

# Rediscovering the Dalit: A Subaltern Reading of *Kammattipadam*

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**Abstract – Films have always been the cultural space where stereotypes are continued. Though Malayalam cinema has managed to establish its name through new themes and characters, it also continues to perpetuate the caste based marginalization and victimization. The people of the fringes become mere sidekicks or extras who have no role in both the film as well as in the society. Among them *Kammattipadam* stands out due to its authentic portrayal of characters and its solid premise. More than glorification, what one sees in the movie is a more realistic as well as humanistic portrayal of the Dalit.**

**Keywords: Dalit, Subaltern, *Kammattipadam***

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The artistic spaces such as the cinema industry, are still untouched by the Dalit issues, narratives or stories. Indian cinema has either been unable to represent Dalit life and concerns on the big screen or has willingly chosen not to do so. These groups are denied the privilege of self-representation and are burdened to continue the stereotypes that the mainstream imposes on them. The dalit characters were minimal and redundant and reduced to being sidekicks to villains or unskilled labourers with no identity. *Kammattipadam* is a 2016 Indian Malayalam language action drama film directed by Ramees Ravi and written by Balachandran.

The film centres on *Kammattipadam*, a slum locality in Kochi Kerala. It focuses on how the dalit community was forced to give up their lands to real estate mafias and how modern urbanisation of Kochi took place. An award winning movie set on the drop back of ancient Kochi, it is one of the best classics in Malayalam. The film tells the story of friendship between Ganga and Krishna; the crimes done by mislead youth, the lives of lower caste and revenge. Krishna who has been living away from his friend and friends in Mumbai, get a call from his friend Ganga in Kerala out of the blue. He senses danger and leaves to *Kammattipadam* where both of them grew up. The movie is narrated through the eyes of Krishnan.

A mob movie that explores the ties between gangsters, their blood soaked lives and friendships; *Kammattipadam* shows how equations change when money comes in. It also analyses what happens when their personal and gangster phases collide through fascinating characters. *Kammattipadam* shows us how entire cultures and communities get erased as the city marches into villages and rural areas. *Kammattipadam* is an ode to the dispossessed.

In *Kammattipadam* Ravi shows how the dalits were forced to sell out their land by their own brethren to upper caste real estate sharks mainly the Syrian Christians. In the film the land mafia uses dark skinned dalit gangs mainly from pulaya community to use real estate. The characters presented in the movie are not inhuman or mentally or physically challenged people. They are ethical people placed in moments of history with a voice. The hero is a middle class ezhava man named Krishnan who grew up in the slums along with his best friend Ganga and his brother Balan. *Kammattipadam* has definitely shaken the edifice of Malayalam commercial cinema as it addresses the issues of the lower strata with utmost realism.

The Malayalam movie *Kammattipadam* examines the representation of marginalized Dalits and the cultural politics. The film *Kammattipadam* tells the story of Dalit people and the problems faced by them. One can also see the life of dalits represented in all its authenticity. They lose their land and their freedom. They were born and brought up at that land. The childhood life and gangster life of youngsters are portrayed in this film. The dalit's inability to save their land and the forced selling of their lands are effectively portrayed in the movie. The major characters of the film are Krishna (Dulquer Salmaan) and his friend Ganga (Vinayakan). Indian Express reports that:

The film rolls out through 'Krishnan', who returns to the city of Kochi in search of his childhood friend 'Ganga' from where flashbacks show how manipulative forces used and discarded the true inhabitants of Ernakulam according to their greedy needs. '*Kammattipadam*' tells a story of the transformation of Ernakulam, a concrete jungle at

present, from its lush green serene past, through a history of bloodshed and violence.

*Kammattipaadam* can be read in myriad ways- as a revenge story, as the history of evolution of a city, as a chronicle of the disintegrating relationships of a group of friends who involve in criminality for survival.

In the film one gets the real idea that all Dalits are used as the materials for the high class needs. The profit that they get is zero. They never get education, instructions or anything valuable. The friendship was the only one thing that they got. They gave more importance to friendship. The black shade makes up and dressing of the actors was justify the story line. *Kammattipadam* is a raw, raging and realistic movie. The characters are dark and deep. The director Rajiv Ravi has dismantled all conventional concepts of Malayali aesthetics by capturing the unadulterated beauty of black skin through characters who portrayed the lives of Dalits. The humanity nature of dalit and their love towards their mother land shows there simplicity. The high class people used them only as material. No one knows about the value of education and knowledge. In the film we see that no one go for education and they doesn't know about their freedom and value. They also work under high class people for a living which makes them equal to slaves.

Once a slave, always a slave. Their next generation also take that position. They don't go for any other job because education is a big problem. At the time of BR Ambedkar, he work for their education, their development and improve their life style. Everyone knows that there are welfare schemes and incentives but one often fails to understand the reality. This unnoticed reality is what *Kammattipaadam* shows us.

The movie shows the development of Ernakulam as a backdrop to the lives of the people inhabiting the place, especially the dalit community, represented by Balan, Ganga and their families. This is done deliberately to show how the formation of a city has been done at the cost of the lives of the poor and the marginalised. 'Balan', one of the major characters of this movie desperately asked to his father about what he teaches to him for the survival the future. 'Balan' and his family come under the 'Pulaya caste' (Dalit) and traditionally following the agriculture for the survival and that is no more relevant. Due to the rapid growth of urbanization, the fields of agriculture are turned to concrete jungles. 'Balan' is very much aware of the upcoming trend of life in the 'Kammattipadam'. He tells his father that these paddy fields won't help us because these fields are going to be the place for buildings and factories soon. He believes only in his own will power for fight with the fate. But there is no other way before him rather than being a gangster. This scene explains the reasons that lead Balan's life as a gangster leader of the area. The movies shows that the city is a place only for the rich and the upper class and not for the minority sections like the Dalits. In order to have a more developed area

for the rich, the Dalits are robbed of their own motherland. Thus the Dalits experience rootlessness and alienation. This reality is effectively portrayed by the film. When most of the New-Generation Malayalam films fails to give an authentic condition of the Dalits, *Kammattipadam* differs from them through the incorporation of little, little nuances like the true social condition and the deviance from the upper-class savarna culture.

The movie's depiction of thug life is also different when one looks it with the other gangster movies. Most of the thug movies focus on the thug activities of their members while *Kammattipadam* focuses of the life story of the characters. According to the article *Historical Revisionism in Kammattipaadam: A Regional Chronicle of Dalit History*:

Usually in films, where thug life is portrayed, we see chase scenes, violence and bloodshed, but no attention is given to the conflicts in the lives of the thugs. *Kammattipadam* deviates from this tradition by showing that there are no born criminals but only criminals who are made. With its revisionist history into Kochi, it show how the Dalits were lured into thug life by manipulative businessmen for their materialistic ventures. The film wants to stress this point which is why it portrays the upper caste hero Krishnan as being able to escape from the thug life, and leading a different life away in Mumbai. But Ganga, being a Dalit, does not have an alternative life before him. Ganga, together with Balan, represents a generation among the Dalits who were misled into believing the deceptive notion of development.

So *Kammattipadam* becomes a bold attempt to present the life of the underprivileged and the oppressed in the context of the changing social scenario ushered in by globalization. It reveals how the Dalits are exploited and marginalized while the benefits of the so- called 'development' are reaped entirely by the affluent urban classes. As Krishnan says in the movie, "The foundation on which the city has been built is not so strong. It is found on marshy land soaked in the blood of the Dalits".

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