Article

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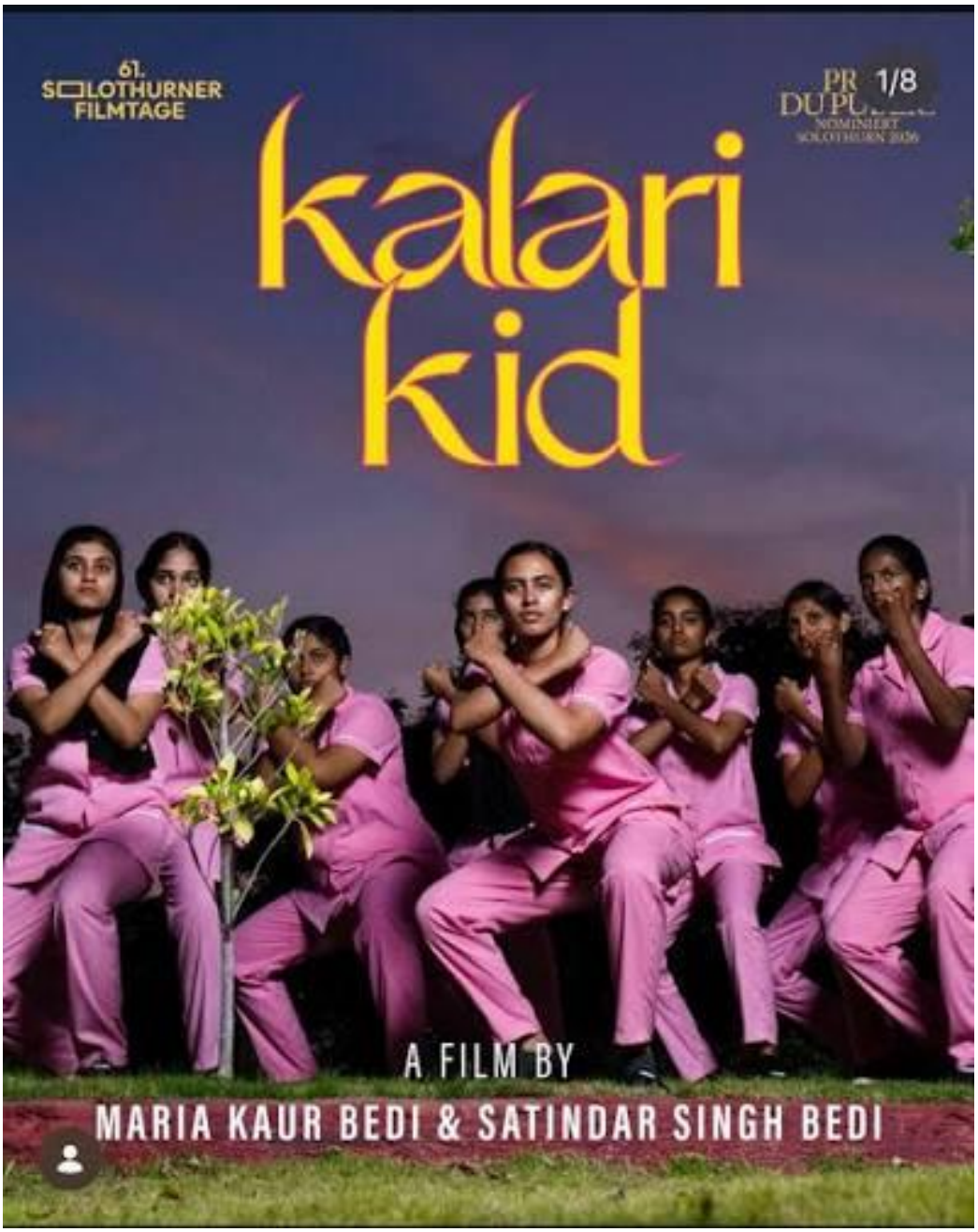
Kalari Kid: When Women Are Asked to Fight Back



What a coincidence — the release of *Kalari Kid* by Swiss-Indian filmmaker duo Maria Kaur Bedi and Satindar Singh Bedi comes against the backdrop of protests in Delhi and across India over rape and women's demand for something as basic as free mobility in their own country. Once again, the question is being asked: why is the solution to women's safety so often to restrict women? Why is caging women seen as a more viable option than teaching behaviour to their raja betas — their sons?

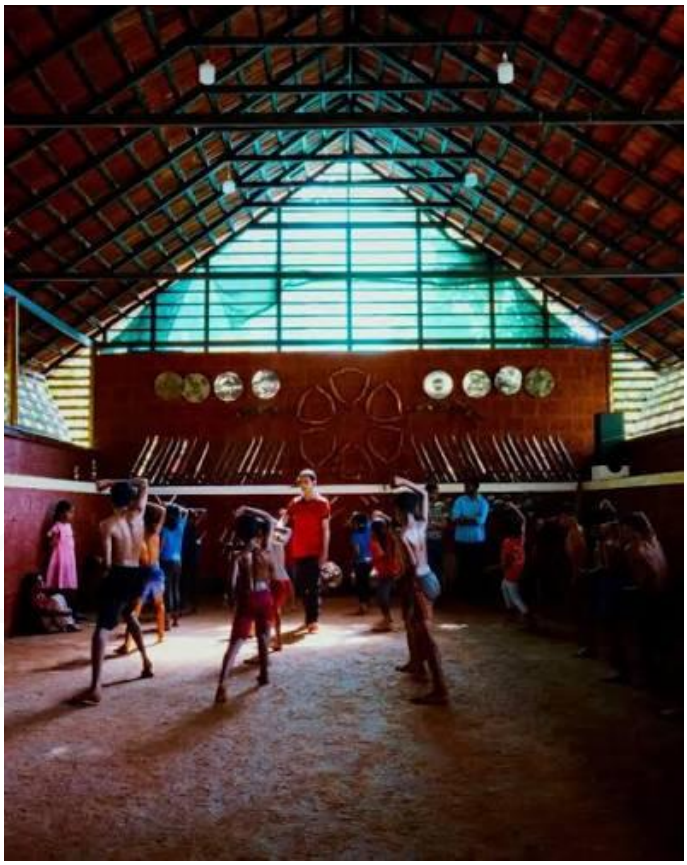
Kalari Kid is a 93-minute documentary that follows women and girls of different ages

and backgrounds, connected through Kalaripayattu, the traditional martial art of Kerala. What I loved about the film is the way these stories are intertwined. They don't feel like separate case studies of "women's empowerment"; gradually, they arrive at different forms of freedom.

The film talks about important gender issues and women's oppression, but it never feels preachy. That, for me, is one of its biggest strengths. The filmmakers trust the women, the images and the situations enough to let them speak. The film almost looks effortless, and so does its music — subtle, natural and never trying to tell us what we should feel. But that apparent effortlessness, I suspect, comes from a lot of patience and a great deal of homework before the shoot and during it. The camera feels observant rather than intrusive. The post-production is equally clean; nothing feels unnecessarily over-explained or over-edited.

The filmmakers have done a commendable job in capturing these women. At several points, I felt as if I was inside the scene rather than watching it from outside. The cinematography also breaks away from the usual way of observing its subjects. Mirrors and other reflective surfaces become another visual layer through which the characters are seen. It creates an interesting distance and intimacy at the same time.

The film takes us into a much longer history of women's oppression. It takes us back in the history where Nangeli, the legendary lower-caste woman associated with Travancore who, according to the widely circulated story, cut off her breasts in protest against the oppressive tax system. The historical details of the Nangeli story and the so-called "breast tax" are contested, but the story itself has become an important part of contemporary conversations around caste, gender and the control of women's bodies. From such historical memories to contemporary violence against women, *Kalari Kid* keeps widening the narrative.



This is where I found the film particularly interesting. It doesn't only show women as victims of oppression. The women in the film are not there simply to represent suffering. They are fighting, learning, working, questioning and finding ways of occupying space.

The film also tries to provide a solution — Kalaripayattu as a form of self-defence and self-empowerment for women.

I love the fact that the filmmakers want to be part of the solution rather than only highlighting the problem, which filmmakers often do. But here I also have a serious doubt.

Can Kalaripayattu really be a solution to oppression by men?

Indian women are already burdened with responsibilities — household work, caregiving, earning, looking after children and families. And now, if we tell women that they must also spend additional time, money and energy learning a physically demanding martial art so that they can protect themselves from men, there are many practical questions.

Where will they train? Who will pay for it? How will girls travel to training centres? What happens to girls in villages where even reaching school can be difficult? Will families that hesitate to spend money on their daughters' education readily spend additional money on martial arts training?

The problem becomes even more complicated when self-defence is presented as the answer to sexual violence.

I do believe women should have access to self-defence. There is power in knowing that your body can fight back. There is power in discipline, strength and confidence. But I doubt the idea that women should have to undergo additional training so that men do not rape them.

Why should the burden of preventing men's violence again fall on women?

When authorities respond to violence by restricting women's access to public spaces, closing or controlling parks in the evening, imposing curfews or telling women where they should and should not go, we are still solving the problem by controlling women.

The training that is required is also the training of men.

Women should certainly be taught to defend themselves if they want to. But men must be taught not to attack them. Institutions must be taught to respond. Police and public spaces must be made safer. Families must teach boys about consent, dignity and equality. Otherwise, we are simply making women stronger prisoners inside the same patriarchal structure.

And this is where *Kalari Kid* becomes more complicated and, for me, more interesting than a straightforward empowerment film.

Despite my reservations, I see this as an important film in many ways.

It is important because it brings together women from different ages, communities and social locations and allows them to occupy the centre of the frame. It also refuses to make the women in the film one-dimensional victims.

It is particularly interesting to watch a film coming from Kerala at a time when the Malayalam film industry itself has been

forced to confront questions about women's safety, harassment and representation. The rise of the Women in Cinema Collective and the #MeToo conversations in Malayalam cinema have already opened difficult conversations about the working conditions of women in the industry.

So, for me, *Kalari Kid* is also a slap to a certain culture of representing women only through the male gaze — as bodies, objects of desire or characters whose agency exists only in relation to men.

What I also found striking is that the film is made by a Swiss-Indian filmmaking duo, with Maria Kaur Bedi handling the cinematography and editing, yet it enters into the complexities of Indian society — caste, class, religion, colour, gender and social hierarchy — without reducing them to a tourist's gaze.

That is important.

Because there is another kind of cinema about India that arrives with a ready-made conclusion, simplifies a complicated society and turns one community into the villain of the story. *Kalari Kid* moves in almost the opposite direction: instead of using Kerala to construct a single political villain, it looks at women, their bodies, their choices and the structures around them.

For me, that difference matters.

Kalari Kid is not a perfect answer to the question of violence against women. In fact, I think its most interesting weakness is precisely the point where it proposes self-defence as an answer to a problem that is fundamentally structural.

But perhaps that is also why the film stayed with me.

It makes us look at the long history of women's oppression, while asking what women can do with their bodies, their anger and their courage today.

And perhaps the first step towards change is this awareness — that women should not have to shrink themselves, hide themselves or stop moving through the world in order to be safe.

They should be able to take their space.

And men, families, institutions and the state should learn not to take it away.

Neha Thombre is a filmmaker, theatre-maker, stand-up performer and human-rights storyteller.