

5th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition for Film Criticism 2024: 2nd Best Award

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Bramayugam



Bramayugam, Malayalam, 2024, 140 mins, Dir. Rahul Sadasivan

It is 17th-century Kerala. A dense forest at South Malabar. Two lowborn Malayali men, having escaped the slave trade, are wandering through the forest at night. One of them, Kora, gets killed by Yakshi (spirit), while the other, Thevan, manages to run away. Unable to cross the river, Thevan ends up at a mansion in the morning and eventually gets trapped in the chains of slavery, yet again, in a different way. There's no escape actually; it's just running away from one cage to another. Because this is, as Kodumon Potti says later in the film, "*Bramayugam, the age of madness, a worsened era of the most degenerate age, the Kaliyugam.*"

Rahul Sadasivan's 2024 Malayalam film, '*Bramayugam*', has everything that you expect in a typical folk horror film - a rural and eerie setting that seems isolated from the outer world, a back story comprising of folklore, and an outsider stumbling into the place accidentally, and the story unfolding through his eyes. The horror, without relying on jump scares, is brilliantly executed, providing you with a spine-chilling experience. But beneath the outer layers, '*Bramayugam*' explores the world's power dynamics, which remain the same regardless of region and time.

Ten minutes into the film, Thevan, a panan, gets welcomed by Kodumon Potti, a

Brahmin, into his house. Potti says he is unconventional in terms of casteism, stating that *"no one becomes a Brahmin by birth, only through karma"*. And that - a lowborn getting accepted by a Brahmin - is what deceives Thevan, leading his way to exploitation. The mansion represents the entire system where Kodumon Potti reigns as the master, and Thevan gradually becomes his slave. There's Potti's cook as well (another slave, but stays in the middle of the three levels of power dynamics here) who doesn't have any name. Thevan, too, is addressed only by his caste inside the mansion, and with time, forgets his name and whereabouts. He cannot peek anywhere, cannot ask questions, and cannot even have his own opinion - because apparently, the oppressed should not have a voice or an identity; their existence is only to serve their masters. And there's absolutely no place to escape.



The film's detailing here hits the bull's eye. During the 16th- 17th centuries, Kerala's caste system became extremely rigid. The higher-ranked people had full control over everything about the lower-ranked people.

Yet, in that system, the oppressor had some social responsibility for the oppressed. Here, in the film too, we see Potti offering food and shelter to Thevan. But what does he demand in return? Complete surrender of his time! It is a trap that continues to persist today; the more one tries to untie it, the tighter the noose becomes.

At the center of *'Bramayugam'* lies the concept of Chathan, taken from Kerala's folklore. Chudalan Potti, Kodumon Potti's ancestor, was gifted the Chathan (some supernatural power in the form of Demigod) by the goddess Varahi. But after being exploited and ill-treated for years, Chathan finally turned against his summoner (a revolt, maybe?) and killed Chudalan Potti and his family. He eventually killed Kodumon Potti (the original, who had attempted to defeat him) as well, and possessed his body. And here comes the dichotomy of staying in power. The Chathan, in disguise as Kodumon Potti, enslaves and dominates anyone who steps into his realm. But he is, as the cook tells Thevan, *"Both the master and the prisoner of this realm"*. Actually, those in power are also trapped inside the very system where they enjoy authority. The Chathan has never stepped out of the mansion, because going out of the system means letting go of one's control. Both the oppressor and the oppressed are trapped here inside the realm; escaping is not an option for either of them.

In Rahul Sadasivan's previous film *'Bhoothakaalam'*, the central characters' journeys were properly developed leading up to the main plot. However, *'Bramayugam'* follows the exact opposite approach as the characters here are representatives of the broader world; their individual stories hold no

significance. All we know about Thevan, the protagonist, is that he is a lowborn who has escaped the slave trade; along with a little information about his village and his mother. But how was his life before, any past trauma, love life and all? These are all irrelevant. And yet we connect with him at the core because the class he represents is familiar. About the cook: he is the son of the original Kodumon Potti with a lowborn woman, and he seeks vengeance for his father's death. We don't even know his name, let alone his journey before coming into the mansion. And information about the original Kodumon Potti is also not revealed, leaving no place for us to feel empathetic with him.

The film becomes extraordinary thanks to its aesthetics and technicalities. The philosophy behind its black-and-white visuals is totally justified. And just like the house in *'Bhoothakaalam'*, the eerie appearance of the mansion in *'Bramayugam'* represents its inhabitants. It's a typical 'mana', the house of a Namboodiri Brahmin (the highest-ranking caste in the region) in traditional Kerala culture. Surrounded by long and lifeless grasses, the mansion represents chaos and creates a sense of mystery in our minds. The art direction in each frame complements the characters' states beautifully. And of course, the reference to 'The Zone' in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 masterpiece, *'Stalker'*, is absolutely spot-on - a restricted place where the laws of physics do not apply, and where a secret room exists hidden which the film's characters must enter to achieve their goal.

The three lead characters here are all male because obviously, it's a male-driven system where women have very little space to thrive (which also justifies the limited screen

time of Yakshi played by Amalda Liz, the only female character in the film). And the power dynamics in the system are explored through the cinematography as well. The extreme wide shot of the massive waterfall and the forest, with the character of Thevan appearing small in it, shows just how small and helpless he is in the whole landscape. Also, it uses the mainstream formula of low-angle shots to show Kodumon Potti/Chathan's superiority over Thevan and the cook.

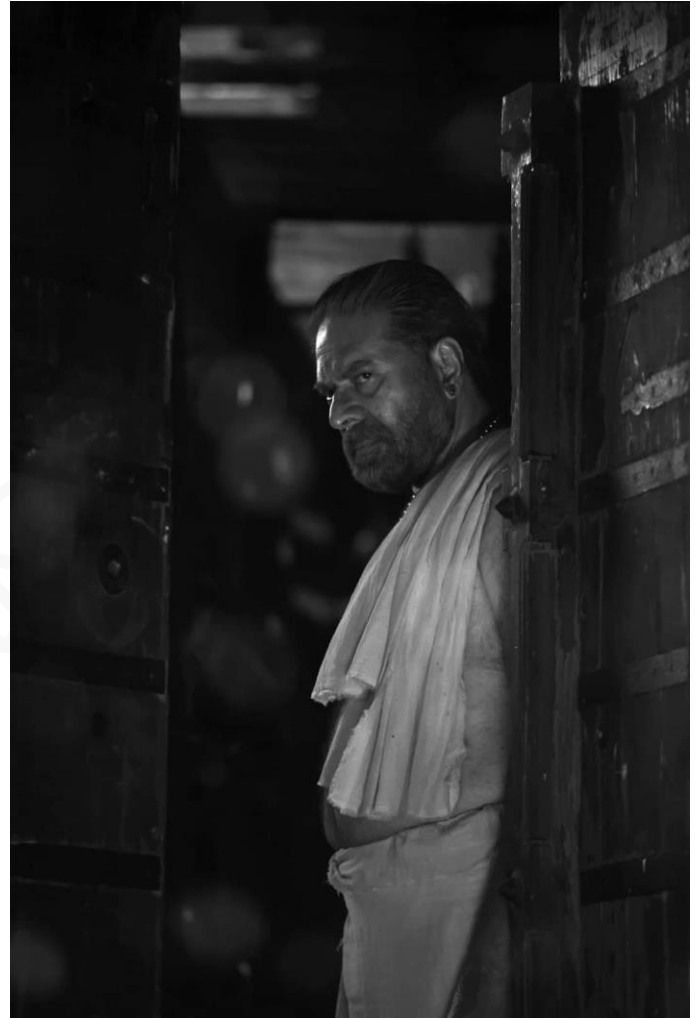


Whether it's when Thevan expresses his fear and says he wants to go home or when he tries to escape and fails - the low angles at all these moments establish who holds the power. The continuous use of follow shots gives us a sense of walking with the characters, making us uncover the mysteries together. On the other hand, the 360° shots at the climax sequence give us goosebumps like no other. What's more interesting is the visuals and the sounds seamlessly merge together to create moments. In that extreme wide shot where Thevan's helplessness is established, we hear sounds of birds chirping - well, these birds are all free, Thevan is not! There are no over-the-top sound effects to shock the audience and give cheap thrills. Rather, it's very subtle and focuses on small details, making the entire setting come alive. For instance, the sounds of the river flows resemble the protagonist's journey, conveying

that crossing it won't be an easy task. When the relentless rains crash upon the mansion, the visuals and sound design are executed so beautifully here that it conveys that the actual disaster is taking place inside the character in focus, and it is not going to stop anytime soon. The approach is also evident in portraying Kodumon Potti's (Chathan in disguise) hierarchical position, especially when it's accompanied by the character's leitmotif. More importantly, there's a brilliant use of silence (arguably the strongest of all sound elements) after almost every high point throughout the film, that allows us to soak in the thrills. When the dice game (again, a reference to 'Mahabharata') is being played, where Thevan pawns his time to Potti, a cross-cutting edit depicts two scenes simultaneously - one is the dice game which Thevan is obviously going to lose, and the other is the cook preparing food for his master. And here, we hear sounds of both one after another, gradually overlapping with each other. There's not a single dialogue in the whole thing, and yet it makes clear that one's fate is going to be like the other's after this. Both the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds align perfectly (like in several other scenes as well), and complement the quick cuts to create tension.

If Rahul Sadasivan, the director, is the brain of '*Bramayugam*', the film's lead actors are undoubtedly its heart - the phenomenal Mammootty as Kodumon Potti, the brilliant Arjun Ashokan as Thevan, and the outstanding Sidharth Bharathan as the cook. Mammootty, the Malayalam superstar, reinvents himself completely yet again here, delivering a performance that would be celebrated for decades to come. His rapid

transition in portraying emotions - joy in one moment, and switching to rage immediately - shows the insane range he has as an actor. And he doesn't exaggerate it in any way and never attempts to overshadow his co-actors. Throughout the film, it's the actor's eyes and body muscles that show the pleasure his character takes in toying with others' freedom.



An interesting aspect of the film is how it completes the arc of its protagonist, Thevan. From the beginning till the climax, it's always either cloudy or rainy, with not even an iota of sunlight. When Thevan enters the mansion for the first time, he walks through darkness to his room - and the darkness stays with him thereafter. However, after the climax, he steps out of the mansion and sees a ray of sun for the first time. And it becomes even more interesting when we get to know that it's not

really Thevan, but the Chathan disguised in his body. If we consider just the body, it has been oppressed ever since it arrived on Earth. And now that the power resides in this body, it elevates to the high status, changing the dynamics entirely. Therefore, just when it's revealed, we see a similar low-angle shot of him, along with that leitmotif, both of which have been on Kodumon Potti all this time. Then, he reaches the bank of the river from where it all started. But this time, the river is calm, which he can easily cross as the power now belongs to him. He looks at the river, and sees Kodumon Potti's face as his reflection in the water - and that's how the cycle of changing power dynamics completes. It only changes its form, but remains the same everywhere. And as the film states, *"Whoever wilds power will be corrupted. Commoners are always its victims."* Having said that, it's certainly not that he will remain at the top level forever. Historically, a more powerful force always comes and challenges the existing one. In *'Bramayugam'*, the Portuguese battalion emerges with their guns (as Mao Tse Tung said, "Power comes from

the barrel of a gun") at the end and marks the arrival of a new form of power. And well, the cycle continues. Following the Portuguese, the British would come and impose colonial rule for hundreds of years. The British would leave, transferring the power to our own political leaders. Leaders would come and go, the oppression remaining constant. Thereafter, in the rise and rise of capitalism, corporate leaders would take charge. And it would go on.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear to us why the director chose 'horror' as the genre for this film. However, the actual horror begins after the film ends - when you look at the world all around and realize that the film, set in the 17th century, is so relevant today. And you realize that you have come across at least one Chathan in your life - ... *taking on the guise of another, a wolf in sheep's clothing, cloaked in the semblance of a man with flesh and bone, it walks among us. But if you look carefully, you will see that it's not human. It has no heart, it's not a creature of God. It reeks of death, relishing in the intoxication of power.*

References/ Acknowledgements:

Caste System in Kerala (Wikipedia page), and some of my Malayali friends I spoke to about the system.

Sayan Paul writes features mostly on cinema for a living. He is from Kolkata.