

And Their Voices Resonated from Parallel Worlds: A Study on the Portrayal of Adivasi Women Characters in Malayalam Parallel Cinema

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Malayalam Cinema has proved its mettle in various national and international venues with its innovative treatment of offbeat themes and has demonstrated its efficacy in attracting a large pool of moviegoers worldwide. Still, when it comes to the realistic portrayal of the Adivasi communities in Kerala, mainstream Malayalam cinema lags like any other film industry in India. The selective erasure of well-delineated Adivasi women characters is perceivable in mainstream film narratives, even in Malayalam. Nevertheless, a refreshing change can be witnessed in the depiction of Adivasi women in the Malayalam parallel cinema of recent years. Here, an Adivasi woman does not play the role of a mere victim of the atrocities meted out to her, but rather, she is represented as being resilient in her mind and body. Another promising change is the surfacing of Adivasi auteur Leela Santhosh who incorporates the distinctive 'Paniya' dialect in her screenplays to provide constructive solutions to agonies faced by the women in her community. Since the portrayal of Adivasi womanhood in Malayalam parallel cinema has evolved over the years, it would be rewarding to chart this change. The present paper seeks to find the factors responsible for these shifting perceptions by placing these portrayals against the backdrop of sociological studies conducted among the tribes of Kerala.

Keywords: Adivasis, Indigenous Cinema, Adivasi auteur, Scopophilia, Realism

Introduction

Cinema is one of the commercialised art forms of the twentieth century. The ideological underpinnings hidden under the finer fabric of cinema can play a crucial role in swaying public opinion. The Malayalam film industry produces an average of 150 movies per year (Divakaran, 2017, p. 240), making it the fourth-largest filmmaking industry in India. Within a brief span of 94 years, Malayalam cinema has already proved its mettle in various national and international venues. From the treatment of offbeat themes dealing with societal inequalities to the innovative visual rendering on the big screen, Malayalam cinema has the efficacy to attract a large pool of moviegoers from all over the world.

However, when it comes to the realistic representation of minorities and their hardships, mainstream Malayalam cinema falls behind just like any other film industry in India. In a nation where the plurality of Adivasi voices is either quashed or silenced, the glamorous world of mainstream movies largely eschews the Adivasis. The Adivasi women in mainstream Malayalam cinema are reduced to generic stereotypes. They occupy the fringes of the film narrative. The violence inflicted upon their bodies is often depicted in such a way that it gives a scopophilic pleasure to the audience. The Adivasi woman is often portrayed as being a mere victim of the various atrocities meted out to her. Her ethnic identity, as well as her gender, places her at the receiving end of a doubly oppressed existence. However, a refreshing change can be witnessed in the depiction of Adivasi women in the Malayalam parallel cinema of recent years. In this parallel world, we see her braving the odds. She dons the role of a breadwinner and proves to be more resilient in mind and body than her male counterpart. In both cinematic universes, oppression and exclusion remain the same.

Nonetheless, in the world of parallel cinema, such oppressions do not seem to break an Adivasi woman's spirit; instead, these women characters are depicted as rising from the flames of their scorching past. When it comes to the cinematic representation of the Adivasis,

another promising change that lies waiting on the horizon is the possibility of an indigenous film from Kerala's soil. Though popular in the west, indigenous films are still a rarity in India. However, Adivasi auteur Leela Santhosh, who belongs to the Paniya community in Wayanad, has made a maiden attempt on this front. The short film *Paikinjana Chiri* directed by her, is distinctive not only for the stark representation of the problems faced by the women in her community but also for providing an effective solution to their agonies in their language. Indubitably the portrayal of Adivasi womanhood in Malayalam parallel cinema has evolved over the years. Hence, it is essential to chart this change. The present paper seeks to find the reasons behind these shifting perceptions by placing these portrayals against the backdrop of sociological studies made on the tribes of Kerala.

The Problematic Representation of Adivasi Women in Mainstream Malayalam Cinema

When it comes to Malayalam cinema, the fascination with the exotic has drawn early filmmakers to depict the Adivasi lifestyle through an exceedingly distorted lens. According to an article by Malayalam film critic B. Vijayakumar of *The Hindu* newspaper, "Indian Films with the jungle as a backdrop was inspired by Hollywood. Films like the *Adventures of Tarzan*, created by Edgar Rice Burroughs, were very popular" (Vijayakumar, 2012). Since Tarzan was a 'noble savage' created to uphold white supremacy and its civilising tendencies, such an observation is not entirely unfounded. In early Malayalam movies, the tribal characters were often sidelined, with the centre stage devoted to the hero or heroine who descends the silver stairs of civilisation to make their grand entrance into the wilderness. The tribes are depicted as highly submissive, naïve and susceptible to subjugation. They were always portrayed as venerating the outsiders with utmost devotion, elevating the outsider's status to that of 'God.' The protagonist of these early movies thus acquires a divine aura. In the movie, *Vanamala*, which IMDB credits as the first "Jungle" movie in Kerala, yesteryear actress Neyyatinkara Komalam is cast as Nalini, aka Maala, the eponymous heroine of the tale. Her character is reminiscent of Tarzan. Born as the daughter of a zamindar,

Maala was separated from her birth parents due to the evil scheming of her father's secretary Prasad. She is abandoned in a forest and is nurtured by a tribal couple. Her foster family's domesticated elephant becomes her confidante. The appearance of the elephant Baby Lekshmi made the movie all the more exotic, garnering rave reviews among moviegoers. In several early Malayalam movies, the lush greenery of Wayanad, Attapady and Thirunelli is utilised to provide a backdrop to the lovemaking scenes and song sequences between the hero and heroine. The Adivasis appeared dressed in scanty clothing adorned with headgear festooned with variegated feathers as accompaniments to these song sequences. Another trope used by the early filmmakers was that of the hero or heroine meeting with a severe accident only to be rescued by a tribal healer or herbalist living in the foothills of the Western Ghats. In the above instances, the tribes were never portrayed as the main character. They always stood in the periphery with only a few dialogues to deliver. These early portrayals show that the tribal population was objectified to cater to the fetishes of the mainstream audience.

The scene slowly began to shift in the 1970s. Movies began to focus primarily on an outsider's perspective on the tribal ethos. The reason for this departure might have been the rising prospect of novelists like P. Valsala and Malayattoor Ramakrishnan in Malayalam literature. Through their novels and novellas, they depicted the customs and practises of the tribals in Kerala from an outsider's perspective. These novels were later adapted to the screen. Ramu Kariyat adapted P. Valsala's *Nellu* in 1974, and Thoppil Bhasi adapted Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's *Ponni* in 1976. Sooner, there was a slow surge in Malayalam film industry in the movies dealing with tribal ethos. Movies like *Malamukalile Daivam* (P.N Menon, 1983), *Uyarum Njan Nadake* (P. Chandrakumar, 1985), *Bamboo Boys* (Ali Akbar, 2002) and *Kaatuchembakam* (Vinayan, 2002) to name a few noteworthy works. In most of these movies, tribals were portrayed as highly superstitious, unhygienic folk. The role of the tribal woman was often ascribed to a fair-skinned actress. Her body was either tanned or kept the same to suit the role. Various camera angles focused on the voluptuous body of the actresses and dancers as they acted demurely

on screen. Coyness was their virtue and submissiveness, a common trait that would eventually wreak havoc in their lives. The only aberration among these naïve tribal women is Kurumatti, a notable character in P. Valsala's *Nellu*. She is the only assertive character among a retinue of the coquettish young woman. In expressing her unabashed desire for Mallan, Kurumatti emerges as a femme fatale, eventually leading the star-struck lovers Mallan and Mara to their ultimate ruin. These movies presented a romanticised version of the tribal milieu by focussing more on the rituals and practices than their day-to-day life.

Representing Women in Transition: Adivasi Woman in New Age Malayalam Parallel cinema

The surfs created by the New Wave Cinema created ripples in movies dealing with tribal themes. Presently, Malayalam parallel cinema justly portrays tribal lives in transition. *Velutha Raathrikal* (2015), an independent cinematic adaptation of the eponymous novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky and directed by Razi Muhammad, ushers in a fresh change to the set pattern in the portrayal of Adivasi womanhood. Right from the casting of Smitha Ambu as Chelly and her meticulous delivery of dialogues intermixing Irula dialect with standard Malayalam to the impeccable cinematography capturing the verdant forest tracks of Attapady, this movie is a realistic portrayal of the tribal lives in transition. The movie's central character is Chelly, an Adivasi woman from the Attapady region in Kerala. The Irulars depicted on the screen do not wear gaudy ornaments or scanty clothes to please the audience. Chelly is often spotted wearing bright yellow coloured churidars and sarees which best match the fashion trends of 2015. Chelly is neither illiterate nor is she naïve. She has acquired higher secondary education and even went on to study at a nearby college in Palghat. Chelly was also a champion in various sports events during her school and college days.

Nevertheless, one day, as she stood on the winner's podium, she faced ridicule from the mainstream male students in her college as they taunted her as well as other women belonging to the tribal community as "unclad tribal girls from Attapady" (Razi, 2016, 54:50). This acerbic comment haunts Chelly to the core. She describes that

the raw wound never healed. She even decides to quit her studies but is reprimanded by her soulmate Jyothi. The Scheduled Tribes in Kerala have an impressive record in literacy rates, approximately 74.44% (Kerala State Planning Board, 2017), whereas the national average is 68.5%. However, the 2013 *Report on the Social Economic Status of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala* shows that a whopping 85.59% of girl students dropped out of school at the secondary level. At the graduation level, there is a slump in the percentage of dropouts, with the statistics showing 12.98% of dropouts among girl students. (Scheduled Tribes Development Department, 2013) The fact that graduates could earn remunerative jobs attracts the young generation of Adivasis to pursue a graduate-level degree. Apart from that, the offer of a lucrative government job encourages them to study even harder. However, in schools and colleges, they face varying levels of discrimination. Body shaming is a routine that they can seldom surpass, often resulting in a lowering of self-esteem, eventually leading to massive dropouts from schools and colleges. This aspect got seldom represented in movies portraying Adivasi characters. Stereotypical tropes often presented Adivasi men and women as having lower intellectual acumen. Thus, the movie *Velutha Raathrikal* depicts the Adivasi life in transition with utmost sincerity.

The central focus of *Velutha Raathrikal* falls on the sexual and economic liberation of Chelly. The film carefully delineates her bisexual identity by depicting her mutual attraction to Manu and Jyothi. Her love is reciprocated by both of them. Though the plotline at first glance might seem sensationalist, the director has taken caution to sensitise the audience to the theme at hand. The tribal community is depicted as being deeply homophobic, with her grandmother prescribing marriage for Chelly for her vagrant transgression. She is married off to her cousin Udayan. Soon after her marriage, Chelly is displaced to Coimbatore as her husband Udayan migrates to the nearby city in search of pastures new. A 1987 study conducted by Walter Fernandes and Geetha Menon (as cited in Fernandes 2005) revealed that development-induced displacement has a higher impact on tribal women than men. Earlier, in the primitive tradition of shifting cultivation, men and women shared the equal work burden. “. . . The man as the

head of the family chose the land he would cultivate and performed religious rites symbolising the beginning of cultivation. At this stage, the woman took charge of it and organised production and work. As a result, the division of work was more gender-friendly in shifting cultivation than in settled agriculture” (Fernandes, 2005, p. 71). Since women exerted equal control over the family economy and its sustenance, they enjoyed a higher status and decision-making power within the family. However, in the current age, this equation has changed. Individual land ownership alienated families from their natural resources and sources of sustenance. The community support system weakened, and women lost their relative autonomy. In the movie *Velutha Raathrikal*, Chelly is forced to work night shifts in a cloth mill for a paltry sum of 4000 rupees per month so that her husband could quench his thirst for liquor. Alcoholism has always been a bane to the Adivasi women who provided provisions for the household. In a qualitative study conducted on the tribal men of Wayanad as a part of the Tribal Mental Health Project funded by the Social Justice Department, Gov. of Kerala, it was revealed that parental factors, home environment, peer factors and early financial autonomy contributed to the initiation of the tribal youth to alcoholism. (Sadath et.al., 2019) The alcohol abuse among the tribal men was also linked with their tradition and culture, whereby the consumption of alcohol was concomitant with many important life events in an Adivasi man's life. Besides, several landlords lured the Adivasi youth into doing the work on their farmlands by enticing them with an offer of alcohol in return for the work done, “As male members spend almost all their wages on alcohol, the financial needs of the family are often met by the women of the household. Such situations demand the tribal women to go for work to run the family, this additional role, along with the existing housewife role, contributes to a high level of burden on them” (Sadath et al., 2019, p. 520). Thus, even in the advanced stages of her pregnancy, Udayan asks Chelly to work to maintain his over-dependence on alcohol. However, their marriage is short-lived as her drunkard husband deserts her to remarry another tribal woman. In such a conjecture, her financial independence enables Chelly to break free from an abusive marriage when her husband questions the paternity of her unborn child.

The film deals with the universal themes such as spousal desertion, single parenthood and struggles for survival in the context of the tribal milieu. Like Chelly, her elder sister faces desertion from her husband, who is a non-tribal. With the advent of modernisation, the practice of marrying an outsider became quite common in the tribal milieu. These outsiders, with their increased knowledge of seasonal agriculture and modern mechanised farming, offered an alternative cultivation strategy that promised them yearlong availability of food. Such outsiders who gained access to the abundant land resources gained full usufructuary right over the land. They cultivated cash crops or plantains in the fertile forest soil, made a profit, and left the forest trails, leaving their tribal wife and offspring behind. In a case study titled *Adivasi Women in Southern India and their Cultural Oppression in Contemporary India*, published as a part of the proceedings of the National History Congress 2016, author Ramee Begum Shaik observes that most Adivasi women have no property rights over the land. “It is primarily the men who have full usufructuary rights over the land and other resources” (Shaik, 2016, p.1066). Thus, in terms of land ownership, Adivasi women remain subservient to their male counterparts. This inequality proves fatal when the Adivasi woman faces marital infidelity. Denial of land rights and limited access to community benefits raises the stake of discrimination against women. The frequent contact with the mainstream Hindu culture has made the Adivasi men more patriarchal in their outlook. Ramee Begum Shaik observes, “Adivasi men now prefer their wives to be housebound in the pattern of Hindu peasant groups” (Shaik, 2016, p.1067). Geetha Menon makes another interesting observation on this change in her article titled *The Impact of Migration on Work and Status of Tribal Women in Orissa* in which she observes that Adivasi men subscribe to Hinduism in an attempt to reclaim their lost status (Menon, 1995) And as Fernandes observes in his article *Development Induced Displacement: Impact on Tribal Woman*, in the traditional society of the Adivasis, men donned the role of hunters, guardians and village council elders. “These roles have now been taken over by the state, without providing any alternative to suit their lost status.” (Fernandes, 2005, p. 80) Furthermore, As observed by Menon (as cited by

Fernandes) men try to compensate for this loss of status “by migrating to another place, improving their economic status, and getting absorbed into a new value system and society that assigns a totally subordinate status to women” (Fernandes, 2005, p.80). Thus the tribal woman has to fight the patriarchal structures within her community and the outside influence of Hindu culture. In exploring these aspects, the movie *Velutha Rathrikal* skilfully weaves the universals with the particulars.

The theme of language loss and loss of identity are succinctly dealt with in the movie. The loss of identity faced by the tribals with the advent of modern-day schooling and their struggle to assimilate standard Malayalam is shown through a scene in which Chelly's daughter Udayakumari is exposed to linguistic violence as she grapples with finding words equivalent to the pond, peacock and sky in Malayalam as her knowledge of these words is limited to the tribal dialect. The loss of hope among the tribals as they desperately try to hold on to their superstitious past and fast-moving present is contrasted effortlessly. The ingenious tribal youth Murugan who later adapts to his mute inglorious lifestyle, is a piercing reminder of how the resourceful tribal youth never gets to live the decent life of their dreams.

Another notable film in this genre is *Udalaazham* (2018), directed by Unnikrishnan Avala. The movie is unique for introducing many inclusive elements: the dialogues of this movie are written in both Paniya dialect and Malayalam and feature national award-winning Adivasi actor Mani P.R in the lead role. Mani could improvise upon the dialogues as he knew the Paniya dialect better than the director. The life of Raju, a tribal transgender person, partially inspires the film. The director of this movie had previously written a biography titled *Vipareetham*, recounting Raju's doubly marginalised and ostracised experiences. One of the major themes dealt with in this movie is the clash between the practice of child marriage among Paniyas and the newly introduced POCSO Act. The film is set in a deep jungle. The Adivasis belonging to the Paniya community are represented as living in a vast riverbed settlement. The settlement is prone to drought in the harsh summers. Occasionally, they also face deluges caused by the opening of shutters in the nearby dams. The movie portrays one of

the strongest tribal woman characters ever to be represented in Malayalam cinema, Maathi. In one of the introductory scenes, Maathi is shown hewing firewood with an axe as her husband Gulikan watches on playfully while petting his dog. Here the established gender roles are reversed. An old tribal woman, presumably Maathi's mother, is seen scolding Gulikan for not hewing the logs, a job traditionally ascribed to men. She calls him 'aanumpennum kettavan' 'neither a man nor a woman.' This is the first caustic remark to be made on Gulikan's identity. At night, Maathi tries to make love to her husband; however, he refuses to comply. The next morning, Gulikan frankly states that he can only provide her with rice gruel to satiate her hunger and that he cannot satiate her sexual desires. It is revealed that Gulikan got married to Maathi at a very young age. "Child marriages are common among Paniya community as they intended to follow it as a traditional practice. . . They consider the age of puberty as marriageable age" (Kalesh P & Rajasree, 2019, p. 121). It is stated in the film's narrative that the marriage between Gulikan and Maathi took place when he was 13 yrs old, and she was 14. At the time of marriage, Gulikan must have been too young to come to terms with his gender identity. However, Maathi is not willing to give up on him. She loves him dearly and hopes that one day he will be able to give her a child. She believes that Gulikan can mend his 'ways.' As the movie progresses, the mainstream men are shown using Gulikan to satisfy their sexual perversions. The police ignore such atrocities committed against the tribal youth. In a scene that functions as an eye-opener, Gulikan is brutally raped by a man, and his cries can be heard in the background, but the policemen are shown ignoring his very existence. Instead, they arrest the non-tribals for committing petty crimes like playing cards. At night, Gulikan is shown writhing in pain as the teary-eyed Maathi offers him comfort. She urges Gulikan to take part in a theyyam ritual where a tribal woman possessed by the spirit of Maariyamman would offer to 'cure' Gulikan of his current disposition. The fact that Maathi is willing to spend Gulikan's four days' hard-earned wages on a religious ritual shows the depth of her superstitious beliefs. Recent research conducted on elderly tribal women belonging to the Paniya tribe in the Mannanthavady district of Kerala revealed that the older

woman of the Paniya community believe in supernatural powers and their ability to cure diseases (Subudhi et al., 2019). The study also revealed that the present generation has little knowledge about ethnomedicine, and the new generation is not keen to follow these practices. The study explains the cause of Gulikan's reluctance to spend money on a meaningless ritual. As poverty pushes Gulikan to work at a hotel in the nearby town, Maathi grows closer to a non-tribal fishmonger. The fishmonger succeeds in grooming Maathi by enticing her with a supply of fresh fish, good clothes and money. Nevertheless, the possibility of having a child out of this union lures Maathi closer to him. Gulikan is once again brutally raped while participating in a temple carnival in town. Meanwhile, a police officer discovers the secret liaison between the fishmonger and Maathi. He films their secret act of love and threatens to make it public. The fishmonger turns out to be a scheming and conniving man. He is wary of getting caught as he has a family back home to look after. However, he is willing to sell Maathi to the police officer as a ransom. When Maathi is made aware of this arrangement she severely admonishes her lover for being a shameless man and spits at him. "Paniyas practice community-level endogamy, and there is no restriction for polygamy and co-habitation. Even if their customary wedding does not have any legal validity, as per the customs of the Paniya community, women enjoy a free social life and equal status with others in the community" (Kalesh P & Rajasree, 2019, p. 122), True to these facts, Maathi is not portrayed as a woman who is cowed down by coercion. When the police officer directly makes sexual advances at her, she fiercely slaps him across his face. The disgruntled police officer spreads a rumour that Maathi is involved in an illicit affair with the fishmonger and says that she is possibly a carrier of AIDS. Once the news spreads like wildfire, the tribals burn down Maathi's hut and ostracise her from the community. When Gulikan returns from the town, he is unable to find her. He cannot file a missing case because both were minors at the time of their marriage. This puts him in a hapless predicament. From there on, the storyline takes a downward spiral, ultimately culminating in tragedy. The POCSO Act, 2012 is a comprehensive law "to provide protection for children from offences of sexual assault,

sexual harassment and pornography while safeguarding the interests of the child at every stage of the judicial process. The said Act defines a child as any person below eighteen years of age” (The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012). “Sections 5 and 6 of the POCSO Act are charged against most of the Paniya Tribes of Wayanad” (Kalesh P & Rajashree, 2019, p. 123). Even the literate younger generation of tribals are not much aware of the law that could potentially put them behind bars. If imprisoned, a family loses its wage earner, eventually leading to economic instability and isolation. In the movie, Gulikan is portrayed as being aware of this Act and its serious consequences. This modern law fails to acknowledge the customary practices of an age-old tribe. Our judicial system has wronged the tribal populace on an epic scale. Before implementing a common code of law, our nation’s lawmakers should have considered the vivid realities of the tribal populace. Thus, the insensitivity of the higher echelons of the judiciary towards the marginalised is severely critiqued in this movie.

When dealing with indigenous cinema, a remarkable short film directed in the Paniya dialect is worth mentioning. It is a work that genuinely qualifies the term indigenous cinema. The short film directed by the Adivasi auteur Leela, *Paikinjana Chiri* (2020), is a scathing satire on the pressing issues faced by the Adivasis in Kerala. Unlike any of the films mentioned earlier, the movie does not portray a romanticised version of the Adivasis. The central concern of this short film is hunger. The title of this short film is written in the Paniya dialect so are its dialogues. The title, which roughly translates as the “Laugh of Hunger” makes us remember Madhu, the tribal youth who was brutally battered and assaulted for allegedly stealing a bun to satiate his hunger. Though the central theme of this short film concerns the rape and assault of a young tribal woman by a group of non-tribal men, the scene soon escalates as the woman tries to take her life by concocting a toxin from the poisonous leaves known to her. When she grinds the leaves and tries to consume the deadly poison, she is abruptly stopped by her fellow tribesman, depicted in the short film as a delirious madman. He prevents her from committing suicide by recounting the tale of Madhu. The tribal woman soon realises her

folly and, in an attempt to reclaim her life, she decides to keep the child born out of wedlock. In the final scene, she is shown sweeping her courtyard in an attempt to sweep away the impurities, including the rapists who disrupted her seemingly harmonious life. Sexual exploitation by outsiders is still a persistent problem among the Adivasis.

Unmarried Adivasi women are exploited by landlords, contractors, usurers and even forest department officials. No amount of insurgent movements or agitations seems to provide a solution to this pressing issue. A study conducted by Justin P. Jose and Shanuga Cherayi and titled *Life of Tribal Woman in Kerala: Identity Psychosocial disability and Social Exclusion* revealed that tribal communities exerted and maintained control over unwed mothers through stigmatisation and discrimination (Jose & Cherayi, 2018, p.384) this was done to maintain their social order. The short film *Paikinjana Chiri* opens with an assemblage of actors, including tribal and non-tribal men and women. For some strange reason unknown to the viewers, they have all convened in the front yard of a traditional Adivasi household. As the story unfolds, it is revealed that the house belongs to the Adivasi woman who was gang-raped by a group of outsiders. The large crowd outside her home, comprising mostly men, discusses the potential ostracisation of the victim by her community. Her rapists are seen bribing the tribal elders so that the victim would never reveal their names.

Unwed tribal mothers suffer from a psychosocial disability which results in poor self-esteem, negative self-image and limited social engagement, which often prompts them to commit suicide. “Tribal unwed mothers bear two disabling identities. Their individual identity as unwed mothers and collective identity as a tribal woman” (Jose & Cherayi, 2018, p. 382). While the former identity makes them vulnerable to discrimination within the community, the latter makes them vulnerable to discrimination outside the community. Thus, the unwed tribal mother is doubly disadvantaged.

Moreover, unwed mothers have strained relationships with their families, relatives, and neighbours. They internalise the social stigma, making them more vulnerable and creating conflicts in their social relationships. Since unwed motherhood is a “discredited and

devalued identity” (Jose and Cherayi, p. 384), the protagonist of the short film at first decides to end her life. Nevertheless, she is quick to reconsider. Studies conducted among unwed tribal mothers in Kerala have indicated that “unwed mothers had positive tribal identity perceptions than married women.” (Jose & Cherayi, 2018, p. 382) The last shot of this short film offers a testament to this statement as it shows the protagonist, jubilant, dancing to the tone of tribal rhythm, embracing her ethnic identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it becomes evident that Malayalam parallel cinema does not portray Adivasis as mere props in the *mise en scène*. If cinema leaves an impact on the audience with its visual storytelling, the depiction of strong Adivasi women characters such as the economically and sexually liberated Chelli in *Velutharaathrikal*, the stubborn Maathi in *Udalaazham* and the unnamed Paniya woman who thrives after rape in *Paikinjana Chiri* has the potency to alter the mainstream perception towards Adivasi women. Although recent mainstream Malayalam movies such as *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* (2020) and *Pada* (2022) have tried to capture the Adivasi ethos with *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* incorporating the songs composed by Nanjiyamma, a folk singer belonging to the Irula community and *Pada* by choosing to depict the real-life gherao of a district collector by the Ayyankali pada, there is an under-representation of Adivasi women characters in these movies. If the cast of *Pada* comprises chiefly men, in *Ayyapanum Koshiyum*, the female protagonist Kannamma, a tribal woman, gets only limited screen time, constraining the scope of her characterisation. The eroticisation of tribal women continues in movies such as *Pulimurugan* (2016), which was a massive success at the box office. Thus, even today, realistic Adivasi women characters and authentic tribal languages remain underrepresented in mainstream Malayalam cinema. Even though there is an increasing appeal for tribal folk songs in mainstream Malayalam movies, there is still a dearth of scripts written in authentic tribal dialects. Hence the efforts taken by independent filmmakers towards reviving the tribal dialects such as Irula and Paniya are praiseworthy.

The present study reveals that, unlike mainstream movies, the acute problems relating to the Adivasi communities get accurately addressed in Malayalam parallel cinema. Instead of portraying Adivasis through the tinted glass of exoticism, these films discuss issues pertaining to the Adivasis, such as the reasons for the rise in high school dropouts, problems with the Adivasi education system, the effect of development-induced displacement on the Adivasis, the unlawful arrests of Adivasi youth under the POCSO Act and the psychosocial disability faced by the unwed tribal mothers. In an effort to connect the particulars with the universals, in these movies, the directors also discuss universal themes such as identity assertions, homosexuality, bisexuality, single parenthood, alcoholism, hyper-masculinity and patriarchal domination. Thus, these critically acclaimed movies are doing their part in portraying the tribal identity in transition. Moreover, the POV shots from the Adivasi woman's perspective lend authenticity to the characterisation, giving each frame a naturalistic appeal. These shots give the audience a sense of immersion and empathy with the characters. These films sensitise the filmgoers to the problems faced by Adivasis without appearing to be preachy. Instead of adopting slow-paced documentary-style cinematography, these movies follow a moderate pace, giving the audience enough time to reflect on the characters on screen. Hence, the women characters in these movies are well-delineated and well-developed. In addition, the Adivasi auteur Leela Santhosh subtly depicts an authentic Adivasi identity in transition.

As the silenced and oppressed speaks back, there is still hope for redemption for the largely (mis)represented tribal womanhood through the medium of Malayalam parallel cinema. However, to achieve this end, Malayalam parallel cinema, often relegated to the margins, must take centre stage. Unless these realistic portrayals reach the mainstream audience, the misrepresentation of Adivasi communities will continue to harm the mainstream perceptions regarding Adivasis. If the government, film distributors and critics take joint initiatives to popularise parallel cinema among the mainstream audience, they can bring a desirable change in the representation of Adivasi womanhood in Malayalam cinema.

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