the traditional rhetoric of Gandhism but also undertakes to throw light on the ills of Gandhism from a Dalit perspective. If Gandhism is depicted as limited then left-centred politics are represented as ideologically deficient vis-à-vis Dalit issues. How does the film represent alternative political ontologies, however? It does so by assembling and employing distinctive images and sources of Ambedkar, Ayyankali and Buddha as shorthand for maturing Dalit views. In deploying these personages and their histories, the film creates a political language, an ideological point of view, and a reliable alternative for the Dalits. In essence, departing from the traditions of commercial/art cinema and surviving the rejection of the censor board, *Papilio Buddha*, like *Fandry* (2013) and *Court* (2014) in Marathi, brings the contentious but significant questions of caste and Dalit identity into the cinematic fold.

NOTES

1 Harish Wankhede (2013) describes the limited filmic response to caste issues thus: "Caste as a peculiar Indian reality is an acceptable fact but it is often cast away by the Bollywood filmmakers." Also read Wankhede (2008).

2 A debate rages about the release year of *Vigathakumaran*, and whether it was 1928 or 1930. While veteran journalist Chelangatt Gopalakrishnan maintains that the film was released on 7 November 1928 (also endorsed by the Kerala government), cultural critic R Gopalakrishnan, based on his analysis of handbills and pamphlets, puts the release year at 1930. The debate is inconclusive.

3 Commenting on mainstream Malayalam cinema, Prakash (2010) 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."

4 The much-contested term "new generation" surfaced in Malayalam cinema around 2010. *Traffic*, released in 2011, is usually regarded as the first Malayalam new generation film. New generation filmmakers like Aashiq Abu, Sameer Thahir and Rajesh Pillai, influenced by global and Indian films, attempt unusual themes and narrative techniques in their films.

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