

6th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2025: Certificate of Merit

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**The Right to the Chair: Revisiting the Silence of the Marginalised
and the Language of Loss in *Nandhan***



Nandhan Directed by Era Saravanan. Cast: M. Sasikumar, Suruthi Periyasamy, Balaji Sakthivel, Samuthirakani, G.M.Kumar, Saravana Sakthi. Language: Tamil. Cinematograph: R. V. Saran. Edited by: Nelson Anthony. Producer: Era Saravanan. Released: 20 Sept 2024.

The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments paved the path to adopt the new system of Panchayati Raj. It emerged as a boon, bestowing the possibilities of power to Dalits and women in particular. Decentralisation through Panchayati Raj has come up with some clear objectives. Political power should reach the common people, upliftment of Dalit and Adivasi communities, and the social empowerment of women were the supreme goals to attain. The policy of reservation was a contributing factor to the representation of Dalits in the political power structure. Although the Panchayati Raj system has made

it possible, the dream for the Dalit folk to be in governance, their posts are merely for the sake of the name. Despite becoming the Panchayat President, they don't have the power, but they act as mere rubber stamps in the hands of the dominant community leader. K.A. Beena, a Senior Journalist and Indian Author who has been conferred with the Statesman Rural Reporting Award 2024 for the debut story of Sujatha Ramesh, mentioned in her thought-provoking travelogue, *Aa Kasera Aarudethanu* (Whose Chair It Is?), based on her journalistic journeys, deserves mention here. The stories written with an

autobiographical honesty with a follow-up procedure, unfold the pathetic plight of working men belonging to the underprivileged sections who try hard to maintain 'a chair of their own'. Her journey through the travels and travails of Sujatha Ramesh convinces the readers thus:

At first glance, there was nothing unusual in my journey to Puthoor Panchayat in Palavayal, Thiruvallur, some thirty kilometres from Chennai. I had been on many such trips, both official and unofficial. Many of them were solo trips as well. But that was the first time I was visiting a woman whose name had the tag "one who could be murdered any moment". My journey was not to some prison where death sentences were being carried out, but to a village. Sujatha Ramesh was the Panchayat president there – a woman living with the knowledge that she could be killed any moment. A telephonic conversation with her was what led to this journey. It was in the year 2015. "Even now, I am not allowed to raise the tricolour on Independence Day. They used to openly say that a Dalit woman cannot raise the tricolour. (Beena 28)

The stigmatised lives of the Dalit people, irrespective of the gender disparities, are the real narratives of pain. They lead a preordained existence rooted in perpetual physical and mental persecution. The Tamil film *Nandan*, directed by Era Saranavan, resonates with the indignities encountered by the lower-class sections of society by the hegemonic and perfidious acts of the ascribed upper people.

The film opens with the discussions regarding the election nomination of the Panchayat President. A mighty Koppulingam

representing the dominant community serving in the said post for the past ten years wishes to maintain his status. A youngster named Nandhan, the titular hero, voluntarily expresses his desire to contest in the election, citing the 'injustices'. The village men could not accept such a proposal from a person occupying a lower position in the caste ladder. Veteran Journalist R. Rajagopal rightly puts it, "Dalits terrified of contesting elections for years, fleeing after filing nominations and dropping dead mysteriously in daylight after winning elections and elected candidates having to sit on the floor and leave the chair vacant for fear of antagonising the upper castes.... The list is long — and lashing. All because of the caste system and the varna system nurtured, aided and abetted by faith-based majoritarianism that seeks legitimacy through Sanatana Dharma" (Rajagopal1). The same goes true in the film as Nandhan is wiped from society and his nomination flees forever.

The system of reservation transformed into a blessing in disguise, and a despondent Koppulingam became aware that the position for Panchayat President in Vanangankudi village is reserved for the scheduled caste. He tries to make Koozhpaana, the unopposed presidential candidate. His manipulating proficiency triumphs in front of the trustworthy servant like Koozhpanna, and he does not raise his voice against the atrocities. Rather, he tries to defend and glorify Koppulingam in the best possible ways. For instance, when Koozhpaana, aka AmbedKumar's name, finds a space on the board as the new president, the dominant village folk tries to physically assault the one who was painting his name on the yellow

board with the green colour. Koppulingam comes to the scene and tries to express his solidarity by allowing the man to write and commanding his people to evade the act. With immense delight, Koozhpaana brings his wife and asks her to see that unseen and unexpected view. She was shocked to see that his name was defiled with cow dung. She cleans the dung with her Sari, just to have a glimpse of her husband's name. Her heaving heart, at many times, including this tries to enlighten him with the heinous acts of Koppulingam, the one who is treated with due respect by her husband. Though the doors of the Panchayat remain shut despite the multiple calls he makes to Koppulingam's phone, he is gullible to accept all the crooked stories shared by his master. He does not raise his voice when Koppulingam usurps his chair and power. He remains the same old slave working for Koppulingam and blindly obeying his orders. When the senior lady of their community waits for her last hours, she is content that Koozhpaana elevated their status by having his name listed as the President. She yearns to see him hoisting the National flag the next day.

The film presents an aspiring scene where Koozhpaana practices to hoist the national flag and deliver the speech. When his towel replaces the flag and it hovers high, the spectators, too, fly with his cherished desire. His son and wife also join the scene to witness the dream moment. The bounds of his excitement were shattered by Koppulingam as he voluntarily hoisted the national flag. Koozhpaana's silence articulates his loss, though he accepts without questioning or complaining his master. His son is totally broken, and he feels shy to go to school and

face everyone. All these episodes carry the balance of exploitation, the sweat of the subordinate worker, the apathy of the employer, and the irrelevance of the state. Through these images, *Nandhan* enunciates what Raymond Williams calls "structures of feeling", the lived experience of the working class that battles full articulation within dominant ideology. The element of realism is brought explicitly through the silences and pauses in the film, and the spectators realise that empathy is replaced by spectacle and observation becomes critique. One is shocked to believe through Koozhpaana's mouthpiece that 'authority is needed not just to rule and even for their basic survival, power is a must'.

The death of the senior lady of Koozhpaana's community introduces the Block Development Officer, Marudhudurai, to the saga of the marginalised. She lived and died miserably without having a space of her own for eternal peace. Koozhpaana musters the courage to meet the BDO and express the genuine requirement of a cremation ground for his people. Marudhudurai shockingly enlightens him about the ten cents of legally allocated land, and everyone is destined to have a decent burial over there. The peaceful temperament of the lower caste people was disturbed by the justifications presented by Koppulingam. He presents with his dominant elegance that the land belongs to him and has given to the underprivileged out of his generosity. The innocent people believe, and they do not question or oppose his arguments. Though caste is never foregrounded overtly, its presence pervades the narrative through silences, hierarchies, and gesticulations. The marginalisation of Koozhpaana and his fellow workers arises not only from class oppression

but from caste-coded exclusion. Louis Althusser's notion of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) derives a different connotation here. The Scheduled class family reproduces capitalist relations by teaching obedience and endurance rather than questioning the exploitation of the upper classes. Here, the family becomes the first space where exploitation is internalised. Poverty and fatigue are accepted as personal fate and never as social injustice. The capitalist exploitation of labour and the apathy of the middle class fail to follow the language of the loss here.

The film ends with a note of optimism despite all the monstrous atrocities manifested here. A slow struggle against the entrenched power of Koppulingam is depicted by Koozhpaana. This Gramscian 'war of position' attains a climax when Koozhpaana is stripped naked in front of his people and harassed in front of his folk for his genuine acts to possess a cremation ground. A stentorian Koppulingam demands his resignation, and Maarimuthu, the deceased Nandan's father, is coerced into contesting the election. The last half an hour of the film makes the viewers sure to predict the final scene. Albeit the film did not have any suspense to reveal, the much-expected climax with Koozhpaana reclaiming the chair speaks volumes. Koozhpaana becomes the unopposed president as Maarimuthu withdraws his nomination. With the support of the villagers, Koozhpaana becomes the real President capable of possessing a chair of one's own. When Koozhpaana writes his name, Ambedkumar and signs the paper, the film deserves applause for the architect of the Indian Constitution, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The

film exemplifies the dreams of multitudes of Panchayat Presidents who wish not to live permanently on the precipice, but with a sense of gratification that their basic human rights are not sacrificed and subordinated. The film closes in a documentary format, exposing the real-life stories of male and female Panchayat Presidents. The unity despite the diversity still remains a distant dream in an Independent India. The introductory pages of the renowned autobiography of Om Prakash Valmiki question: "Can dominant society make space for the subaltern to speak?" To this, Valmiki answered: We need an ongoing struggle, and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in the hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change. (Joothan, x)". *Nandhan* echoes the similar sentiment.

The title "Nandhan", meaning "beloved son" or "one who brings joy," becomes a subtle act of resistance and redefinition. The film transforms what is usually a term of affection within private, familial spaces into a public, political question about belonging, dignity, and equality. *Nandhan* challenges his social identity and ascertains his need to represent the downtrodden. The title of the film can be seen as a generic one. *Nandhan* could belong to anyone, and this 'everyman' image portrays the struggles of the oppressed and underrepresented strata of society. It refers to 'God' also. The son of Nanda, brimming with the potential of Ananda (bliss), bestows that serene joy to the outer world. He becomes a 'God-like' figure to the one most humiliated and abandoned. Hence, the personal name or the proper noun attains a political statement of

inclusion, signifying that the marginalised too have the right to affection, belonging, and recognition. The film serves as a metaphor of loss and longing, a humanist assertion of worth, and the Marxian critique of inequality. Through its striking irony, the film asks: Who gets to be loved in an unequal world? Will the dominant agency ever permit the subaltern to raise their voice and conquer all their lost territories? *Nandhan* emerges victorious by giving a space for the audience to ponder over the real subject matter of flesh and blood, even after the scenes skim away from the binocular vision. The film definitely has a takeaway for the spectators despite all its

flaws in the ‘cut’, ‘take’ and ‘action’ procedures.

Living in a world of AI algorithms and technological advancements, one fails to understand what is happening in the real lives of people. Social media statuses and stories fail to comprehend and acknowledge the multitudes battling for their daily life and right to live with dignity. Era Saravanan’s *Nandhan* deserve mention, and the excruciating ordeals of the underprivileged Dalit people ought to be discussed in the limelight. These sorts of realistic films should become a part of the academic parlance and enlighten all to achieve the true Swachh Bharat.

References

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