

The Days of Bowing are Gone: Adivasis in South Indian Movies 2022



Kesiya Alice Joseph

Abstract: *Our nation needs an environment where everyone takes pride in becoming a stakeholder in nation-building and chalking out the future course of our national history. However, the irony is that the real stakeholders and the key figures of our nation-building are still at their tapestry end. People accepted the normalization of Dalit or Tribal discrimination based on various grounds. The influence of the media can have a significant role in this process. In recent decades, movies have showcased a stereotypical representation of tribes and Dalits. However, a whole new group of South Indian film-makers is now trying to alter the way movies are made and seen in India. Their movies showcase diverse voices, experiences, and perspectives, influencing how we perceive and engage with our popular culture. When most film-makers are fascinated by the commercial viability of a film, for them the film makes matters more. Their works are not only for art's sake but also for life's sake. Because movies have the power to normalize certain behaviours, attitudes, or beliefs, making them seem more acceptable to the mainstream of society. South Indian movies like Kantara, Jigarhanda DoubleX, and Jai Bheem come in touch with the social reality of discrimination faced by the people who belong to the lower sections of society. This paper entitled 'The Days of Bowing Are Gone: Adivasis in South Indian Movies 2022', tries to explore changing views and perspectives of tribal characters in popular South Indian Cinema in 2022 with special reference to the movies Sembi (Tamil) and Pada (Malayalam).*

Keywords: Tribes, South Indian Movies, Popular Culture Scope of the Article: Film

I. INTRODUCTION

India coined the title 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', which means the philosophy which teaches the whole world as one family. It is more accurate when the Indians make an oath of allegiance to the Republic of India, that is, 'all Indians are my brothers and sisters'. This solemn promise gives a feel of home also to some of the most ancient civilizations and the largest population of ethnic tribes. India stands high among other nations in the world for its rich culture, heritage, and tradition. Indian culture has a diverse tapestry that spans over 5000 years of history. Indian culture is a blend of various customs, traditions, and practices. The origin of this culture has its roots in the lives, beliefs, costumes, and traditions of Indian tribes.

India is a land of cultural diversity in which a great number of indigenous people live and contribute to the ethnographic tradition of the nation.

Albeit this is a homeland to all, tribes have remained intact despite the modern lifestyle. Likewise, South India is home to a diverse range of indigenous people, with a unique culture, traditions, and practices. Behind the façade of South Indian states, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, have a tainted and under-discussed history of exploiting and depriving its adivasi population of their basic rights. These include not only the rights over the forestland but also the basic right to life and dignity. It is visible that the majority of men have consciously excluded and alienated them through exploitation and injustice by keeping them out of the legislation that directly concerns them, their lives, and their livelihoods.

According to Crime in India 2022-Vol. II published by the National Crime Records Bureau of the Ministry of Home Affairs, there are 1045.4 lakh (2011 Census) of tribes living in this country. Kerala records only a 4.8 lakh tribal population, whereas in Tamil Nadu there are 7.9 lakh [1]. However, the reality is that, among these tribes, Kerala records a 35.5% crime rate against the Scheduled Tribes in India [1]. It is considered as one of the highest crime rates against Schedule tribes in the country. The rate of total crime against Scheduled Tribes in Tamil Nadu (2022) is only 8.4% [1]. These are mere statistics of registered crimes. Because some of the crimes make it to the records, very few make headlines and many don't make it anywhere. People scroll through these headlines, glance at them, and move on to their priorities.

Hence, in this fast-moving world of immense experiences, we forget the voice of the deprived. Blurring of boundaries between physical and digital experience makes us perform in a world of voice. Recent literary art forms alter their earlier approach to this section, especially in South India. The South Indian film industry, especially Kollywood, Mollywood, and Tollywood, has significant followers all over the world. A novel group of film-makers changing how movies are made and seen in our nation. Old South Indian movies were akin to masala movies, action movies, high-budget movies, and family movies, whereas, today they are fascinated by more realistic films, which are critically acclaimed and commercially successful and have a significant impact on South Indian culture and society. During the post-COVID period, the film industry went through new ways of thinking and capturing the lives of people. While most South Indian film-makers are interested in commercial films, a new breed of directors is looking at cinema differently. Among them, few film-makers at the prevalence of the caste system in India.

Manuscript received on 22 February 2024 | Revised Manuscript received on 01 March 2024 | Manuscript Accepted on 15 March 2024 | Manuscript published on 30 March 2024.

*Correspondence Author(s)

Mrs. Kesiya Alice Joseph*, Department of English, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady (Kerala), India. Email ID: kesiyaalicejoseph@gmail.com ORCID ID: 0009-0007-0936-0183

© The Authors. Published by Lattice Science Publication (LSP). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

For the last few years, many South Indian flicks have been released about the lives of tribal people and hit the South Indian big screen. Flicks of South Indian actors like Surya, Lawrence, G V Prakash, Junior NTR, Mohanlal, Biju Menon, and others have always been fascinated by this genre.

South Indian flicks like *Jai Bheem*, *Ayyappanum Koshiyum*, *Kalvan*, *RRR*, *Pulimurukan*, and *Jigardhanda DoubleX* visualized the real-life of tribes who were tortured by the official authorities.

II. POPULAR CULTURE AND CINEMA

A well-known Welsh Marxist theorist, literary critic, and cultural historian, Raymond Williams (1921-1988) is interested in emphasizing the importance of understanding culture with its social and economic context [2]. He wrote extensively on the history of culture by examining how cultural forms and practices evolved. He is considered one of the founders of cultural studies and is remembered for his insightful analysis of culture, power, and society.

His studies showcase that popular culture and media are closely intertwined, and engage in continued feedback loops, with each influencing the other [2].

Media platforms play a vital role in shaping and reflecting the popular culture. The media showcases diverse voices, experiences, and perspectives influencing how we perceive and engage with popular culture. It amplifies trends, ideas, and messages, making them more visible and widespread. The media can normalize certain behaviours, attitudes, or beliefs, making them seem more acceptable to the mainstream. The media creates icons and celebrities who become symbols of popular culture. Popular culture drives media consumption, with audiences seeking content that reflects their interests and values. Its trends and fads influence media content, with creators incorporating elements that resonate with audiences. The close relationship between popular culture and the media helps to shape the values, beliefs, and attitudes in society.

Nothing has changed for the Adivasi community than coming out on their own to question more about the power hierarchy and the oppression they have been facing for a long period. Tribes started to realize that they had to stand on their own feet and ask questions about their rights and values to society. They were also realizing that they have the power and innate talents to conquer their rights when nobody is going to help them.

The majority of the spectators are non-tribes in India and most of them are Savarnas. So the discourses that they bring with them and try to present are mainly prejudiced against the tribes – a stereotypical tribal figure can be seen. Most of the early films portray the tribal characters as uncivilized- an ugly group and increasingly othered [3]. They are more and more ghettoised into community-based network groups. It is a matter of fear. However, in 2022, South Indian films showcase a more realistic representation of a tribe. They are intentionally avoiding the stereotypical image of the tribe and focusing more on their social insecurities and vulnerabilities.

Directors with novel ideas intentionally put some silence in their films to evoke pity and fear in their spectators. That was a concept put forward by the peripatetic philosopher, Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Pity is aroused in the spectators, by

the magnitude of the pain undergone by the protagonist and the fear aroused in the spectator by the knowledge that the plight of the protagonist can be one similar to us [4]. This is the awareness that we bring home to us when we watch a realistic movie in 2022. Through these activities, a film can question the efficiency of the establishment in finding a real-time solution to the Adivasi struggle.

This paper entitled ‘The days of bowing are gone: Adivasis in South Indian Movies 2022’ tries to explore the significant representations of tribal people in popular South Indian Cinema- 2022 with special reference to the movies- *Sembi* (Tamil) and *Pada* (Malayalam). This novel concept in South Indian films is a need of the hour and part of today’s popular culture. It not only emphasizes the representation of tribes but also showcases the influence of the media on popular culture. This paper has decided to use the words “tribe” and “tribal cultural heritage” respectfully.

A. Pada

Pada (Army) is a 2022 political thriller movie by Kamal KM, starring Kunchacko Boban, Joju George, Vinayakan, and Dileesh Pothan. Kamal is considered one of the major directors who showcase the voice of the voiceless in his films. His film reinstates the problematic Tribal representation of Malayalam cinema in a new frame. Apart from old movies, from the beginning itself, the tribal characters are more sensible, bold, and know their rights. Through this film, Kamal attempts to get the attention that the tribes deserve [5]. Even during the time of the Land Reforms, the Adivasi land rights didn’t get the attention that they deserved. In 1975, the government of Kerala passed the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer and Restoration of alienated land) Act to reclaim the encroachable adivasi Lands. It was a time that got momentum in Adivasi’s struggles for the right to land in Kerala [6]. However, the plight of Adivasis remains the same government neither considered enough applications to reclaim the encroached land nor did the considered applications move further. In 1996, an amendment to the Land Reforms Act was unanimously passed by the state of Kerala to bypass the KST Act. *Pada* is based on this real event that happened in 1996. Considering its storyline, *Pada* did create a great buzz among movie-goers. It happened when Mr. WR Reddy, district collector of Palakkad was held hostage in his office. *Pada* tells the story of the two days on which the incident took place. So curiosity and intentions must be slowly revealed. To balance the challenges of making a non-commercial big-budget film, the director intentionally created a certain kind of suspense that should be maintained to give it a thriller style. The cinematography of the film needs a special appreciation of that to achieve the visual detailing. Kamal and his crew members shot it over four schedules that spanned around 60 days. In this flick, the director wanted to highlight the sensitivity that the state missionary once had. Although the film was released in the year 2022, although the quadricentennial year of the real incident happened, the issue remains the same. There is no change in relevance or urgency at all. Kamal did an investigation more than a year into the screenplay of this movie.



He started his research in 2018 and went through most of the evidence he could collect about the incident. He met up with political activists, the Chief Secretary involved, the concerned collector, the mediator, the Zilla judge, and the IG, and everyone contributed to the script. Kamal KM has come a long way as a film director who has already made a mark in the South Indian film industry with the film *ID*, and he doesn't swear by the tried and tested formula for realistic structure. More importantly, he is one of the major directors who have tried to explore the voice of the suppressed in society. Here, what matters is the subject, rather than the reaction it generates. Pada is a reflection of public conscience in India and the way we think every time there is a Naxal attack. There is a sense of despair, frustration, and anger about when tribes will be able to avenge these attacks. At the end of the day, the story is about the voice of the depressed section. It also showcases the real political context. Fortunately or unfortunately, it is a time for discussion about the subaltern crisis and its remedial films for now will take a back seat as the character plans to take a well-deserved break. Hence, Kamal comes in touch with the social reality of discrimination in which people accept the normalization of discrimination based on various grounds. The storyline revolves around five men from different tribal backgrounds and planning to make something revolutionary to get recognition nationwide in a short period. Although they were five, their voice and protest represent a mass of suppressed class. The group arrived at their destination and waited for the arrival of the District Collector who represents the government authorities. After a day's wait, they get into the collector's chamber at the visitor's time. When the whole populace went outside, these men forcibly attacked the chamber and tied the collector with their arms. At the same time, they chase others around him out. Then they introduced themselves as 'Ayyankali Pada' activists working for the welfare of tribes. Their current need is to repeal the controversial Adivasi Land Amendment Bill of 1995. They are aware that it was a Herculean task for them and need more time to resolve it. At the same time, they also knew that the voice of this tribal group in front of the Government officials especially on an Act of 1975 and its Amendment bill of 1995, could not be, get into the higher officials without doing anything like that which might trigger a revolution. This news caught fire in the very next news broadcast and printed media. They finally succeeded in their need from the government. It proves that the influence of the media helped them to spread their voice across India within a short period. Pada is Kamal's first Malayalam language non-commercial film and second feature after *ID* (2012), which showcases the miserable plight of the Adivasi community more literally on the screen in its true sense. This flick is beautifully captured through the dialogue between the collector and the men. Finally, the film shows that the collector sympathizes with their miseries and aligns with their case. Kamal made this film with full heart and conviction.

B. Ayyankali Pada

The Ayyankali Pada hostage protest was carried out on October 4th, 1996 by a four-member Maoist group consisting of Vilayodi Sivankutty, Kanhangad Rameshan, Kallara Babu, and Ajayan Mannur. They took the then collector of Palakkad

District, Mr. W.R. Reddy for nine hours with explosives and a gun in his chamber. After the negotiations with government officials, Ayyankali Pada reached an agreement for release. Later, they revealed that their weapons were fake, and no serious injuries were reported during the protest. Though the activists were promised safe passage by the government and were not arrested, three of them were arrested later. When the Vilayodi Sivankutty, Kanhangad Rameshan, and Ajayan Mannur were arrested, Kallara Babu remained in hiding for 14 years. Hence, this film has relevance today.

C. Sembi

Sembi is a 2022, heart-hitting Tamil movie by Prabhu Solomon. It showcases the life of a ten-year-old tribal girl named Sembi and her fight against the unfortunate life she went through [7]. Like any other child in our country, she also wished to succeed in her dreams and to become a doctor for her family. However, her dreams were smashed out by three men from outside the village. Prabhu's characters mostly look real and intense. Sembi also brings out such an experience. Sembi's age-old grandmother Veerai, an apiarist, played an iconic role in *Kovil Sarala*. The character of Veerai represents a rebel from a downtrodden society. It gets its full strength when she thrashes the policeman and escapes with her granddaughter. Sembi called her grandmother 'Ammachi' and they lived in an isolated area on the mountaintop of Kodaikanal [7]. Albeit the film represents the theme of increasing child abuse in our country, it also gives awareness about the POCSO Act of 2012, to protect our children from sexual abuse. The cinematography of the flick was done by M Jeevan, who is one of the top-class cinematographers in the South Indian film industry. Music composed by Nivas K Prasanna plays a pivotal role in the world of Sembi. Their isolated life was described in the lyrics of the song "Aathi en mela," [8] written by the director himself. The music and background score of the film help to elevate the emotional moments in the audience, just like Aristotle's concept of tragedy. The first part of the story evokes pity and fear in the mindset of its spectators while watching the scene of three influential miscreants sexually assaulting Sembi and her dream of becoming a doctor gets torn apart. Later, the story unveils their fight against their misfortune, and finally, they succeed in their plight with the help of an advocate.

The son of the opposition leader of the state, Nanjil Sampath, and his two friends are the influential miscreants in this crime. They were always slipped from the eyes of the law because of the power of this opposition leader. The investigation officer of this Sembi case also represents a corrupt police officer who brought money from the opposition leader to settle the case.

Although the antagonists and their supporters are from Savarnas, the innate will of Ammachi doesn't bow her head towards them, but her fear about the power of Savarnas makes her flee with Sembi. It symbolizes the real picture of tribal migration that happened many times in tribal history, due to intruders from outside. Tribes were always forced to flee from their native place to another to become safe and secure in their lives.

The latter part of the film shows the sympathy and supporting hands of today's youth. Today, youths have sympathy towards these people and most of them are always ready to support them. It is a result of the influence of the media on today's culture. The media is highly influenced by the lives of youth. They have sympathy and empathy towards what they are scrolling through. These are beautifully captured in this flick.

The character of the young collector in the first movie, Pada, and the passengers in the second movie, Sembi, showcase today's representation of 'anbu' towards those who suffered the most. The bus itself represents a journey of life, where people from different walks of life come together, share experiences, and grow. While watching this movie, we may also feel like we are traveling in 'anbu' (compassion) with a little Sembi (prayer). The name of the bus itself symbolizes the sympathy and compassion of the people. The director intentionally put some of these ideas in his film to evoke pity and fear in the audience. Anbu represents the emotional bond and relationships formed among the characters during their journey on the bus. It also represents our nation's unity in diversity; the bus passengers come from different backgrounds, ages, and professions, yet they form a strong bond, showcasing unity in diversity. When passengers shared their life stories, struggles, and emotions, it created a deep connection and empathy among them. The bus becomes a support system for the characters, providing comfort, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. Finally, the journey transforms the characters, helping them overcome their struggles, find hope, and discover new perspectives. Hence, the bus 'Anbu' represents a journey of life, where people from different walks of life come together, share experiences, and grow. Another vital character is the Lawyer, played by Ashwin Kumar Lakshmikanthan. The lawyer's character in the flick adds depth to the story, emphasizing the importance of advocacy, justice, and empowerment in the face of adversity. Kamal intentionally put this character into this film to represent his views on the issue. Through this lawyer, the director tries to empower the audience to stand up for their rights and demands. Kamal presented the lawyer as a representation of social commentary. The lawyer's character highlights social issues, such as corruption, exploitation, and the struggle for justice in a flawed system. He advocates for the rights of marginalized communities, including the tribal people and passengers on the bus. He fights for justice, seeking to hold accountable those responsible for the Sembi case that unfolded. The influence of the media on young people is beautifully presented in this movie. The vlogger documents the bus journey, capturing the stories and experiences of the passengers. Through his lens, the audience gets to see the passenger's story unfold, adding depth to the narrative. He uploads a live video of Ammachi's words in which she unveils her real story. His vlogging helped a lot to get this issue to the public and made it a pandemic in Kodaikanal. Through his channel, the real incident immediately spread to this whole part of the world. His presence highlights the impact of social media on our lives, as they share their experiences online. This character in the movie adds a unique layer to the story, emphasizing the power of storytelling, connection, and documentation in capturing the human experience. Students of Engineering

College and their flash mob in the private bus stand hit the minds of the public about the incident. The advancement of technology has the power to take immediate action against any crime. The Zoom meeting puts this issue into the right hands with immediate effect. Although child abuse is a negative topic that has taken over Tamil films, Sembi is different from those movies for its vital mission to raise awareness about the POCSO Act and tribal representation. Sembi is not something indifferent to us. But the plot and its cinematography are naval to us. Though some unrealistic pictures can be seen in the middle of the movie, Prabhu finally did his view successfully.

III. CONCLUSION

A reinvigorated strategic culture with greater accountability, national unity, and flexibility to embrace change will help us realize our long-term goals in a time-bound manner. Two political collaborations and a common aim are educating the youth on personal and political issues. Hence, these kinds of films showcase not only the importance of finding a real-time solution to the tribes' struggle for their land but also the sensitivity of those in power and how they use it. Both of these films received good reviews from the public for their cinematic brilliance and their methods for engagement with the incidents that happened among tribes. Pada has chosen to talk about the vast history of revolutionary Adivasi resistance that Kerala has witnessed. Indeed, the Adivasi voice is completely missing from the discussions and reviews of the movie. Though the film claims historical accuracy in the visualization of events that unfolded, it avoids the director's engagement with the larger history of Adivasi resistance and the impact of this particular event. The media and popular culture have a power in these films. Film-makers try to convince us that we have deprived the tribes of what rightfully belongs to them and remember that they are not dispensable numbers for vote bank politics. A film can't talk about everything around an issue. It can just point at the issue and prepare the cinephiles for further discussion. In that sense, movies have created ripples in this dead water of South Indian movie themes. Spectators are satisfied to appreciate this genre of films, which are more realistic than other action thrillers. Different and powerful stories have had feedback in recent times. Among the OTT platforms and Satellite Platforms, there are immediate takers for these kinds of socio-political stories. It also emphasizes the significance of the media in today's popular culture. In both these films, costume designers and make-up artists need an appreciation for adding a bit of realism on screen. These two flicks are equally important in today's socio-political scenario and give onlookers all the feels. The media provides a sad reality of our nation which is depicted on screen, and that is what happens as well. Both these directors succeeded in conveying the essence of their films to the audience. These two films showcase the non-caring attitude of the government toward vulnerable sections of society. They are not trying to solve the problem but trying to re-conciliate the victims with negotiations. Today, reconciliation is a much-hyped word.



However, diminutive work has been done by the government and other entities to promote it to a level that can be felt by the tribes. Social messages are inherent in these two films. When the movie Pada introduces us to the Acts of 1975 and 1996, Sembi introduces the great POCSO Act of the 2012- Indian Constitution. Albeit the second one is not directly connected to the tribes, it is vital for the protection of tribal children from insane rapists and molesters.

They are mostly unaware of this act and have no power to convince the court about their plight. Hence, the detailed explanation of the POCSO Act will help them to know something about their rights. Finally, it can be concluded that these two quality cinemas showcase reality with some cinematic liberty and indicate the importance of society helping someone in a detrimental situation and bringing justice to the victim.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

- **Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests:** Based on my understanding, this article has no conflicts of interest.
- **Funding Support:** This article has not been sponsored or funded by any organization or agency. The independence of this research is a crucial factor in affirming its impartiality, as it has been conducted without any external sway.
- **Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate:** The data provided in this article is exempt from the requirement for ethical approval or participant consent.
- **Data Access Statement and Material Availability:** The adequate resources of this article are publicly accessible.
- **Authors Contributions:** The authorship of this article is contributed solely.

REFERENCES

1. "Crime in India; Statistics (2022)". National Crime Records Bureau-Ministry of Home Affairs, (Vol. 2, 70th ed., pp. 637-735). People's Achieve of Rural India. <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/crime-in-india-2022-volume-ii/>
2. Williams, R. (2018). Popular culture: history and theory. Cultural Studies, 32(6), 903-928. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2018.1521620>
3. Kumar, Chhotelal & Sharma, Khushbu. (2022). "RR, Baahubali, Raavan: How Indian Cinema Stereotypes 'Adivasis'". The Quint. <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/rrr-baahubali-raavan-how-indian-cinema-stereotypes-adivasis>
4. Nagarajan, M. S. English Literary Criticism and Theory; An Introductory History. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2011. pp 8-19, Print.
5. M, Anjali. (2022). " 'Pada' Echoes Kerala's Malign History of 'Othering' Its Tribal Populace". The Quint. <https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/indian-cinema/pada-echoes-keralas-maligned-history-of-othering-its-tribal-populace>
6. THE KERALA SCHEDULED TRIBES (RESTRICTION ON TRANSFER OF LANDS AND RESTORATION OF ALIENATED LANDS) ACT, 1975. https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/15581/1/full_page_photo_-_1975.pdf
7. Movies, YouTube. Sembi YouTube, film by Prabhu Solomon, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuU9WprOMSk>
8. "Aathi En Mela - Video Song" YouTube, song by Nivas K Prasanna, 3 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRGXoxz8xGY>

AUTHOR PROFILE



Mrs. Kesiya Alice Joseph, a dedicated educator pursuing her doctoral degree (PhD) at the Department of English, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala, with a strong academic background in English Language and Literature, having completed her Master of Arts from St. Thomas College, Pala (Affiliated to MG University, Kottayam). Her research focuses on tribal culture and literature, exploring the rich traditions and narratives of indigenous communities. She qualified for UGC NET in the year 2018 and has several publications in various ISBN journals to her credit. Currently, she is a teacher at GHSS Nedungome, where she is committed to inspiring and empowering students to reach their full potential. With a research-oriented mindset and excellent teaching and communication skills, she is passionate about making a positive impact on the lives of her students, while continuing to grow and develop as a scholar and educator in the field of tribal studies.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of the Lattice Science Publication (LSP)/ journal and/ or the editor(s). The Lattice Science Publication (LSP)/ journal and/ or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.