

THE GAME OF POWER POLITICS PORTRAYED IN DR. BIJU'S MOVIES PERARIYATHAVAR AND KAADU POOKKUNNA NERAM

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Abstract

Bijukumar Damodaran, known mononymously as Dr. Biju, is an Indian Film- maker who is considered to be one of the contemporary voices in Indian cinema, who raises his voice openly against social injustice, gender inequality, environmental problems, and speaks up for the marginalized sections of the society. This paper is a humble and un-biased attempt that focuses on the aspect of power politics portrayed in Dr. Biju's two socially relevant movies, *Perariyathavar* (Names Unknown) and *Kaadu Pookkunna Neram* (When the woods bloom) which were acclaimed nationally as well as internationally. The two movies are interconnected in one way or the other. Reflecting the lives of the marginalized sections, including dalits and the tribal communities, both the films portray the negligence from the part of the government towards issues of the subaltern. It tells us how government, which is responsible to protect them and their lives, to an extent becomes the reason for their plights and sufferings. *Perariyathavar* portrays the story of a garbage collector who struggles to make a living and to bringing up his eight year old son in a city, where people like him remain 'nameless'. The film presents the darker side of the city and the lives of those who inhabit these spaces and sans romanticism. They are a group who are very much visible- garbage collectors, migrant labourers, gypsies, street children, and street vendors- having no names. Whereas film *Kaadu Pookkunna Neram*, in the onset of celebration of forests, portrays of how inconsequential a policeman with a pistol is inside one, and how the real inhabitants of the forests, the tribals, should be left alone.

Keywords: marginalized, dalits, tribals, maoists, hegemonic, subaltern, power-politics.

Introduction

Perariyathavar is set on the backdrop of true events including Muthanga agitation, protests against garbage dumping in Vilappilshala (Thiruvanthapuram), Laloor (Thrissur), and Kureepuzha (Kollam) and in many other parts of Kerala. The first part of the movies tells us about a section of people whose lives are confined within the boundaries of city wastes. Even though they carry the wastes of the higher sections of the society who enjoy all the privileges, they were pulled as under privileged, into the darker outskirts of city. Their plights were depicted through the protagonist characters played by Suraj Venjaramood as a sweeper who works with the city municipality and his motherless, eight year old son, the character played by master Govardhan. These characters draw real pictures of realities of these dispossessed sections that caught in the quagmire of garbage dumping in the city outskirts and the predicament of losing roofs over their heads. The plot unfolds through the son's narrative. The second half of the movie depicts the lives of poor Adivasi communities deprived of their lands. The movie depicts the responses of the authorities towards the protests of these demeaned sections to gain their rights.

Kaadu Pookkunna Neram focuses on the deliberate attempts of the government to exert UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) over anyone who talks for the lives of the underprivileged, especially for the tribal people and for the dalits. The film tells us how government fails in fulfilling the needs of these marginalized ones and on how indifferently authorities approach these problems. It also throws light on the hegemonic- subaltern relationship between the classes in power and the classes deprived of their rights. Both the movies depict so many social realities in common. They discuss the struggles of existence of the marginalized communities, their land issues, educational issues and their social backwardness. These are the core elements in these movies. The political negligence towards the marginalized and the oppressed, their political non acceptance were also discussed. Both the movies act as the illustrations of how the power politics and government sidelined the people who are under privileged and how they exert their power over them.

The Game of Power-Politics

Impassively, government always stood in the foreground when it comes to the denial of human rights. So certainly, the ones who strive to accomplish the task of soliciting these forbidden human rights happen to quarrel with the authorities. The government suppresses the agitators by branding them as anti- nationals. In every age, government carries out this task effectively by explicating different sets of laws. UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) can be referred to as latest in the list. The law claims for efficacious prevention of unlawful activities in the country. In a democracy laws and acts are meant for the protection of its people and it shouldn't end up in deteriorating them in one way or other. Dr. Biju's socio-political discourse *Kaadu Pookkunna Neram* (When the woods bloom) begins with a reference to UAPA.

“UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) is an Indian law aimed at the effective prevention of unlawful activities and associations in India. Now UAPA is widely used by Indian government, about 200 people were branded as Maoists (a banned communist group) and arrested in Kerala state under this act”.

- (*Kaadu Pookkunna Neram*) (When the woods bloom)

Perariyathavar (Names Unknown) and *Kaadu Pookkunna Neram* (When the woods bloom) by Dr.Biju tells the story of resistance against the negligence of the state towards the subaltern issues. When *Perariyathavar* addresses the issues of the marginalized by referring to their agitations against the state authorities, on the other hand, in *Kaadu Pookkunna Neram* these issues are addressed through a group of people who became the voices of the under privileged whom the government silences using the law of UAPA.

Even though it has been more than half a century since we achieved independence, what is the pertinence of a government in a democratic society if it is incompetent to render land for the evicted subaltern sections? When second half of the movie *Perariyathavar* is set in the backdrop of Muthanga agitation, we need to discuss the underlying truths behind the political strategy which the mainstream society and other political parties hold in the issues of these adivasi communities who got evicted from their lands. They couldn't deny the fact that histories of unjust were always concerned with the inferior strata of the society including the adivasi communities. In every age, is it there 'fate' to get subjected to these kinds of constant exploitations and revilement from the part of the government and the hegemonic sections of the society? Or should they protest and resist? While tracing the history, we come to know that, Kerala had witnessed many protests claiming their “right to live”. Only through constant struggles, many of these sections had achieved such forbidden fruits that were denied for centuries.

In the film “*Perariyathavar*”, Dr. Biju tries to make a parallel reading between the lives of the marginalized sections of the city suburbs as well as the people living in the tribal villages. This is because the social and political issues they encounter are somewhat similar. They experience common problems like threats of forceful eviction from their land, protests, strikes, issues of improper re-housing, garbage and many more. At the end of the first part, the movie depicts a scene in which a particular section belonging to the lower strata of the society who lives at the outskirts of the city are evicted from their own lands as per the Government order in order to build a road to the private factory nearby. But they claim that they should move from there as that land was acquired by the government to build link road. Here the government which is assigned with duty to protect and retain the rights of the inferior sections is acting against them in order to fulfill the claims of the hegemonic sections. They assure them that they will be rehabilitated. They told them that they will be shifted to temporary camps and will be provided with land depending on its availability. But they had no faith in this promise. When they refused to move, they demolished their homes and evicted them forcefully and shifted them to shelter homes. They ensured them new houses. The Government order was to accomplish development projects over their lives. This particular scene results in evoking so many questions in the minds of the audience. Who gave the government, the ultimate power to uproot these people from the land in which they belong? In a democracy like India where everyone has equal right to live, who has the power to make their lives underprivileged? On one hand government acts in order to make the state developed, supporting the interests of the capitalists, on the other hand abandons certain sections by making them nameless. For them sometimes, this land will be the only possession they own. The contradicting factors, i.e., the ‘helplessness’ of the subjects and the infinite power possessed by the ruling authority is clear from these dialogues by the character played by Indrans when he engages in a conversation with the protagonist character played by Suraj Venjaramood.

“There is no other way, if the government asks, you must go.....

How can they suffer being deprived of the land they have?”

- Indran's character (*Periyathavar*)

Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' describes the very idea leadership and its relationship between different classes. According to him in modern conditions, a particular class cannot exert its power over other classes

there by advancing their economic concerns or through enforcements. Rather it should exercise intellectual and moral and should make relationships and cooperation with different forces. It rests on an idea of negotiated power whereby members of a class are able to persuade other classes. Here in this particular context of the film, the capitalist class makes an alliance with the government as both the group aim at gaining mutual benefits. The alliance of the capitalists and government form the dominant class or hegemonic class where as the exploited marginalized sections can be referred to as the subaltern class. The film is a realistic portrayal of lives of people living at different edges of the society. We audience are introduced with individuals and different sections of people, who mutually encounter a state of abandonment by civilization and culture as well as both elite and popular.

In the second half of the film, the setting was shifted from the darker shades of the city-life to the depths of the forest. The scenes portrayed here are deeply influenced from real incidents that had taken place at Muthanga on February 19, 2003. The context in the movie is depicted in such a way that a group of people belonging to the tribal community conducts a widespread agitation against the government claiming for land as they were deprived from their home lands. The movie ends where police force fired into the protestors and one of the protagonist characters, the son (Govardhan), was killed. Inspired from real events, the movie draws the pathetic picture of how wiping these marginalized sections out of their lives forever became an inevitable step for the ruling authorities for their survival and how worthless they consider these peoples' lives. It tells us the story of a group of people who once lived harmoniously in the lap of nature's deep woods, who now holds the baggage of uncertainty, insecurity and fallaciousness of not having a single piece of land, not even to bury their deadbodies. After the Muthanga agitation, their struggles to live turned out to be the struggles for land. Promised land became synonymous to the denial of promises. As they don't have any provision to possess organized voting bank, no political party raised their voice for them. In order to sustain their voting banks they supported and persuaded them to conduct agitations against government. These agitations were mere foul plays by political parties. Behind the scenes they were making way for the encroachers. When we trace back the history of events we came to know that the plight of these people begins from the immigrations dating back to the time of the Britishers. During the Second World War, in order to rehabilitate the soldiers, the government snatched about 33,802 acres of tribal lands of Southern parts of Vayanad, Sulthan Bathery, Nenmeni, Ambalvayal. Thus this paved way for the immigrants to exploit the poor tribal people for their needs. Later in the year 1975, Kerala Assembly had passed the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer of Land and Restoration of alienated land) legislation for the tribal sections of the state. This particular law was to ensure that the land of the tribal people should confine within them and shouldn't get into the hands of non-tribal people. It was also meant to restore their lands which got previously alienated. They once possessed extended land in forests in Wayanad, Palakkad, Idukki, Kollam, Pathanamthitta and Thiruvananthapuram. In many ways Post-Independence governments and non tribal settlers were responsible for these landless plights of Adivasi communities. As per the land reform act, maximum land attributed to them was 10cent. But today only three or four families reside there. In 1971, in the name of annexing private forest areas, government acquired most part of the land attributed to the tribal people. The law of 1975 was suggested as a solution but the law didn't come into action. Later in 1999, in the name of compatibility, both ruling and opposition parties together suggested a law, which provided them little relief. But making use of many loopholes in that particular law, many interested parties acquired those lands illegally from the hands of the tribal people. In the year 2006, when UPA government came into power, Forest Rights Act was passed. On the basis of this act, many of the political parties made them tenanted inside forest areas. Majority of these sections who tenanted inside these forest areas didn't get land yet. During August 2001, when agitation in front of the secretariat was taking place, there reported 32 deaths due to starvation. When situations got worse, A.K Antony government called up Gothra Mahasabha for compromise and signed a treaty. In that particular treaty, they made five promises. Land that can be provided with 5acres will be given that much land, at other regions minimum 1acre of land will be given and on the basis of the availability of land more land will be given, during land distribution they enable them with adequate resources to meet their needs, a five year project will be introduced, government will decide the judgment on the case which was filed in supreme court on tribal land encroachment, a law will be passed in order to protect the newly given land for the tribal people and they claim central government to announce this land as 'Scheduled Settlement Area'. But government didn't keep their promises and they didn't get any land. Thus on 3 January, 2003, Gothra Mahasabha entered into Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary. But on 19 January, 2003, A.K Antony government ordered police force to fire. Thus in that firing two people were killed and many were wounded. As a result many protests had taken place all over Kerala against this brutal action of the government against these marginalized people. Thus government brought farm land from State Farm Cooperation of India for 42-crore. Even though 840 tribal people were given lease, they couldn't provide land for the rest of the people. When revenue officers claimed that they showed land for 640 people, the rest wandered around the farm. The Government exploits these people the same way how the encroachers exploit by taking advantage of their innocent minds who gift whatever they own when induced by a bundle of tobacco or by offering a low price.

The issues portrayed in *Perariyathavar* and *Kaadu Pookkunna Neram* are closely linked to each other in one way or other. Even though *Kaadu Pookkunna Neram* focuses on how the act UAPA is used as a tool by the government to silence the ones who raise their voice against the autonomy and negligence of the government, the concerns underlying these voices are for the marginalized tribal sections as they are the victims of their power politics.

Under the act of UAPA, government can arrest anyone claiming them to be Maoist. No evidence is needed. There is no specific time of getting bail. In the beginning of the movie a group of policemen are camped in one of the schools in the tribal village in the forest area. They were assigned with the duty to arrest Maoists who are believed to be working among the tribes. The major question which Dr. Biju discusses throughout the film is 'Who a Maoist is'. In the midst of the first half of the film one among the policemen arises this question to his colleagues.

Policeman 1: Frankly speaking, who is a Maoist?

Policeman 2: Those who create a mess out of our lives are Maoists.

Policeman 3: They are trained well and have guns like AK47.

Policeman 1: Why are these Maoists creating so much trouble?

Policeman 3: They are being funded from outside too destroy our nation.

Policemen 1: If they try such a thing, I will die protecting my country.

- (*Kaadu Pookkunna Neram*) (When the woods bloom)

From this conversation, it is clear that people really don't have a clear picture on who a Maoist is or what are their ideologies. This is where government plays tactfully. It provides a misconception in the minds of the people that Maoists are people who act against the government and government policies. This is how government cleverly subdues them by exerting UAPA over them. Many such incidents have been reported in Kerala. Recently Adv. Jaison C Cooper and got arrested on January 28, 2015 under UAPA, claiming for being associated with the attack happened at Kalamassery highway. Police arrested them in the name of interrogation and took them into custody and recorded arrest. Later on January 30, 2015 Adv. Thushar Nirmal Sarathy was arrested claiming the reason. Both of them are associated with Peoples' Human Rights Commission. Due to continuous intervention of many progressive democratic thinking institutions as well as individuals, they got bail on May 17, 2015. Associated with People Human Rights Commission, they indulged in many human rights issues including the incident happened in Kakkannadu, when two other state workers were killed, then issues like endosulfan, Paliyekkara toll protest, protest against Kathikoodu NGIL Company, campaign against Moolambilli and Kudamkulam nuclear plants. Likewise they intervened in various human rights issues in the society, but the government tried to portray them as the ones who try to uplift the human right problems of the Maoists. This stand of the government is somewhat similar to the stand taken by George Bush during the attack of World Trade Centre that if someone stands against the authority, then they will be proclaimed as terrorists and supporters of terrorism. The actions taken by the government to deal with Maoists are, in one or other way, is a sort of human rights violation. The government believes that Maoists are against the state, thus the ones who stand against the suppressing actions taken by the government against Maoists are also against the state. If they are against the state, then they are certainly Maoists. This is the policy that government holds. Nowadays Maoists activities are increasing day by day in our country. The Government always fears the libertinism of the Maoist ideology. This is because there ideologies are very strong that they have the capability to persuade the subjects. In the political climate that exists in Kerala nowadays, there are chances for Maoist breakthrough. This is because in the present scenario, government takes so many measures that adversely affect their lives. They fear the ideology of Maoism proposed by Mao Tse Tung who told to get into the lives of the people to know their problems. The real Maoist institution put forwards the problems of ultimate political power faced by the people. This stands as strict contradiction towards the ideologies of the government and other authoritarian bodies of the country.

The movie portrays the continuous struggle operated between the state and the marginalized, who denied their basic human rights. In the first half of the film, one of the policemen among the group had nabbed someone, when the police force tried to catch the Maoists. Later he realized that he got trapped inside the depths of the forest and the one he caught is a woman, whom he suspects as Maoist. Here both the characters hold a hunter prey relationship on the basis of the power distribution. The characters are molded with contradicting political undertones. Initially power exists in the hands of the policeman because through them only government exercises its authority, whereas on the other hand, the woman stands against the autocratic policies of the government and their negligence and their denial of basic human rights of the poor adivasi communities. One is the voice of the 'superordinate' and the other is the voice of the 'subordinate'. But later on a gradual subversion of power is depicted. This subversion can be read in two different levels. The primary subversion of power is among the political divisions and the secondary one is among gender divisions. When he came to know that he lost his way and only the woman knows the way out he asked her to get him out, she refused. From there starts a gradual shift of power. When an individual or a group of individuals have the ability to fulfill the needs of yet another individual or group of individuals, the former can exert their authority over the latter. They can even superimpose their potency over the conditioned laws. This is the ground on which the

first level of subversion takes place. In certain scenes after the arrest, he frequently reminds her that he is a woman. In one of the scenes when she tries to escape, he uses physical force to suppress her and he tells her,

“You are a woman. Remember that. I will not kill you. But I am capable of other things.”

- Indrajith's character (*Kaadu Pookkunna Neram*)

She spits on his face as a reply to him. It silently symbolizes her rancor towards the arrogance that the patriarchal realm holds, which always tries to substantiate their claim on categorizing women as defend less. Here gradually the prey becomes the hunter and the hunter becomes the prey, reversing the gender roles.

Dr. Biju depicts the government's deliberate attempts to substantiate their claims on Maoist activities among the tribals and the one who raises their voices for them are depicted clearly in the film. In a particular scene, in search of a tribal man called Choman, whom they suspect to be helping the Maoists to flourish their activities, four innocent tribal men were arrested. They made them naked in front of everyone during interrogation and recorded arrest by exerting UAPA. Since it is a non-bailable offense, they will be tortured inside the jail for many years as no one cares for their lives, neither law nor the government. In one of the scenes the woman's character mocks on the fascist policies followed by the government. She reminds the policeman the words of Mao Tse Tung by raising the gun against the policeman, which had fallen from his hands.

“It was Mao Tse Tung who said that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun

.....But in India, gun is used to retain in power.....The government elected by the people uses gun and police to frighten the people.”

- Rima Kallingal's character (*Kaadu Pookkunna Neram*)

This scene symbolically reminds the audience that, 'power' and 'weapons attribute power to the government otherwise it is just 'helpless'. When the woman raises the gun against the policeman, it can be read as an interrogation of the people towards the autonomy of the government. It depicts the fear of the government, when people get moved against them.

The film arouses so many questions in the minds of the audience. In a particular scene, the policeman asks the woman, why she opted for Maoism. Then she asked him who told him that she is a Maoist. Then she asks him whom they consider as Maoists. He replied that the ones who wage war against the government in the name of environment and tribals.

“If some people involved in the issues of environment or tribals, how can they be called a Maoists? The government considers the people who involve in issues like the environment, gender, tribals and Dalits as Maoists.....The police are labeling all those who read books like good films and theatre, people who cast their opinion social media with a Maoist seal.”

- (*Kaadu Pookkunna Neram*) (When the woods bloom)

The actual fear of the government is its subjects. Thus they sow the fear of Maoism among the people. This scene is slapstick towards the political parties also. It suggests that the Maoists commit not even one-fourth of the attacks committed by the political parties on a single day of hartal. When she takes him out of the forests, he enquires her name.

Policeman: What is your name?

Woman: Maoist!! Calling me that way will be easier.

Policeman: You do have a name.

Woman: In front of any policeman our names are 'irrelevant'.
To call us Maoists will be convenient.

Policeman: You didn't ask me my name

- (*Kaadu Pokkunna Neram*) (When the woods bloom)

This scene sounds sarcastic and a slap on the face of the authorities of the state and the media who act in favor of the government and brand those who raise their opinions against the authorities as Maoists and extremists. Both the films throw light to the blatant, ignorant and adamant nature of the authorities. In *Perariyathavar* he portrayed the game of politics in which both government and the capitalist groups combine to form the dominant class. Here rights

of the underprivileged are flexible so that any profit seeking dominant group can alter them according to their will. The Government who are assigned with the duty to protect them is portrayed in a way that they act according to the will and interest of the hegemonic groups. The power which they hold is the reason why the ruling class attempts to ally with them. Cities, as well as forests, are under their autonomy. The harmonious relationship which nature holds with the tribal communities is exploited to satisfy their needs. In *Kaadu Pookkunna Neram*, Dr. Biju speaks of the suppressive nature of the government in muting the voices which rise against them by altering and formulating different laws. The film portrays how tribals and people who speak for the tribals are accused in the name of Maoism. Different individuals or groups who work for regaining the denied rights of these indigenous are suppressed by exerting UAPA law by branding them as Maoist. Dr. Biju criticizes this act of the government who fears its subject and distorting their perceptions of truth. The character played by Rima Kallingal stands for the rights of the tribals but it is not revealed to the audience whether she belongs to any radical group. Here the director is not endorsing any radical group or their ideology. Rather Dr. Biju is making attempts to unfold the blatant image of the government who stands against its subject and fears the subject who stands against them. In a democratic country like India, today it seems to be difficult to speak one's mind, act according to one's will denying all the rights which our Constitution offers us.

CONCLUSION

Portraying the lives of the marginalized communities, the social, political and economic disparities they face are not widely discussed in Indian cinema. Whereas in the International scenario, foreign films such as Iranian movies, Korean movies, Italian movies etc, for the past many years, have been attempting in portraying the lives and issues faced by these marginalized sections. Nowadays a small change has witnessed in the consciousness of India Film-makers, in the way in which they view these subaltern issues. The growing influence of fascism is the reason why these filmmakers show reluctance in portraying these issues onscreen. These issues can't be addressed, without raising their voices against the authorities, as to an extent they are responsible for the plight of the marginalized. Thus the government has been suppressing every form of art that communicate with the people and tries to throw light to the current socio-political scenario. This is the psychology that works behind attacking Dalit writers and movie makers who accommodate subaltern issues in their movies. They even try to alter syllabuses of universities, schools in order to eradicate whatever models working against the government. One such recent issue is deleting the history of Channar revolt in Kerala which initiated protest against breast taxation from CBSE texts. Fascist government suppresses every movement that glorifies such revolts of the marginalized. Yet another similar issue trending in our society today is government's blatant act of exerting different laws over the people who strive to raise their voices and opinions against the government by branding them as Maoists and anti-nationals.

Dr. Biju through his movies *Perariyathavar* and *Kaadu Pookkunna Neram*, substantiates these social realities. According to him, to a greater extent, the negligence and indifference from the part of the government are the reason behind the sufferings of these marginalized sections. The government acts in favor of the dominant classes in the society and their union results in taking advantage of the poor marginalized sections in order to gain mutual benefits. Because they know, helping the poor underprivileged sections may not provide them any gain.

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