

‘Kalapani’; Historical Fiction Reconstructing the Nationalistic Tendencies of the 1990s in India

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Abstract

The visual representations of creative work have the greatest ability to influence people and to propagate political agendas. Being the largest democratic country in the world, the major agenda of India’s nationalist principles is associated with the concept of ‘unity in diversity’. Unfortunately the over influence of religious polarizations in the society stand as a threat to this policy of the democratic government. The need for a peace-making mediator to regulate the balance between different religions existing in the Indian society arises out of this kind of a situation. As a result, film has been chosen as the most powerful instrument to spread this propaganda of inclusive nationalism in the minds of people. It is also notable that the cultural stereotypes produced by these films influence a larger audience. The encapsulation of historical events polished with the fictional coat in a film recalls the romantic tendencies of the past to evoke pleasure in the minds of the audience just as the historical fictions. Kalapani is one such film which reminds the purgation of emotions by depicting the harsh realities of life from the past. The present study focuses upon how the film represents the propaganda of inclusive nationalism. The paper also tries to portray the film as narrating fictional story in the historical context.

Keywords: Nationalism, History, Film, Fiction, Propaganda, Violence, Culture, Stereotypes, objectivity, credibility.



The reconstruction of history alarms the existence of a new era demanding the legacy of the past to resolve the current conflict. The advanced representation of historical events and subjective interpretations of the life experiences of eminent personalities have an effective power to unite the conflicting ideologies. Hence

historical representation has become a tool to instill the sense of inclusive nationalism in the minds of the citizens.

Being the largest democracy, the major agenda of India's nationalist principles is the concept of 'unity in diversity'. Unfortunately the over influence of religious polarizations in the society stand as a threat to this policy of the democratic government. The necessity of a mediator to regulate the balance between different religions existing in the Indian society arises out of this kind of a situation. The religious clashes that occurred in the early 1990s as part of Babri Masjid issue and the later developments has accelerated the demand for such a mediator to console these issues. Nationalism began to be used as a tool to liberate the ideas of unity.

Philosophers of film are in almost unanimous opinion that films are essentially representational. The dominant view is that films, as like any other art works such as paintings, sketches, sculptures, novels, are paradigmatic representational art forms. The visual representations of creative work proved to have the greatest influence over the young generation. As a result film has been chosen as the most powerful instrument to spread this propaganda of inclusive nationalism in the minds of people. It is also notable that the cultural stereotypes produced by these films influence a larger audience. It openly declares the state-sanctioned principles to establish its totality with conservative guardians and older audiences, while including space for contemporary artistic influences.

Just after the release of the film *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 directed by D. W. Griffith, the genre of historical films has emerged as one of the controversial art forms of all the time. Thereafter it has always maintained the high status as a genre contributing in the production of global market. By promoting national myths and establishing the totalitarian forms of national policies of the government, the recreations of past became highly controversial in its basic nature. In addition to this, historical representations of the past can never be stated as objective. However the authenticity of the past is not usually questioned, as one can never go back to those days and recheck it. History can only be scrutinized and organized by filling in the vacant spaces with splendid imagination as the essentiality of an art form demands. Therefore history can be defined as that which deals with how we narrate an event that happened in the past rather than what happened in the past.

The encapsulation of historical events polished with the fictional coat in a film recalls the romantic tendencies of the past to evoke pleasure in the minds of the audience just as the historical fictions. *Kalapani* is one such film which reminds the purgation of emotions by depicting the harsh realities of life from the past. The film brings back the audience to the beginning of the last century through some fictional as well as historical characters. As the title suggests, the film is about the historical events that is believed to have happened at the 'Cellular Jail' or otherwise called as 'Kalapani' at Port Blair in Andaman & Nicobar Islands. The movie represents the personal experiences of the inmates in the Cellular Jail during the pre-independent era. The film was a big budget movie of that time crossing three cores in the case of budget and took years to complete its production. Employing actors from various film industries across India, it was a brilliant attempt to narrate the history of the penal colony in Andaman.

The hero of the film Govardhan is a fictional character who is a doctor by profession. The plot begins from the descriptions about the personal life of Govardhan. The versatile actor Mohanlal plays the role of Govardhan in the film. Because of the backup of Western education and the influence of free thinking, Govardhan strongly reacts against the social injustices happening in the village. But he never resorts to violence as his weapon to fight against those injustices at the beginning. But later the film brilliantly attempts to justify the heroic actions of the character and he proves himself as the suitable stock hero demanded by the adventurous films. The social condition of pre-independent Kerala society is brilliantly represented in the society. Hence it can be said that the climax scene is the evidence for brilliance of the director only to satisfy the emotions of the audience.

Having learned about the extremists' plan to cause an explosion by bombing a train, Govardhan tries hard to stop them from committing this violent action. Unfortunately caught by the police as an extremist, Govardhan is punished for lifetime imprisonment in the Cellular Jail at Port Blair. There he happens to meet renowned freedom fighter Vinyak Damodar Savarkar and several other historical characters. Govardhan shares his cell with Mukunda Iyengar, one who believes in the Marxian ideologies and violence. David Barry, the jailor and Mirza Khan, the Major, (Amrish Puri) ghastly tortures the inmates of the prison. The prisoners are forced to eat human waste and in one instance Govardhan is made to clean Mirza Khan's shoes with his tongue. The prison represents cruelty at its peak and the officials are famous for their inhuman behaviour towards the inmates. However Govardhan and Mukundan escapes from the prison and are caught by tribals in a forest. Somehow they escape from them and are eventually caught by the British police force while they fight with each other. Later due to the efforts of a British doctor, the government appoints a commission to investigate upon the matter of tortures happening inside the prison and order some people including Govardhan to be released. But the prisoners get murdered by David Berry and Mirza Khan by brilliantly executing a plan as they felt that the release of the prisoners will be a disgrace for their dignity. As they murder Mukundan as part of this plan, Govardhan takes revenge against them by attempting to kill both of them. He kills Mirza Khan and injures David Berry out of anger. Finally he is sentenced to death. All these years his lover Parvathi hopes for his return. Finally an army officer, who is the nephew of Govardhan, tells her that he will return soon to make her happy.

Unlike the other historical films dealing with the independence struggles, the film didn't glorify heroism in the beginning. Instead, the hero is represented as an average noble man who keeps humanitarian values and loyalty towards his own mother country. He commits a violent action only towards the end when the officials of the prison cross all the limits of exploitation and discrimination. However at several instances in the film, the hero calmly reacts to the social injustices meted upon him by the colonizers. These kinds of non-violent actions exhibited by the hero not only establish the foundational propaganda of Indian National Congress party in India, but also make the film more realistic.

Set in the first two decades of the 20th century, the major portion of the film has been shot in Andamans - mostly at the Cellular Jail, where freedom fighters from various parts of the country were incarcerated by the British. However Priyadarshan uses too many cinematic liberties to tell his blatant tale. Issues such as untouchability, dominance of Brahmins, traditional feudal system and women oppression are realistically portrayed in the film. The villains in *Kalapani* are villains because the film demands stereotypical villainous characters. The climax of the film where Govardhan takes his revenge over general Mirza Khan and David Berry, the actions take a turn to change the mood of the film. The immediate violent reaction of the hero towards the end of the film can be considered as the result of his personal vengeance towards the villains rather than out of patriotic ideals of the hero.

Nevertheless the film agrees the existence of caste discrimination in the Indian society by tracing certain small incidents. Even after attainment of independence, caste is still treated as the birthmark for discrimination. The beginning scene in the film itself justifies this fact. The reference to caste surname by an educated official shows the intensity of such hostilities towards the lower caste men. Later the heroine is forced to marry an upper caste old man by the village headman. The existence of power hierarchy based on caste and categorization of society on the basis of class are evident in the narration of this scene.

'Marumakkathayam' is another social system which existed during this period in Kerala. This is very well portrayed in the film through the characters of Govardhan and his uncle. Uncle wants Govardhan to marry his own daughter so as to keep the property under his security in the future. He is also the village headman who is always conscious about his own superiority over others. In order to maintain his own superiority and to be safe, he supports the blind injustices done by the colonized government towards the fellow villagers. Such kind of opportunistic leaders were present in the Indian society during that time.

Meanwhile the representation of historical characters like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, in the film is an attempt by the director to make the story more appealing. The question of authenticity cannot be raised here as the film accepts the fact that fictional elements are included in the plot structure. But at several instances, the film fails to provide authenticity to the historical narration. The central character of the film, Govardhan's actions substantiate this. His friendship with the cellmate Mukunda Iyengar is highly romanticized in the film. The escape attempt done by Govardhan and Mukunda glorifies the adventurous tone of the film. Film thus fails to portray several historical elements associated with the Cellular Jail while depicting the fictional story of two friends in the jail. Still it tries to evoke a sense of the need for inclusivity in a diverse nation like India. The argument between Govardhan and the kind English doctor's wife is an attempt made by the script writer to instigate the emotions of Indian citizens. It tries to recall the lost sense of unity among the diverse people living in India as a result of the communal revolts happened in the country during the post-independence era. 'We are one' is the underlying concept that the film tries to reassert through each scene. The epilogue of the film which requests the audience to not misuse the freedom that they enjoy in the present clearly substantiates this fact.

“However David Berry survived the fall, paralysed he was transported to Calcutta where he met with his death after eight years. Millions have sacrificed their lives to get us the freedom we are enjoying today. Should we misuse it or not???”(*Kalapani*)

This is the rhetorical question that the director asks to the audience. He wants his audience to think about it and to support the inclusiveness of every diverse religion, language and caste existing in the Indian society. He wants to generate the ideas of inclusive nationalism that gained strength during the 1990s as a political instrument that conceals the autocratic religious polarization of the government during that time.

Moreover the film tries to deconstruct the concept of religious polarization which got widely spread after the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Kashmir insurgency.

The long lasting conflict between India and Pakistan reached its peak during the partition of India. The origins of this rift can be traced back to the formation of Muslim League in 1925 which created a major transformation in the political agendas of the nationalist leaders to construct a secular democratic India. The concept of a Hindu nation along with the diversity in religion and ethnicity was the corner stone for the formation of India or Hindustan. These leaders defined ‘Hinduism’ as a way of life and not as a religion. Cultural pluralism and inclusiveness marked their secular policies regarding the state. Notably, RSS leaders like M.S Gowalikar defined Hindu culture as against the ‘Semitic monotheism’ and ‘exclusivism’ (Choudhary 168). However the influence of Muslim League and the extremist ideas of Hindu nation by the RSS leaders like V.D Savarkar, introduced the idea of two nation theory. Such a concept again accelerated the strengthening of separatist groups in the country. The film indirectly makes its criticism against such an idea while trying hard to uphold the idea of equality. Even though the film seems to be criticizing against the policies of violence, it justifies the violent reaction exhibited by the hero towards the end so as to satisfy the audience. Unfortunately towards the climax, the director sacrifices the credibility of history that is being reconstructed in the film for the sake of poetic justice. Such a violent action is blindly justified as part of revenge thereby making the film satisfying the demands for a tragedy. Hence the historicity is lost and a revenge tragedy is born.

Finally it is clear that the film also portrays major historical facts which are realistically represented through some fictional characters which show the brilliance of the director. Thus it can be said that the film advocates the reconstruction of so many historical facts through its fictionality. By satisfying the demands of a super hit film, *Kalapani* also exhibits the qualities of an art representing history. Even though the story line is not historical, the inclusion of historical characters and situations create a historical background to the film. Hence it is clear that *Kalapani* is a film where a fictional story is being narrated in the context of history.

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