

Article

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When Nangeli Comes Back to the Stage with the Voice of the Subaltern



There is a wide range of scope in filming nineteenth-century Kerala. There are films like *Pazhassiraja* upholding the interventions from the upper layer of society and with many ahistorical elements. On the other hand, the recently released film on Nineteenth-century Kerala, written and directed by Vinayan, looks at the history from below, how people at the bottom lived and fought for their livelihood. The social turmoil of the nineteenth century and atrocious caste hegemony are irrefutable historical facts from the pages of Kerala history. Kerala was neither a

unified state nor a democratic society until independence. The feudal economy and caste polity led the various kingdoms. The rule of Travancore in the pre-independent period was more terrible compared to other areas of present Kerala. The advent of British colonial rule had repercussions in forming new discourses.

On the one hand, it imposed double economic stress on the masses and, on the other, provided the air of freedom unfamiliar to the feudal caste-ridden past. However, now that such facts are being wiped

out and erased from the memories of the new generation, any attempt to film such historical facts deserves appreciation despite the inaccuracies and distortions that would have crept into the narrative. The film *Pathonpatham Noottandu*, written and directed by Vinayan, depicts the nineteenth-century social struggles by presenting two anecdotes based on two subaltern resistance movements of southern Kerala.

The film begins with the East India company's Travancore headquarters, where the colonisers and feudal lords meet to share their leisure time using sadist measures. One neglected social reformer from the lower caste arrives to meet the officials and starts the narration by mixing facts and fiction without losing the crux of the story.

Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker was a social reformer who had to fight physically and culturally against the social injustices in Kerala. He was by birth financially affluent and belonged to the backward community of Ezhava but was denied public spaces and education until the British colonisers had legislated to overcome the social distancing based on the caste system. Since the country is witnessing consistent effort going on to erase the histories of the past and re-write the country's history in terms of the dictates of the ruling elite to re-instate the ancient Manu Vada state, the film *Pathonpatham Noottaandu* by Vinayan deserves special attention. While the verdict class manufactures history and consents to assert that we had a pleasant golden past, any attempt to remind the oppressive days of the past is a welcome venture. The present onslaught on democracy and secularism depends on the myth of the golden past. Of course, the personal histories of great warriors and reformers are not free from hagiographic stories spread across the country. In the case of the reformer fighter placed as the film's hero, the suffix of Panicker after the pronoun, Velayudhan itself is problematic as it is inconsistent with his caste identity. However, he was known as both Velayudha chekavar and Velayudha Panicker, whatever the story behind the twin identities. The point is that Velayudhan was a heroic reformer of the subaltern whose real biographical history and instances of interventions have been blurred because of three

factors. Firstly, the elite historians were not bothered about such subaltern and marginalised figures and anecdotes. Secondly, whatever they depicted mostly contained distorted versions favouring the ruling elite. Thirdly we had an inferior culture of documenting, especially at the bottom. Owing to such factors, even then, the birthdays and early movements of Sri Narayana Guru, whose birth was in the 19th century, needed clarification and differing in various texts. In such a circumstance, while we watch the film produced to fit in with the box office success, we should approach it with a broad perspective. So, my concern is whether the film serves the purpose of recalling the instances favouring the underprivileged and oppressed. Besides, our reading is always contextual; in that way, the film also reminds one of the bleeding histories of the subaltern and the women of all classes.

The film starts with the story of Velayudhan, whose courage and commitment to justice and truth and even loyalty to the Princely state somehow appeases common sense and slowly moves to the cardinal issue of the subaltern women's rights to wear minimal cloth to cover their breasts. When the lower caste women conduct a protest march against the breast tax and declare their rights to wear the dress and even other ornaments like any other women belonging to the upper castes, the film focuses on the margins of history. The margins in India are even now unheard and unseen and often kept under cover whenever the great imperial leaders visit the country. Even nowadays, students are beaten to death simply because of their inadvertent trespassing to drink water belonging to the upper castes. There were many struggles during the nineteenth century against the feudal and imperial regimes in various parts of the country. Women of all classes suffered from the oppressive male-dominant etiquettes and practices at that time. But unlike the privileged communities, the lower castes were treated as untouchables and even denied fundamental rights such as the right to wear clothes to hide their breasts. Amazingly, the voice of an untouchable woman leading the struggles against the regime came up in the streets of Travancore. Deepti Priya Mehrotra has collected the stories of a woman who lived and fought

for justice in India and for long pushed away in forgotten margins. Nangeli from Cherthala was among them, and her history was not correctly maintained. The post-independent regimes failed to maintain such historical monuments and maintain the factual narratives properly. Only with recent subaltern movements the marginalised historical anecdotes and remembrances got attention from the mainstream intellectuals and regimes. Even now, there are attempts to erase such histories of the margins with the argument that proper evidence is lacking. In such a context, the film director has successfully placed the heroine to counter the mainstream arguments, thereby blowing the whistle to challenge the so-called evidence and authenticity.

The women belonging to the untouchable communities in Kerala had to pay *Mulakkaram* (breast tax from puberty onwards, and a local officer called *parvarthiyar*, appointed by the Diwan of Travancore, used to visit door to door to collect the tax. It is believed that the women were denied clothes to hide their upper parts since the authorities wanted to see the size and determine the amount of tax. In those days, the staff collected the tax at the residing places, and the woman placed the required quantity of rice on banana leaves. The toiling masses were getting only subsistence minimum for their hard

hesitations to believe such stories, although more menial things were happening. In the film, Nangeli leads the struggles of the untouchable woman and finally chops her breast before the authorities instead of confessing. The Channar revolt, the breast covering struggle (*Marumarakkal lahalala*) in Travancore, took place ten years after the Dalit woman Nangeli had cut her breast and martyred herself to protect the rights of the untouchable women. The film depicts the incident differently. However, since such stories have different versions, the narration retaining the spirit of the fight for equality is worthwhile, especially in the current post-truth period when ahistorical eulogy of the past reign over society. The protest march by the poor and oppressed women shouting that “we too are Humans” reminds the neglected and ignored aspect of history. The untouchable woman who leads them and finally amputates her breast produces an agonising memory for the spectators.

Indeed, the film has aimed at the commercial aspect of its exhibition with so many shots to appease common sense. However, the courage and commitment of the director to transcend the prevailing hate-ridden revivalist ideology make it different.

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