



## **Creating Ruptures in Hegemonic Narratives: A Study of Adivasi Representation in the Film *Unda***

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### **Abstract**

*Representation of Adivasis(aboriginals) has always been a problematic subject in the Malayalam film industry. Though left progressive filmmakers of the 70s have attempted to address the marginalization of minorities, it ended up stereotyping the ethnic minorities as voiceless, oppressed, ugly and untouchable and in need of a left-liberal revolutionary savior who in most cases will be an upper-caste man. This paper is an attempt to critically examine the representation of Adivasis in Malayalam cinema and how the film *Unda* makes a difference in the scenario. Malayalam popular cinema has always explicitly stereotyped aboriginals by portraying them as fools, thieves, exotic and ugly. On the other hand, art cinema/ parallel cinema created by the left-leaning intellectuals have attempted to address the oppression of Adivasis by the state and the society. But they most often take the form of an academic narrative and fails miserably in preserving the cinematic quality of the film. Another focal point of the study is to analyze how *Unda* has attempted to create minor ruptures in the grand narrative without losing its cinematic essence. The movie critically reflects on how a state apparatus like the police force systematically oppress minorities even inside the force. The film *Unda* deconstructs the popular notion of Malayalis that caste is of a foregone era and that Kerala is a castles society. Unlike the popular cinematic portrayal of minorities, the Adivasi character in the movie has a voice of his own. He speaks for himself. He resists casteist abuses. *Unda* also problematizes the state violence towards Adivasis and how the state abuses them by claiming they are Maoists. This paper tries to evaluate how *Unda* challenges the popular visual culture and the idea of stardom even when it is a box office hit.*

*Keywords: Aboriginals, Agency, Representation, State Violence, Stereotyping , Visual Culture*

History of Malayalam cinema is as old as the history of Kerala. Cinema has become an essential part of the cultural framework of Kerala. The political changes arose in the public discourse of Kerala massively influenced Malayalam cinema. What makes Malayalam cinema different from other Indian film industries is that Malayalam cinema from the beginning itself largely focused on social and political issues of Kerala. Present study intends to analyse the representation of adivasis in Malayalam cinema and the socio cultural context of the films that depicts adivasis.

Left political discourses to a great extent shaped the public consciousness of Kerala which is reflected on cinemas as well. Kerala is famous for its high rates of literacy and life expectancy than other states in India. The role of left political parties in the growth of the overall human development of Kerala is commendable. But as Luisa Steur points out in her article “Adivasi Mobilisation: Identity versus Class after the Kerala Model of Development” , Kerala model of development proposed by the left political parties focused only on class issues and the emancipation of peasants and workers

## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-06

### International Conference on Indigenous Languages and Translation Studies

held on Saturday, 3rd August 2019

Venue- Seminar Hall, **School of Humanities and Social Sciences**, Jain Deemed-to-be-University, Palace Road, Bengaluru, India



excluding other marginalised communities such as dalits, adivasis and other minorities. She examines that Kerala's general human development came at the cost of silencing adivasis and other minorities (3). Assimilation of the political identity and the issues faced by adivasis into a larger working class problem denied them any chance of speaking for themselves.

In the social imagination of Malayalis, adivasi is someone who does not have a political identity of his/her own. They are perceived as passive victims of oppression and are not capable of being political actors of their own right. These dominant narratives controlled by Brahmanism as well as the hegemonic class discourses get its approval by the systematic repudiation of the history and culture of dalits and adivasis (Dharavath, 192). Resisting these grand narratives dalit and ethnic minority discourses emerged and gained popularity in the 1990s. Alternate narratives created by dalit and tribal historians challenged Brahmanism as well as the class discourse which refuted the political agency of adivasis. The new epistemic change created by these new narratives gave momentum to the new organic dalit and tribal movements all across India. Land struggles in Kerala can be seen as a part of this new shift. Steur examines that the indigenous people of Kerala appropriated the colonial construction of aboriginals as a homogeneous category in order to connect to global discourse on indigenous rights. Many indigenous tribes in Kerala before these new movements identified themselves as peasants or workers (5). Steur also points out "It is only in organising to claim the 'tribal rights' inscribed in the Indian constitution that different 'tribal' communities have started to call themselves 'adivasi' and have started to unite"(6). This new alternate historiography gave rise to a new sensibility among academicians and scholars. Many scholars have problematized the historical injustice done by the non-indigenous artists, writers and film makers in their representation of the indigenous.

The idea of representation in media and cultural studies has gained importance over the past few years. According to Stuart Hall representation is the production of meaning through language. The discursive approach in the constructivist theory of representation not only discusses how language creates meaning but also examines how this knowledge is connected to the notion of power (16). Representations are mediated. This mediation process is influenced by "factors such as modernity, history, experience, agency and power" (Dharavath, 25). Gopal Guru in his famous speech given to the U.N conference on Race, Xenophobia and Other Related Forms of Discrimination held in Durban raises an important question: who has the right to represent?(2)

Mainstream popular films most often cater to the national images and hegemonic narratives of a society. Representation of minorities has always been a problematic subject in the Malayalam film industry. Mainstream Malayalam cinema has explicitly stereotyped adivasis as fools, villains, ugly, exotic and comic. From the early depictions of adivasis in movies like *Nellu* to the more recent *Bamboo Boys*, the image of adivasi is constructed as man eating, half naked, dark savages. Even though art / parallel films created by the left leaning intellectuals have attempted to address the marginalisation of adivasis and other minorities they ended up stereotyping adivasis as voiceless, passive victims of oppression and in need of a left revolutionary saviour who in most cases will be an upper caste man. J. Devika calls this the "rendering of the oppressed passive". Left liberals made oppressed people's emancipation dependant on the all sacrificing 'reformers' who are more privileged in their caste and social status (804).

Tamil director Pa Ranjith in his films specifically *Kaala* and *Kabali* challenges both the brahmanic and left liberal narratives of caste issues by appropriating popular cinematic techniques. Placing Rajnikanth in the centre of both movies can be seen as an intentional act. 'Mass dialogues' and heroics of the protagonist were used as an instrument to convey anti-caste perceptions and Ambedkar ideologies. By using Rajnikanth's stardom Pa Ranjith in fact calls upon the casteism and bigotry of the cinema industry itself.

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The most recent Malayalam movie *Unda*, which tells the story of a police group travelling to Chhattisgarh for election duty, can be seen as a political representation of the changes happening in the Malayalam film industry. *Unda* addresses topics such as casteism, state violence and cultural invasions. One of the main characters of the movie, Biju Kumar, is an adivasi police constable. The caste abuse faced by BijuKumar inside the police force is an example of how casteism operates even inside state agencies. *Unda* questions the left liberal notion of caste as a phenomenon of a foregone era and caste oppression only happens in North India. Even when the main plot of the movie talks about the Maoist threat to the police and the caste oppression of adivasis in Basthar ,Chattisgarh , the script writer Harshad skilfully places this as a mere background for showing the veiled casteism of the so called progressive people of Kerala.

Biju Kumar is the only character in the movie that can identify with the plight of adivasis in Basthar. He is not shown as a voiceless victim in the movie. Biju resists caste abuses throughout the movie. He even fights with another police constable and reclaims his self-respect. The main protagonist of the movie Mani sir who is a sub inspector, played by Mammooty challenges the conventional notions of a hero. *Unda* deconstructs the popular Malayalam cinematic imaginations of the police hero as an upper caste, masculine saviour. Mani sir does not boast about his masculinity or the greatness of the system. He talks about experiences of his life. He is shown as having all the vulnerabilities of a human being. At a critical juncture in the movie Biju Kumar openly talks about the discrimination he is facing as an adivasi and says that he is thinking about quitting the force. Before this speech the character of mammooty asks the fellow police trainees to listen to what Biju has to say. Ajith Kumar A.S points out that this is an important rupture in the conventional narrative styles followed in popular cinema. He notes that Mammooty, the mega star of Malayalam industry, asking everyone to listen to Biju Kumar, can be understood as an important statement saying that the mainstream cinema and cinema industry should start listening to the narratives of the marginalised communities (3).

The only female character of the movie is the wife of Mani sir. She is shown as a bold pulaya woman with strong convictions. Pa Ranjith in his movies uses visual signs like photos of Ambedkar, the three piece suit of the dalit hero which is a political statement, or visual prominence given to the colour blue, which is an explicit symbol of dalit power, in order to convey his political and ideological stand on casteism. In *Unda* when showing the house of Mani sir and his wife, the audience can see the photo of Ayyankali in the living room which can be understood as an intentional act from the part of film maker to convey where he stands. Even though the movie revolves around Mani sir and the constables under him, *Unda* addresses the issue of state violence towards adivasis and how state abuses them by claiming that they are Maoists through the character Kunal Chand. In the movie, Kunal Chand's son gets arrested for his alleged affiliation with Maoists and eventually results in his mysterious death.

It is imperative to note that a group of Muslim film makers are beginning to challenge the dominant narratives of casteism, islamophobia and gender discrimination in Malayalam films. We saw the emergence of a new political discourse awakening during the Rohith Vemula protest in Hyderabad Central University which challenged the Hindu Brahmanical state and left liberal politics by uniting both Islamic morality and Ambedkar ideology. New film makers like Muhsin Perari, Harshad, Zakkariya Mohammed, Khalid Rahman and many more are deconstructing the conventional ideas of film making. *Unda* is one such movie which opens a possibility for an alternate dialogue on caste discrimination.

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