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# Jayan K Cheriyan's *Papilio Buddha* (2013): A Counter-Narrative

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There are many Indian films depicting tribal life. Generally they focus on the selective aspects of tribal life such as community based life, superstitions and beliefs of tribal people. Some films reflect a racist attitude which reifies stereotypes that persist in mind of the mainstream towards Dalits and adivasis. *Papilio Buddha* is a 2013 Malayalam feature film written and directed by Jayan K Cheriyan. It is a counter-narrative questioning the legitimacy of grand narratives created and reinforced by power structures including the state and its machineries. The film depicts certain social realities based on several land struggles that happened in various dalit communities in Kerala, including Chengara, Meppadi, and Muthanga, and its effect on the Dalit population. It is also an attempt to examine the different perspectives in which the Dalits are considered by the society and also analyse how the voice of subaltern goes unheard by the mainstream society.

The film was denied censor certification and entry into the International Film Festival of Kerala. The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) had cited nearly 30 instances, including visuals and dialogues denigrating iconic leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, E. M. S. Namboodiripad and Ayyankali apart from visuals of extreme violence and extreme torture of women by police. Usage of filthy language and calling caste names such as 'Pulaya', 'Pulakalli' in a derogatory manner. In January 2013, the board decided to give certification to the film after the makers agreed to mute a controversial speech by Ambedkar in the movie. Later *Papilio*

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*Buddha* won the Kerala State Film Special Jury Award for Best Direction in 2012; Saritha received a Special Jury Mention for her performance in the film. Special mention by the Kerala Film Critics Association Award for Best Debut Director, and Second Best Feature Narrative at the Athens International Film & Video Festival. It also screened at the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and the Montreal Film Festival.

The title *Papilio Buddha* (Malabar Banded Peacockis) refer to a rare species of butterfly founded in Western Ghats, one of the richest areas of bio diversity in india. It is disappearing due to deforestation, the use of pesticides, ecocide and corporate land-grabbing. The connection to the movie is that it explores the life of a group of displaced Dalits in the Western Ghats of India. People of that area are also endangered and victims of ecocide just as Papilio Buddha. The film also cast 150 Adivasis and completely shot at Muthanga region, the integral part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, in Wayanad district, Kerala.

The film unfolds in fictional Dalit settlement called Meppara. Sankaran (Sreekumar), a young JNU dropout is the central protagonist, who befriends a white gay American lepidopterist Jack (David Briggs) to escape from the fetters of his caste and to identify himself upper class.. Manjusree (saritha), a strong-minded Dalit woman auto rickshaw driver, struggles to avoid prejudice in a male-dominated career. As a woman she is doubly suppressed, at the level of gender and caste. She faces all sorts of atrocities. Meanwhile Manjusree hits a lecherous union leader, and was brutally raped; Sankaran is also arrested for illegally catching butterflies and tortured physically and mentally. The events spark off two acts of violence which politicise and radicalise the community. Some of whom are queer, who decide to shun the peaceful tactics proscribed by Gandhi in favour of rebellion and Ambedkerism. The state uses its police to suppress the revolt. Dalits shout that “we are not anybody’s

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harijan”, “we banish Hinduism” and Sankaran quote what Dr. Ambedkar said about Gandhi’s fast in Yervada Jail in 1932: “Satyagraha is a foul and filthy act.” The film ends in violence as well as forced migration of Dalits.

*Papilio Buddha* is important because it brings all these human-rights violations and racism issues to the front. There is almost a parallel between the violence suffered by the young male protagonist Sankaran in police custody and the gang rape suffered by the woman auto rickshaw driver Manjusree. Both are violated by gangs in different kinds of uniform; both involve deep sexual hurt and more importantly, terrible pain and injury to both the physical body and the inner self. In other words, the movie completely does away with the conventions of representing rape in Malayalam cinema, and in a way that is definitely anti-patriarchal.

The various political parties’ Savarna philosophies have used the Dalits for their growth but failed to help them and contributed to their oppression to cater to their own interests. There is a Gandhian leader in the film who tries to use Satyagraha as a means to win over Dalits who are squatting on government land. But the Dalits led by Sankaran consider “Satyagraha is a foul and filthy act.” And they go on to burn an effigy of Gandhi. It has been alleged that the film is anti-Gandhi, but there is a deliberate attempt to present a counter narrative to the official narrative of Gandhi as a blemish-less embodiment of non-violence and a champion of the Dalit cause. This act of burning Gandhi’s effigy is juxtaposes with the parlell destruction of photo of Ambedker.

The Dalit colonies in Kerala are best examples of social segregation of Dalits. These colonies historically serve as the main sources of muscle power for traditional parties including the communists. Communist party which advocates the rights of working class also behaves indifferent to Dalits. Sankaran’s father Karian a one-time communist, who feels let down by the failure to achieve equal rights.

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Naturally they see Dalit activism as a threat to their existence, and Dalit movements are marked as terrorist groups' in order to suppress them.

The film makes biting comments on the caste system and doesn't spare anybody, including the NGOs working in the region. The upper class intellectuals and NGO workers who pretend to stand for Dalits are shown in the film to be the products of the long tradition of casteism in Kerala. Incapable of accepting the equality of Dalits they preach themselves. The indifference of the westerners to caste system is portrayed through the role of Jack.

So many voices go unheard in the media- the oppressed, the minorities; those fighting for their very existence are blotted out of society. The Dalit representation in the media is very poor, and Dalit movements like DHRM (Dalit Human Rights Movement) are consistently framed as terrorist movements in popular media, which enables the middleclass intellectuals to turn a blind eye towards the caste atrocities happening against Dalits. As an experimental documentary filmmaker Cherian tries to give a voice to indigenous Adivasis in Kerala. Who are attempting to hold on to ancestral land, which is being forcibly taken away from them by a government only interested in serving the interests of larger mining companies. Based on true events, Papilio Buddha is a drama that unapologetically showcases the reality of Dalit lives, atrocities and violence that committed against Dalits, women and environment. The movie also sheds light in to the identity problems faced by the youngsters among Dalits. Sankaran's attempts to get away from the fetters of his community and identify himself with the upper class but his constant failure make him realize the realities and accept his identity as Dalit and fight for them.