

Cry in the Wilderness: Depiction of Tribals in Select Malayalam Films

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ABSTRACT

The marginalization of tribals not just from mainstream society but also from the cultural realm has always been an intensely debated topic. This article seeks to explore their representation in Malayalam films and how it has been historically shaped by dominant social and cultural factors rather than by lived reality. Drawing on selected films like *Aranyakam*, *Bamboo Boys* and *Narivetta* the study examines the politics of representation and how it has critically contributed to the construction of stereotypical images of the tribal community.

Keywords- Tribals, marginalization, Malayalam films, mainstream society, *Aranyakam*, *Bamboo Boys*, *Narivetta*, stereotypes.

The cultural sensitivity in any art form – be it, film, literature, painting etc– and of the society from which it emanates, can be gauged from the way it engages with the marginalized and oppressed sections. In this regard, the Malayalam film industry leaves a lot to be desired as it continually seeks to invoke and reinforce a conventional value system upholding exploitative practices against ethnic minorities, especially the tribal population. Also, it needs to be stated categorically that the industry has failed miserably to identify and give voice to the distinctive identities of the many subgroups that constitute the tribal population of Kerala. There seems to be a lack of awareness or complete disregard in the depiction of diversity among them manifesting in terms of cultural, religious, and ritualistic practices and beliefs. As R.V.M. Divakaran points out, “The tribal population of Kerala... is underrepresented in films and that too is in a stereotypical manner, flattening diverse cultures and identities into one generic stereotype.”

The marginalization and discrimination the tribals experience in society cannot be disassociated with the underrepresentation and disregard they encounter in the cultural realm, especially in films, plays and TV shows. What one can safely assume is that the differential treatment meted out to the tribals in society is consistent with their marginalization in the cultural space. This paper seeks to explore the dynamics of representation, or lack of it, of the tribal communities in three Malayalam films – *Narivetta* (2025), *Bamboo Boys* (2002), and *Aranyakam* (1988). These films have been selected for the study considering the fact that they provide adequate screen time for the tribal characters, though whether they do justice to the tribal characters is another matter altogether.

‘Tribal’, a term coined by the British, has been used to refer to a category of people who share a common culture, language, belief systems and rituals often organized around kinship. In Kerala, the tribal population is around half a million, belonging to different subgroups with distinct cultural identities. Most of them are underprivileged, living in relative isolation in forests and hills and heavily dependent on natural resources for their livelihood. It is in this cultural context that one has to examine the depiction of this marginalized community in mainstream media and films.

Though the depiction of tribals in Malayalam films have evolved over the years, their stereotypical portrayal – varying from the comical to the primitive – remains an issue of critical concern. In fact, one would have to contend that, not just the Malayalam industry but the Indian film industry collectively has failed to do justice to the tribal communities. They are rarely presented as real people with individual identity and agency; on the contrary, they have been assigned

mysterious, peripheral or comical roles relegating them to the background of the central events. This process of othering need not always be deliberate or intentional; it is often the result of the ignorance, indifference or callousness on the part of filmmakers. It is also pertinent to note that commercial films looking for box-office success are bound to reinforce such stereotypes in its quest to feed what is palatable to the undiscerning viewer. As Manoj Kana, filmmaker, speaking to the *The News Minute* observes “In mainstream Malayalam cinema, Adivasis are often projected as curio pieces, giving the impression that they are fine with the atrocities meted out to them— a result of lazy research and writing” (Menon 2019).

Aranyakam (1988) directed by Hariharan, though it superficially deals with various socio-economic issues faced by tribals, has at its core a love story between two elite upper caste/class individuals and the tragic death of a Naxalite fighting for tribal rights liquidated by the State in a fake encounter. It needs to be noted that the Naxalite character is a non-tribal who seems to think that it is up to him and people like him to fight for the tribal cause. Here the film is, in a sense, denying agency to the tribal characters by making a non-tribal character take up the cudgels on their behalf. But then, the film does not entirely disregard the tribal cause. The ambivalence that marked the films of that period when it comes to the portrayal of tribals comes through in *Aranyakam* too; it is sensitive in parts but unjustifiably limiting elsewhere. Though the film empathizes with the tribal cause and appears to take a stance against the exploitative practices of the feudal characters, midway through, the story changes track, eventually becoming a tragic love story and glorification of the personal sacrifice of an individual.

The major issue with the film vis-a-vis the treatment of tribal characters is not granting them narrative agency though the film is purportedly championing the tribal cause. They do not drive the narrative; their role is limited to aid the major characters to embark on their emotional and psychological journey. The critical issues that matter to them like poverty, exploitation, marginalization at the hands of the privileged and State violence and do not find expression in the film. Nor does their inner turmoil, which remains unexplored. In fact, their romanticization as pure, uncorrupted souls living in close harmony with Nature only serves to deprive them of their identity as socially complex human beings with a mind of their own.

Bamboo Boys (2002), directed by Ali Akbar focuses on young tribal men who enter the “mainstream society” in search of livelihood. The film seeks to foreground tribal life— their customs, traditions and values and also the critical problems they face like poverty, unemployment and exploitation. At a superficial level, the film seems to be sympathetic to the tribal cause but on a closer scrutiny it becomes evident that the depiction is laden with stereotypes which has often been the case when it comes to indigenous communities in Malayalam films. Also, there is an attempt to create humor at their expense which makes the film, in a sense, more problematic than other films which relegate them to the periphery.

In the film, the narrative is not from a tribal perspective, though the plot largely revolves around characters belonging to the tribal community. Here, the issue of agency and identity of the tribal characters remains problematic with the plot distancing itself from their mental landscape. The focus of the film seems to be solely on the non-tribal characters with the tribal characters existing just to aid the progression of the plot and provide comic relief. The stereotypical notion that tribals are aggressive, uncivilized and violent and so incapable of leading a normal life in the “mainstream” society also is reinforced by portraying them as engaging in unlawful activities like smuggling. In the ultimate analysis, the film only offers an outsider’s gaze, clouded by an elitist perspective, leading to a complete failure in portraying the tribal characters as real life people with complex feelings and emotions.

Narivetta (2025), directed by Anuraj Manohar is one film in which the depiction of tribal characters transcends the usual flaw of exoticization, making them an integral part of the plot. Though there are obviously many shortcomings with regard to the portrayal of tribal characters, the film refrains from portraying them merely as symbols or exotic beings, leading unreal lives. The tribals in the film lead ordinary lives, preoccupied with everyday concerns and aspirations, and this is something one does not come across often in mainstream Malayalam films. The film’s strength lies in giving the tribal characters agency with them having clear political views, awareness about their condition and also the need to resist the inhuman treatment meted out to them by the State. This awareness gives them the strength to fight and the power to resist systemic injustice. Though their fight does not meet with ultimate success, the awakening of political consciousness, in fact, the blossoming of it towards the end, augurs well for the future.

There are clear signs that the tribal population is not ready to take things lying down or accept their marginalization and denial of basic human rights as fate, but as structural injustice perpetrated by mainstream institutions, primarily the State. The geographical space the tribals inhabit – the forest – is shown as a contested space where there is a clash of conflicting ideologies, rather than a romantic backdrop for the non-tribal protagonists to conduct their affairs. Violence in the film becomes an unsettling experience as it is not intended to lionize the hero figure as is the wont in mainstream commercial films. In the film, violence is presented as something organic and abrupt without being artificial or sensational. The lived reality of tribal life wherein violence becomes an integral part is presented in a realistic manner; the vitality and dynamism of tribal life coupled with the desperation they experience due to the injustices perpetrated by the mainstream society get full expression in the violent scenes.

However, the film is not without shortcomings, which is to be expected, as it is ultimately a commercial venture with one eye on the market. The protagonist in the film is a non-tribal – a Syrian Christian – and towards the end, especially, it becomes a vehicle for displaying his heroism and valor relegating the tribal land issue, hitherto the core of the

film, to the periphery. The sacrifices of the protagonist and his moral crisis take central stage, thereby denying the tribal community agency and power over their destiny. The fact that the film is loosely based on real events further complicates the issue of denial of agency as far as tribals are concerned. In the real event that happened in 2002 there was no such non-tribal heroic presence. In fact, the mainstream society was largely indifferent to their cause and did not seem to bother even when a tribal was killed in police firing. The uprising was led by tribals themselves with a woman tribal leader taking centerstage. Though the film portrays a female tribal leader who resembles the real-life character, she becomes a marginal character towards the end and inconsequential in the larger scheme of the film – displaying the valor and sacrifice of the male protagonist. In short, though the film deals with tribal life and issues, it falls short of offering a nuanced understanding of tribal concerns.

The tribal presence and their treatment in Malayalam films have always been a contentious issue. In the ultimate analysis, one can safely conclude that the tribals have always been at the periphery of the narrative, not allowed to take centerstage even when the story revolves around them. They never become the narrative voice, shaping how readers perceive characters and the plot as this position is always reserved for the privileged. They are mostly depicted as a primitive, violent, and instinctive group, incapable of logical thinking and reasoning, thereby reinforcing colonial stereotypes. Often seen through a non-tribal lens, tribals are presented as a homogeneous group deprived of their individuality. Of late, though there are signs of moving away from stereotypical representation of tribals, Malayalam cinema, as a whole, falls well short of granting tribals any narrative voice and agency.

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