

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Contest 2022: Winner of the Certificate of Merit

Sanil Malikappurath Neelakandan

Constructing Ideological Tropes of Dalits and Muslims: On Caste, Islam and Gender in Malayalam Films



Dalit assertions in Kerala are read as deviant acts of identity politics that promote divisiveness in so-called progressive Kerala's political and social transformations. The Brahmanic cultural milieu in Kerala is a paradoxical formation within the seemingly liberal spaces. The coexistence of orthodoxy and advanced aspects also reinforces the caste-based cultural realms. Dominant, Brahmanic cultural production determines the category of Muslims too. The rhetoric around anti-class political formations and cultural engagements is viewed as politically dangerous in a developed state like Kerala. This article attempts to analyse the recent Malayalam film "*Nayattu*" and "*Biriyani*" and their ways of articulating the dominant caste ideology and anti-Islamic temperament. It initiates the following questions. What kind of politics is created through these films? Does it trigger any autocratic, majoritarian interests?

***Nayattu*: Visualizing the Casteist Temperament on Dalits?**

The film "*Nayattu*" (Directed by Martin Prakkat/2021) needs to be understood in the larger context of the visibility of Dalit social/political articulations in the complex, public action-driven development and its absence in multiple avatars. The movie revolves around the lives of a Dalit lady, a Dalit man and non-Dalit police officers and their involvement in the death of a Dalit youth. Dominant forms of politics and Dalit political assertions thus are demonstrated using his case to gain the Dalit vote bank. A Dalit who met with an accident due to lack of basic driving of the police jeep becomes a "haunting a Dalit body" for these officers irrespective of their caste locations. These officers are projected as sincere officers who must face the misuse of the law by Dalits. One of the central messages conveyed is how the law is being deployed/misused by Dalits. These Dalit officers are

principled as well as they are absconding as well. A group of Dalit youth portrayed as manipulating the law against them are also positioned as manipulating their rights and duties as citizens.” Principled” Dalits are constructed to normalise the “deviant” Dalits. Broadly, the film thus becomes a casteist visual slur that strictly caters to the ant-reservation, upper caste spectatorship. To conceal the casteist intentions of the script/narration and the optical construction against Dalits,” honest “Dalits are positioned against the miscreant Dalits. The film also tries to convince its credibility in mapping the lives of the Dalits through its details, such as pictures of anti-caste intellectuals such as B.R. Ambedkar and Ayyankali in Dalit homes. These tropes thus are inserted into the narrative to win the hearts of the Dalits. At the same time, Dalits are also projected as alcoholics and potential criminals.

Broadly, the Dalit police officers and the Dalit youth thus become central spaces of the casteist narrative extensively used by the non-Dalit majority to question dalit’s social mobility. Acronyms of Dalit organisations are parodied in this film to demonstrate such organisations as problem creators. One of the central myths perpetuated in mainstream society is that Dalits are misusing the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) act 1989 for their vested interests. This film broadly highlights similar stereotypes about Dalits’ misuse of law through a movie structured around the Dalit theme in Kerala. The following section discusses *Biriyani* and its othering of the Muslims.

***Biriyani*: Majoritarian Construction of the Muslim Women**

The movie, *Biriyani* (Directed by Sajin Baabu/Malayalam/2020) is broadly appreciated for its nuanced portrayal of Muslim women's struggle for freedom in a so-called patriarchal Islamic society. Muslim women are projected as marginalised within the patriarchal Muslim communities worldwide. Islamophobia is part of the narrative that defines Muslims as the oppressed and Islamic men as the oppressors. Majoritarian reductionism about Muslim

life worlds thus facilitates communal tensions. Malayalam film *Biriyani* needs to be analysed in the background of the dominant non-muslim communities’ fantasies-stereotypes about the fanatical/oppressive Muslim men and sexually repressed/marginalised Muslim women. The film’s narrative is curated by unveiling Muslims’ cultural idioms and practices to create a selective, biased reading of anti-modernity related to Muslims. A cliched understanding of the non-Islamic majority bias is catered through sexually active Muslim daughters and wives, psychologically deranged Muslim mothers, patriarchal Muslim husbands, Islamic terrorist circumstances etc. Violent images of butchering and blood flow due to circumcision are juxtaposed in the background of Islamic hymns. Politics of charity and Islamic Organizations are also discussed to engage with the insider/outsider of the homogenous nationalist projects.

Talaq of the central Muslim woman character and her brother, who became part of radical Islamic politics, reproduce Islam’s pre-law based-custom oriented, masculinist image. Images of the burning home and smoking Muslim old mother are juxtaposed to reflect the unfreedom and Muslim women’s search for freedom from the oppressive domestic spaces. Media discussions that are inserted to frame an objective approach in this film discuss jihad, hijrah and indoctrination through Salafism-based education, the plight of Muslim women, the patriarchal nature of Islam, caste in Islam etc. Thus, such recreation of media debate acts as a referential take on the popular and hegemonic understanding of the Muslim groups in Kerala. Diaspora dividend is also analysed as part of the development of socially excluded Dalits, Ezhavas and Muslims in one of those media debates-sub themes within the film to create an impression that it provides a balanced approach related to the discussions on majorities, minorities and Dalits. Books caught from the suspected terrorist books, a man reading Osho’s book about repressed sexuality, and a central woman character reading a book about Islamic sex while travelling in the train in the film are invoking the hegemonic fantasies about the

oppressed/repressed Muslim women in search of diverse enlightenment.

Interestingly, in one of the TV discussions, an expert uses the terms good Muslims and bad Muslims and echoes the dominant social science debates and rhetoric about global Islam. A muezzin befriends the heroine, and he is projected as a kind Muslim man who is caught between tradition/modernity, religion/humanity etc. A Muslim shrine is also shown as a place where butchering and prostitution happen simultaneously. Central women's character is thus revealed as someone searching for salvation and as one had to go through a misogynist Muslim family, oppressive/hypocritical religious culture, sex work/freedom etc. Khadeeja, the protagonist, thus takes revenge on her oppressors, such as police officers, clerics, native community elites, and pimps, by inviting them to the Iftaar party organised by her. She mixes her dead baby's body that died out of her torture in the police station with the biriyani and fed them as part of her revenge. This film thus attempts to recreate the dominant-majoritarian understanding

of women from the minority and the minority in general.

Conclusion

These films attempt to reconcile with the following questions irrespective of their ideological terrains. There are diverse ways of life worlds among Dalits and Muslims. Since it is mixed, it can be unequal and therefore needs to be civilised through the civilising gaze of the hegemonic /ideology of caste-majoritarianism. Films that move in this epistemic direction of visual megalomania act as a form of surveillance. Paranoid, dominant citizenship that skeptically looks at those who depart from the centres of normalising is being internalised and reproduced to cater to the larger narratives that destabilise the social and the political realms of democracy. Kerala is undergoing various forms of othering related to the Dalits and the minorities due to the Brahminic political spaces. Whether it is parallel/commercial/middle/new-gen cinema, films from Kerala are caught in the spectacle of ideological tropes.

☞ **Mr. Sanil Malikappurath Neelakandan lives in New Delhi.**