

## **Mapping the Dalit Body: Dalit Representation in Rajeev Ravi's**

### ***Kammattipadam* and Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's *Ozhividivasathe Kali***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*The caste-based discrimination of Dalits and legitimization of atrocities against them have been historically justified by treating them as polluting outcastes, reserved for disciplining, punishing, and even killing. This situation has a parallel with the condition of the homo sacer, as elucidated by the Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben in his famous work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. As regards Agamben's homo sacer - the Roman outlaw, the state of 'inclusive exclusion' metaphorically aligns the 'insider outsider' position of the Dalits in the Hindu society. The lines of difference in this 'inside-outside' position is that while for the former it ensues from the criminal activities, the product of their subordinate position in the Hindu caste hierarchy for the latter. In other words, Dalits' inclusion-exclusion is consequent to the out-caste-ness that relegates them to a precarious existence.*

*The new millennium, Malayalam Cinema finds a paradigm shift with the emergence of what is called Dalit Cinema. The titular Dalit Cinema while portraying the dismal Dalit world also attempts to unravel their systemic exploitation and victimisation. Rajeev Ravi's *Kammattipadam* (2016) and Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's *Ozhividivasathe Kali* (2015) are selected for study as representative Dalit films. While the former directly deals with the historic betrayal of Dalits, their dispossession and displacement from their lands by influential upper caste communities, the latter foregrounds the hidden casteist dimension of Malayalees' mindset and the death politics in operation in Kerala society by explicating how a Dalit is strategically and ideologically pushed into the liminality of non-existence.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Dalit, Homo sacer, Malayalam Cinema, Caste subaltern, Cultural oppression, Inclusive Exclusion*

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Drawing on the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben's concept of the Homo Sacer, it can be argued that the condition of the Dalits is similar to that of Homo Sacer: the Roman outlaw who was ostracised from society on account of a crime the man committed. The Homo Sacer, consequent upon his crime, is deprived of all his rights as a citizen and excluded from society. Though thus, ostracised from society, the Homo Sacer had to remain within its boundaries abiding by its laws. The oppression and discrimination of Dalits and their exclusion from the Hindu social order is a result of the caste system: a system of social stratification with 'an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt' (Das 2010: 25). Dalits as lower caste people incur the most stringent deprivation and restrictions. Having been deprived of their essential dignity and basic humanity for centuries, Dalits have been reduced to mere slaves of the dominant caste(s) and remained ostracized as outcaste(s).

Though, ostracized from the Hindu society as outcaste(s) Dalits had to remain within its fringes, rendering their service to the upper castes. Though declared as outcastes and deprived of every right like the Homo Sacer, the Dalit has been subjected to the arborescent laws of the caste order. Thus, Homo Sacer's state of 'inclusive exclusion' metaphorically aligns the Dalits 'insider outsider' position. Dalits' inclusion-exclusion, relegates them to a precarious existence. Caste System pronounced upon Dalits an eternal 'state of exception', degrading and dehumanising them.

In many ways Dalits cultural exclusion was more dehumanising than their social and economic deprivation. Dalits have been excluded or rendered invisible from the screen space of Malayalam Cinema right from its start. For instance, the first heroine of the first film in Malayalam, P K Rosy's<sup>2</sup> Dalit Christian identity had to be hidden to make it possible for her to play the role of a Nair (upper-caste) woman in *Vigathakumaran* (1928) directed by J C Daniel. In Kerala in the first half of the Twentieth century, it was unthinkable for high castes to see a Dalit woman in public places. The untouchable Dalits and lower castes were denied their basic rights such as the right to education, the

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<sup>2</sup> P. K. Rosy was the heroine of the first Malayalam cinema *Vigathakumaran* (trans. *The Lost Child*, 1928) directed by J. C. Daniel. The role of a Nair lady which she had played in *Vigathakumaran* provoked violent protests from Nair landlords when the film was first screened in the Capitol Theatre in Trivandrum in 1930. P. K. Rosy's outcaste status as a *Pulaya* Christian convert was the reason for the protest. They tore the screen and attacked Rosy and her relatives who had come to the theatre to watch the movie at the behest of the director J C Daniel. She ran away for her life from the theatre and hid. When she was not found out the upper castes burnt down her hut. She fled to Tamil Nadu and never to return to Kerala.

right to worship, and the right to enter public places. Even their very sight was considered polluting the high caste purity. How else could they stomach a Dalit woman acting in a film? So, when P K Rosy's Dalit identity was finally found out when the film was released in the Capitol theatre in Trivandrum there were violent protests. To quote the words of the noted film critic Jenny Rowena:

On the very first day on which her film was released, men from the upper caste Nair community tore the screen and broke up the show, unable to bear the sight of a Dalit woman in the role of a Nair woman acting out love scenes with another man. After this they started attacking Rosy. J C Daniel who made the film, tried to get her protection from the King, but the Nair landlords came in large numbers and burned down her hut and chased her out of the village. She was forced to run away from Kerala, never to return to the field of cinema.

The example of P K Rosy succinctly proves how Malayalam Cinema excluded Dalit characters and locale from its very inception to cater to the demands of caste and patriarchy. This trend continues even in the present time as no Dalit heroine has ever appeared on the screen space of Malayalam Cinema since P K Rosy.

In 2010 noted Malayalam director Kamal made *Celluloid* based his script on the novel *The Lost Heroine*, written by Vinu Abraham, which told the real-life story of PK Rosy. But Kamal's film instead of narrating the tragic story of the first heroine of Malayalam Cinema turned out to be a biopic of J C Daniel, the director of the first Malayalam film. As Kamal confesses, it was not the true story of the Dalit heroine of the first Malayalam film that inspired him most, but that of the director J C Daniel and the hardships he had undergone to produce that film (Nagarajan). As a mainstream director, Kamal was more attentive to the travails of another male director than to the struggles of the Dalit heroine. Therefore, P K Rosy's story is left by the director half the way through the film as she disappears from the screen space before the interval and the rest of the film is about J C Daniel. In this way, the director denies P K Rosy her due subjectivity and reduces her to an object of pity.

The fact that even eight decades after the release of the first Malayalam movie, a male director is unable to visualize a Dalit woman in the lead role of a film based on her life story, reveals the domination of caste and masculinity in Malayalam Film industry

even to this day. P K Rosy was eliminated from the social imagery of Malayalam Cinema a second time by director Kamal. On account of her gendered caste subalternity, P K Rosy is 'out-cast' both from off-screen and on screen space of Malayalam Cinema. However, the attempt to reconfigure the subject position of Dalit characters in favour of dominant characters and their 'inconsequential' erasures are not just limited to P. K. Rosy. Dalit characters appear and disappear from the screen space of Malayalam Cinema for no apparent reason as their roles are considered quite insignificant within the narrative structure of the films. For instance, Neeli, a Dalit woman, in famed *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (2009) starring Mammooty confronts the same fate.

The erasure of the Dalit characters is often to preserve the space for the high caste character. Instances of such erasures of the agency of Dalit characters abound in Malayalam Cinema and can be traced back to the social realist films of the 1950s such as *Neelakkuyil - Blue Cuckoo Bird-* (1955) influenced by the communist ideology. *Neelakkuyil*, directed by P Bhaskaran and Ramu Kariat, was lauded by critics for its Renaissance<sup>3</sup> anti-caste polemic. *Neelakkuyil* narrates the poignant story of the Dalit woman Neeli who becomes pregnant after having an affair with high caste Sreedharan Nair. Fearing the outlash of the Nair<sup>4</sup> community Sreedharan Nair refuses to own the responsibility for Neeli's pregnancy. Deserted by her lover and society alike, Neeli is forced to live the street as an outcaste. Later she dies at childbirth near a railway track where she had come to commit suicide. After Neeli's death, at the insinuation of his wife, Sreedharan Nair decides to take care of Neeli's child which is hailed as a progressive gesture in the film.

It can be argued that Neeli's elimination from the narrative space was necessary for establishing the progressive anti-caste outlook of the high caste protagonist because it was her death that forced Sreedharan Nair accept Neeli's child. But in the anxiety to foreground this progressive trope of the protagonist, who is left to the background is the Dalit female protagonist, whose ordeals, injustices, and humiliation the audience are prompted to forget in the lengthy anti-caste proclamation given forth by the character of the postmaster. *Neelakkuyil* also failed to attribute any individual voice and

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<sup>3</sup> Renaissance refers to the positive changes occurred in the socio-political milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala.

<sup>4</sup> Nair is a high caste Hindu community in Kerala, India.

social agency to Dalit lives that it sought to portray. The entire movie's configuration around the upper caste household and the upper caste society, placing the Dalit domicile and society outside the frame of the camera proves it. But the denial of Dalit interiority is not particular to the film *Neelakuyil* but is a general trend in Malayalam Cinema that has a serious social implication. Dr Hariprasad Athanickal's observation in this regard is pertinent:

For a working understanding of the idea of interiority, one can say that it is a lack of social agency. This lack of social agency also should be understood along with the lack of family life in popular films, the interiors of the households of the Dalit characters are never shown and their domestic relationship is never approached. Reading this forsaking against the idea of a realistic representation in cinema one would come to terms with the lack of social agency rendered to the Dalits in cinema as a matter of grave concern (47)

Thus, by denying the Dalit protagonist her due agency, the film *Neelakuyil* which is hailed as a movie that questions the caste differences in Kerala society ended up fortifying the ideology of caste patriarchy. It is no wonder that a host of Malayalam films produced after *Neelakuyil* too carry forth this rationale of Dalit exclusion. For example, in the so-called family socials, which remain popular in Malayalam Cinema even today, there is a characteristic absence of the subaltern identity and interiority.

It can be seen that the majority of Malayalam movies are situated in and around the lives of the upper caste brahmin, Syrian Christian, and Nair characters. Either the subaltern characters are absent in them or they appear on the fringes of the society deprived of any agency in the plot. While the exclusive focus is on the life, surroundings, and sentiments of the upper castes, the Dalit characters stereotypically figure in the casteist films capes of Malayalam Cinema both as subordinate figures, and negative foils of the high caste protagonists, devoid of their voice and history. At times, they also appear as laughing stocks, mindless villains, and victims of their misdeeds. Even more negative treatment is reserved for the gendered caste subalterns. Dalit women appear in multiple roles as immoral sex objects for the upper caste men and also to cater to the pleasurable gaze of the male spectators, as vulgar-tongued maidservants, scandal-mongering workers, and lustful prostitutes among others. Thus, in the political

economy of popular Malayalam Cinema, the sovereignty of the upper-caste characters is well preserved as they dominate the screen space, determine the course of the narrative and also control the subaltern characters and women.

However, a paradigm shift occurred in the new millennium of Malayalam cinema. While in the 20th century Malayalam films caste issues were either unaddressed or given only a token representation, in the new millennium of Malayalam cinema, one can find an exclusive focus on Dalit issues, Dalit identity and Dalit social and political agency. G. Ajayan's *Bodhi* (2008), Jayan Cherian's *Papilio Buddha* (2013), Surya Deva's *Mahatama Ayyankali* (2013), Shanavas Naranipuzha's *Kari* (2015), Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's *Ozhividivasathe Kali* (2015), and Rajiev Ravi's *Kammattipadam* (2016), *Pada* (2022) directed by Kamal K M are just a few examples. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to study all the above filmic interventions from the margins the analysis will be limited to two representative samples: *Ozhividivasathe Kali* (2015) and *Kammattipadam* (2016) since both the films were well received by Malayalee audience compared to the other films. These films foreground the process and extent of the social mechanisms and imaginaries of caste still operating in Kerala society.

The idea that Kerala evolved as a modern, egalitarian society by successfully fighting against the caste and class inequalities which had plagued it in the premodern era is very much prevalent among Kerala historians. The abolition of caste slavery, eradication of untouchability, struggle to use public places like streets and temples meant for upper castes, the upper cloth movement, *Kallumala Samaram* among others are mentioned in support of it. Further, a slew of socio-economic reforms such as land reforms, poverty eradication, universalization of education and health care, etc popularly termed the Kerala model, is said to have led to the inclusive development of Kerala. But the fact that Kerala modernity and the Kerala model<sup>5</sup> failed to address the problems of the subaltern communities becomes self-evident when we consider the unending strife of Dalits and tribals, for land since Independence: Muthanga, Arippa,

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase 'Kerala model' is used by economists and social historians to highlight the advancements the state of Kerala achieved in the spheres of land reforms, poverty reduction, healthcare, educational access, and, child welfare. While economists like Nobel laureate Amartya Sen are all in praise of the Kerala model, its critics point out its unsustainability.

and Changara land agitations are just a few instances. The Muthanga<sup>6</sup> police firing, police action against Ayyankali Pada<sup>7</sup> and DHRM<sup>8</sup>, and innumerable similar police atrocities against the Dalits and Adivasis reveal the reactionary stance of the Governments to the rightful demands of the subaltern communities.

In every sphere of Kerala's social life, Dalits face exclusion and discrimination. The case of Chithralekha, an autorickshaw driver from the Kannur district who was attacked, her autorickshaw burned and she was driven away from her village by CITU men is just one among the many cases. It is to be noted that though Chithralekha was attacked and her auto which was her only source of income burned, none of the culprits, all of whom belong to the trade union of the powerful CPM, has been brought to book. The violence and abuse of Dalits continue unabated in Kerala despite the mounting protest. The honour killing of a Dalit youth, Kevin, in Kottayam district in 2018, the mass lynching and murder of a tribal youth Madhu in Attapady in the same year and the brutal rape and murder of the two Dalit girls<sup>9</sup> aging 12 and 9 of the same family in Valayar of Palakkad district in 2021 and the improper police investigation that led to the acquittal of all the accused are just few instances from contemporary history that showcase how the subaltern castes as an abject population are still susceptible to upper-caste's atrocities in modern Kerala. Kerala still hides the caste monster under the rubric of its apparent developed socio-economic indices.

It is in the above context of the rampant attacks on Dalits that films like *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* successfully foreground the atavistic fears of the 'other' and instincts of caste still persistent in Malayalees 'modern psyche' becomes significant. The film is based on a short story written by Unni R, by the same name. The plot of the story bears similarity with that of Vijay Tendulkar's *Play Silence! The Court is in Session* (1968). The director has taken ample liberty with Unni R's story although he has

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<sup>6</sup> Muthanga refers to the incident of police firing at the Adivasis who were protesting for land in Wayanad, Kerala in 2003. The atrocity resulted in the death of five Adivasis.

<sup>7</sup> Ayyankali Pada is the name of an extreme left-wing organization that protested for Adivasi's land rights in 1996 by holding the Collector of Palakkadu district hostage. The incident forms the plot of a recent Malayalam movie named *Pada* directed by Kamal K M.

<sup>8</sup> DHRM (Dalit Human Rights Movement) is a Dalit activist movement founded in 2008 in Kerala that fights for the rights of the Dalits and lower castes in Kerala. It was branded as a Dalit extremist movement two years after its formation.

<sup>9</sup> Two Dalit siblings were allegedly raped and murdered in Valayar in Palakkad district of Kerala in 2017. The police investigation failed in corroborating enough evidence, which led to the acquittal of the accused in the case. The case was later handed over to CBI.

retained the theme as such. The incidents in Unni's story take place in an ordinary lodge in a certain city in Kerala. In the story, there are only four characters Dharmapalan, Vinayan, Asokan, and Das all of whom are Govt employees. They represent the four-fold caste system: The Brahmin, the Kshetriya, the Vysya, and the Shudra. They gather at the lodge on a Sunday to drink and make merry. While drinking they play an old childhood pastime "the game of the thief and the police" to while away their time. They decide on character roles by casting lots and accordingly Dharmapalan becomes the King, Vinayan the minister of the King, Asokan the police officer, and Das the thief. King Dharmapala orders Das to be hanged as he was accused of plotting against the King. Asokan testifies to the King that Das had told him that, the citizens are wary of the present regime and that the lower caste people will snatch power and banish the corrupt king and his ministers". King Dharmapala, in an inebriated state, furiously assaults Das with a wine bottle and kills him.

In the movie, however, there are five male characters instead of the four male characters of the story and also a Dalit female character. The director includes a fifth unnamed character who is an upper caste Nambudiri whom everybody addresses respectfully as 'Swamy' (Lord). He plays the role of the chief justice who conducts the trial of Dasan. While retaining the names of the four savarna characters as such, the Dalit character's name 'Das' has been changed into 'Dasan' which means 'servant' in Malayalam, to connote his subaltern identity as well as for linguistic felicity. The movie relates the story of five friends, representing a cross-section of the Kerala society who go to an isolated bungalow in the interior of a forest to spend in fun and jollity an election holiday day. The simple jokes and cajolery in the conversation between the friends are poisoned by the fangs of centuries-old caste prejudice that the viewer slowly realizes. The tension slowly but steadily mounts up culminating in the climax: the hanging of the Dalit by the other four high caste members of the group who are united in their common hatred of the Dalit- 'other'. Despite the internal conflicts plaguing their relationship, they for the time being forget their sub-caste differences to unleash their latent murderous prejudices of caste on the outcaste Dasan to put him to death.

The film's choice of setting in a dense green forest with occasional rains, instead of the city lodge, is an apt locale. It symbolizes the dark unconscious of the upper caste characters with its uneasy calm and serene silent waters hiding a deluge of caste

instincts and hatred. Such a setting is proper for playing out their concealed caste hatred of the Dalit other. Through their casual comments and occasional funny remarks, the director discloses their primitive caste motives which lay buried deep below the foliage of their polished modern selves. In the seclusion and anonymity of the wild forest's primeval darkness, libido and Thanatos are unleashed over the subaltern character. *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* reminds us that caste bitterness and hatred towards fellow Dalits is ever-present deep in the mindscapes of Malayalees.<sup>10</sup>

Though Dasan is a govt employee like the other four friends they still cannot treat a Dalit as their equal but consider him below their station owing to his subordinate position in the caste hierarchy. That is why they demand from Dasan services like killing the fowl, climbing the tree, serving them drinks and so on which the caste system had impelled Dalits to perform. There is ample suggestion in their discussion on reservation that they think Dasan got his Govt job because of his lower caste identity. As long as Dasan was willing to carry out their wishes, they were willing to keep him in their company.

Apart from the four upper-caste characters and the Dalit character Dasan, there is only one female character, Geetha, in the film, the maid who is also a Dalit. Despite his subaltern identity, Dasan is included, though to be excluded later, in the social circle of the upper castes, Geetha, the gendered caste subaltern is excluded from it. The director stresses the undeclared ban on women in the private and public spheres of Kerala. She is denied access to the social circle of men, to their fun, jollity, and drinking. She cannot participate in their discussions about contemporary issues, even when they concern gender relations and women empowerment. In the movie, she is rendered silent throughout as she is not given any significant role except that of cooking for men and occasionally subjected to the lustful gaze.

Though silent throughout the narrative, she finally emerges as an articulate and powerful woman, embodying the resistant spirit of Dalit women. It is in the scene when she encounters the masculinity of Dharman. Geetha strongly reacts to the sexual advance of Dharman. Uttering swear words -"Mother-fuck"- she violently slaps on his face and drawing a sickle from her bundle she threatens to kill him. A browbeaten

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<sup>10</sup> Malayalee is a term for the member of the linguistic community whose mother tongue is Malayalam, the official language of the state of Kerala, India.

Dharman, who plays the role of the King in the film, returns with a bowed head having his patriarchal ego deeply hurt. Through her violent reaction, the director demonstrates the mettle and strength of character of a Dalit woman. The significance of the character of Geetha lies in the fact that she subverts the stereotypical stock image of Dalit women in popular Malayalam Cinema as a mute object of pity being the victim of caste and patriarchy. It is no surprise that while Dasan ineffectually tries to counter caste power and succumbs to it, Geetha is able to resist and succeed.

Against the resistant gendered caste subaltern, Geetha, is placed the submissive Dalit male, Dasan, who despite sensing the differential treatment and insult inherent in the words and deeds of his companions cannot shrug away their company. However, he is not privy to the nefarious plan that was getting hatched in the mindscape of his upper-caste friends to annihilate him. At the threshold of its execution, by intuitive knowledge, he realises that it was not going to be a mere play as claimed by his friends but a continuation of the historic ploy of *Chaturvarna* and that his fate is sealed. It is shocking to perceive how caste hatred cuts across ideologies and philosophies. Despite all the hints in the movie, the denouement comes as a chilling surprise. An open conflict is absent for it happens within the minds of the characters. It is to be noted that while the police figure Asokan is unsuccessful in recognizing the thief, according to the rule of the game, he had to be punished yet he escapes the punishment by bribing the Chief Justice. At the same time, when Dasan is identified as the thief, he has no choice but to yield to the dictates of the caste sovereign. That is the peculiar 'State of Exception' Dalits are subjected in the state of Kerala.

The possibility of some untoward happening is indicated through several images in the film. The image of the capsized boat portends doom. The other image is that of the dying fowl ineffectually flapping its wings. While his friends demand that the fowl be killed by Dasan though he protests that he doesn't know how to do it, he has no choice. Though Dasan is aware of the murderous caste bias of his friends towards him and registers his protest too, he fails to resist them. The film brilliantly demonstrates how the four-fold forward castes who are dominating and controlling virtually all aspects of the state's social, religious, and political life, are strategically and politically colluding with each other in continuing their historic murderous game of betrayal of the Dalit.

Paradoxically, those who deter from killing a bird have no qualms to kill a human. While Dasan is unable to stand and stare at the death of the fowl, to view its death pangs, the upper caste members feel no remorse to put a Dalit to death. Its political parallel is the caste hypocrisy of the Hindutva nationalists and hard-core cow-vigilantes who preach universal brotherhood - *Vasudeva kudumbhakam* - and cow protection but has no qualms to attack Dalits and minorities. In the eyes of his upper-caste friends, Dasan's life is of less value and worth than that of a fowl. Worried by the facades of purity and pollution they see to it that the 'mean' deed of killing the fowl is vested on the lower caste Dasan. While Dasan protests why is asked to carry out subservient jobs such as climbing the tree, killing the fowl or setting drinks for them, they praise him for his deftness in performing all these deeds. The idealizing of the physical prowess of the subaltern is a cover for brutalizing the subaltern body. The killing of Dasan is a symbolic act that reminds the spectators about the historic victimization Dalits by hegemonic castes which continues even after independence. It is a casual comedy for the upper castes and in fact as the title suggests the whole film from the beginning to the end is a play, a play of catching and killing a mockingbird, as hinted by the song sung about the yellow bird. The yellow bird, the yellow capsized boat, and the fowl are portent signs that foretell the inevitable fate of Dasan.

The immediate provocation for the killing of Dasan comes from the poem he recites. The poem critiques the caste politics which inscribes the black Dalit body with negativity from birth to death. Fed up with the unequal treatment meted out to him by his high caste friends and their harsh taunts about his black complexion hinting his Dalit identity, Dasan finally decides to retort by reciting the following poem:

When I born...I'm black.  
When I grow up... I'm black.  
When I in the Sun... I'm black.  
When I sick... I'm black.  
When I die... I'm black.  
But you...  
When you're born...You're pink.  
When you grow up...You're white.

When you're sick...You're blue.

When you die...You're brown.

And dare you call me coloured?

The singing of this song signifies the raising of Dalit consciousness in Dasan. The Dalit who is a mere body is acceptable and tolerable to the upper castes: a body that attends to them serves them at beck and call. As long as Dasan fit into the stereotype of the subordinate body that obeys the caste norms and acts according to the wishes of the upper castes, he is acceptable to them. Apart from the Dalit's body, the caste centre cannot brook any mind, soul, or brain for them. Their 'high caste consciousness' debilitates them from listening even to the sensible criticism offered by Dasan through the poem he recites. The caste centre can barely tolerate such a denunciation from the fringe. The moment Dasan ceases to be a mere body and assumes an agency, it threatens to unsettle the caste centre which decides upon its annihilation.

The shots and scenes of the film are rich in symbolic overtones. Deep serene waters which dip in and out of the frame is imbued with symbolic signification. They not only connote the caste impulses that cause ripples in the serene social atmosphere of Kerala but also imply the uneasy existence of Dalits like Dasan in the caste-infested environment. Always acutely aware of the injustice meted out to him, Dasan is never really at peace with himself or in the company of his upper-caste friends. The eddies caused by this differential treatment in the mind stream of Dasan eventually surface through the poem which capsizes his life's boat (as already mentioned the capsized boat in the stream is an apt image like the flapping of the dying fowl that symbolizes the precarious state of Dalits).

The film foregrounds that not even any semblance of modernity and progress has pierced the upper caste wall of hatred and bias erected against the Dalits. The connivance of the four friends to agree to punish the Dalit, forgetting their inter-caste differences, which had earlier surfaced several times in the film, underscores the unpleasant and dangerous reality of caste which looms large in the Kerala society. The upper caste(s) in Kerala, who dominate virtually all domains of the state, collude with each other in carrying out their murderous game of chaturvanya in betraying, and annihilating Dalits. The game of Police and thief in which the characters in

Ozhivudivasathe Kali indulges is allegorical and divulges how caste politics functions against the interests of Dalits.

If *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* depicts the caste neurosis infesting Kerala's upper caste strata and its catastrophic effect on Dalit subjects, *Kammattipadam* shows the disastrous consequences of Kerala's fast paced economic growth on the Dalit populace who get uprooted and displaced from their native soil. *Kammattipadam* conveys the story of Dalits disinheritance from their land and its demoralising effect on them. While the former adopts a symbolic and allegorical mode to convey its theme, the latter adopts a narrative method to unravel the story of Dalits' dispossession. The context and the setting of the story is the transformation of Ernakulam into the Kochi metro. The city was once filled with greenish paddy fields cultivated by Dalit farmers and workers. But they were displaced from their settlements by influential upper caste communities who through hook and horn snatched away their lands, in the context of the expansion of Kochi as a metropolitan city and made a huge profit out of it. Though the film portrays the disintegration of the Dalit settlement at Kammatipadam, a place on the outskirts of Ernakulam town, it can be taken as a microcosm of several similar Dalit settlements across Kerala from where Dalits have been uprooted in the name of development.

The Land Reforms Act passed by the first Communist Government in Kerala in 1957 had brought some relief to at least some sections of the Dalits as small tracts of agricultural land were given to them for cultivation. One of its negative effects was, however, the ghettoization of Dalits into so-called *Laksam veedu* colonies which furthered their insularity from mainstream society. But the small holdings of land they owned had helped them to make their both ends meet. The rapid urbanization of Indian cities in the late 20th century resulted in the large-scale displacement of the rural population mainly constituting subaltern classes. Kochi too developed into a major industrial hub resulting in a real estate boom and all paddy fields and wetlands soon turned into housing villas, shopping centers, or super markets. The Dalit working classes who once toiled in the green fields of Ernakulam lost their traditional jobs and the newly emergent business class took advantage of the situation as they made use of the jobless Dalit youth to facilitate their illegal businesses.

The film depicts the two phases of the Dalit community at Kammattipadam: before and after the development of Kochi into a metropolitan city. In the former phase,

the place was inhabited by the local population mainly consisting of *Pulayas* (An untouchable Dalit caste community in Kerala) whose traditional occupation was farming and agriculture. The younger generation helped the older generation in cultivation and lived happily in their own lands except for the occasional harassments of the high castes. There is a scene at the beginning of the movie that shows how Dalits were ill-treated by the upper castes. While Balan's father along with some of the relatives was engaged in digging a pond, a group of upper castes tried to stop them. There was a dispute regarding the ownership of the land in which the pond was being dug. When the upper castes started assaulting his father Balan attacked and chased them away. This incident demonstrates that the Dalits of Kammattipadam did not merely yield to upper caste atrocities but were able to return the blows. But with the process of urbanization, the culture and way of life of the Dalits underwent drastic changes.

The younger Dalits had lost interest in the traditional occupation of the community as farming and agricultural cultivation had become unsustainable and uneconomic. With the expansion of the city agricultural lands were filled and converted for business and residential purposes. Finding no jobs, the Dalit youth of Kammattipadam began to get involved in illegal business activities. They became members of the quotation gangs of the petty businessmen and real estate mafia who used them for enhancing their illegal businesses and making huge profit out of it. Thus, Balan, Ganga, Krishnan, and their friends indulge in all sorts of anti-social activities for upper castes such as liquor brewing, smuggling, and killing. At the insinuation of their high caste masters, they even work against the interests of the Dalit community. They aid and abet the forceful eviction of Dalits from their lands. Once, when Balan attacks his relatives at the behest of his high caste master Surendran Ashan, his father Kochutty scolds him and Balan reacts violently telling his father that he is doing it all for getting money. He accuses his father that the latter taught him no skills except farming. He tells his father that soon there will be no fields left for farming as the paddy fields will be converted into factories. Thus, the film clearly shows how the Dalits of Kammatipadam are victimised by the industrial growth and development of the city.

There is a moment in the film when the realization strikes Balan that upper caste masters like Surendra Ashan was using Dalits like him for their business interests. He

regrets working against the interests of his own community. He was knowingly and unknowingly colluding with the upper caste business men and real estate mafia in displacing the Dalit settlement at Kammattipadam. It is the moment when Balan develops Dalit consciousness. It was the death of Kochutty his father who dies of a heart attack thinking about the misdeeds of his son that makes Balan repent. He decides to mend his ways. But it is too late, Balan is killed in a pre-planned road accident masterminded by his enemy. After Balan's death, Ganga continues the criminal activity of his brother and becomes the leader of the quotation gang. Ganga is killed by his master Surendran Ashan himself when he comes to the later seeking protection from the rival gangsters. After using Dalits as their henchmen, the high caste masters let them down to be killed by their enemies. Along with this story of betrayal, the film also narrates the parallel story of the disintegration of Dalit community.

Unlike the mainstream Malayalam cinema, *Kammattipadam* pays attention to Dalit interiority. The film focuses on the conflict-ridden family life of both Balan and Ganga. Balan falls in love with a Dalit converted Christian girl named Rosamma and marries her against his mother's opposition. But they have an unhappy married life on account of Balan's drinking habit, his illegal business, and other antisocial activities as well as his wife's quarrelsome behaviour. Even years after their marriage Balan is not able to become a father and he curses himself. His wife is always worried about Balan, as she knows that Balan's life is in danger because of the unlawful activity he indulges in. Like Balan his brother Ganga too has a unhappy family life. He is attracted to Anita who is already in deep love with Krishna from their school days onwards. But Ganga forcefully marries her much against her will. Their marriage proves to be disastrous for both. Anita never allows Ganga to come near her and always keeps nagging him. As she confesses to Krishna after Ganga's death that she never loved Ganga and never gave him any peace of mind. Thus, *Kammattipadam* is the first film in the eight decades-long history of Malayalam Cinema that exclusively focuses on Dalit identity and Dalit interiority.

The aspect of caste in Kerala in its totality has never been addressed even though 'caste is a monster that crosses' every walk of *Malayalee's* social, professional, public and private life. Malayalam film directors are complicitous in observing sanctioned ignorance about its 'invisible presence' in the mindscape of *Malayalees*.

*Kammattipadam* and *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* as Dalit Cinema holds up an uncomfortable mirror against Kerala to taunt at the hypocritical equity notions that veil its obnoxious and hierarchical caste complexes which could turn lethal at the slightest provocation. While *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* problematizes the hidden caste orientation of Kerala by foregrounding its caste unconscious underlying the hierarchical social relations among people that reduce Dalits to the state of the 'homines sacri'(Agamben 1998: 97), *Kammattipadam* establishes that, Modernity and Kerala model could succeed only so far as to displace and dehumanise the Dalits and not aid and empower them. The dangerous increase of caste killings in Kerala in the new millennium, the period which boasts of many developments at par with the international parameters is a stark pointer to the reality that lie at the heart of darkness.

Treading a path different from the early movies figuring Dalit characters, *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* and *Kammattipadam* portray the psychological and sociological alienation forced upon Dalits in the caste ridden Kerala society. While the former uses figurative cinematic language, to depict the extent of the psychic alienation of Dalits, the latter uses the language of the modern urban world to accentuate the reality of their banishment from the land. Both the films present how Dalits, having their subjectivity denied, are still stationed in the positions of objects and how they become victims in the hands of the upper castes who wield power. While the former demonstrates how the Dalits are still a banished lot from the psychic terrain of Kerala despite the claims of assimilation through positive legal and constitutional measures, the latter shows their physical banishment from their habitats which brings in its wake all sorts of allied displacements reducing them to an abject population destined to exist in city slums and government wastelands.

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