



Mediating the Tribal Voice : An analysis of Nanjiyamma's Kalakkatha

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Abstract- The tribal oral song Kalakkatha, which Nanjiyamma, an Irula tribal lady sings in the Malayalam film Ayyappanum Koshiyum, is mobilized through the film to reach a broader audience and acquire cultural visibility beyond its indigenous roots. This study explores this process. In addition to serving as a plot device, the tribal song serves as a symbolic link between mainstream culture and tribal heritage in the movie. Kalakkatha went beyond the screen and became a viral sensation, performed extensively in social media, festivals, and cultural events like Onam. This analysis looks at how the song's earthy beat, playfulness and lyrical praise of nature helped it connect with a wide range of listeners. Along with examining how film may both maintain and commercialize tribal expression, it also raises issues related to appropriation, authenticity, and the politics of cultural representation in the media.

Keywords- Cultural Visibility, Oral Tradition, Tribal Music, Music and Resistance, Cultural Preservation.

I. Introduction

Folk, tribal, and indigenous musical traditions have been used more frequently in Malayalam film in recent years. They are used as narrative devices that enhance thematic resonance and cultural authenticity, as well as as aesthetic components. This pattern is part of a larger trend in Indian regional films to highlight underrepresented voices and cultural expressions. The song "Kalakkatha" from the 2020 Malayalam movie Ayyappanum Koshiyum serves as a noteworthy illustration. Nanjiyamma, a singer from the Irula tribal community of Attappadi, Kerala, performs "Kalakkatha." The song is in their own dialect, a variation of Tamil with unique linguistic characteristics, and is based on the oral traditions of the Irula people.

Since it connects popular culture and indigenous knowledge systems, this tribal song in a mainstream film setting represents a turning point in Malayalam filmmaking. In addition to becoming a musical hit, "Kalakkatha" serves as a cultural relic of the Irula community's artistic and linguistic legacy, which has long been marginalized in popular culture and official documentation. The song also became very well-known, earning praise from critics for its realistic depiction of Irula tribes and emotional depth as well as becoming viral on social media. Tribal voices were further validated in Indian cinema when Nanjiyamma's performance was acknowledged at the 68th National Film Awards, when she took home the Best Female Playback Singer prize. In the song, Nanjiyamma talks of a far-off fantasy that represented something far more than her ordinary village life: seeing an airplane soar across the sky.

The airplane was a wonder to her that she could only appreciate from the ground. However, when song gained widespread acclaim, her life took a lovely turn. The



woman who used to gaze up at airplanes in wonder was now sitting in one, soaring above the sky to collect her esteemed national award. It served as a potent reminder that talent can transcend barriers, regardless of how modest its beginnings may be. Her journey from a tribal village to a national platform reflected her flight, which was once a fantasy but is now a reality.

With a focus on their close relationship to nature and the delight they find in the small things, the song examines the basic and peaceful way of life of the tribals. It emphasizes their sense of awe when they see modern things, such as a jet soaring overhead, expressing their pure curiosity and unadulterated outlook on life.

- The sandal wood tree in the east has blossomed!
- Shall we go pluck the flowers and then watch the aeroplane
- La ladle laale laale
- Laale laale laale lee

Picking flowers is a symbol of their intimacy with nature and their dependence on it for beauty and nourishment. Their easygoing lifestyle and carefree attitude contrast with the difficulties of metropolitan existence. The lyrical depiction of the song offers a glimpse into their values, worldview, and relationship with the environment while also celebrating the ecological knowledge and cultural diversity inherent in tribal existence. Alochana Sahoo observes that :

Tribal culture is unique and differs significantly from mainstream cultural practices. Commonality is the essence of tribal life which gets illustrated in its value system. Tribal culture has its bearing from the nature that counts land, forest and water and are marked as their foundation. Their culture and social customs bear the mark of nature. All rites and rituals, festivals of the tribals have an inbuilt system of nature- worship in one or other form.(94)

The inextricable connection between tribal identity and the natural world is delicately highlighted in the video song by Nanjamma's pet dog. The dog serves as a representation of continuity, memory, and cultural affiliation rather than just being a simple visual motif. Animals are not only friends in many tribal groups; they also have ancestral meaning that is frequently incorporated into everyday routines, oral traditions, and folklore. Furthermore, by emphasizing sensitivity, emotional depth, Nanjamma's relationship with her dog defies popular perceptions of tribal people. By demonstrating how identity is co-constructed through shared lives with non-human family, this portrayal enhances indigenous perspectives.



Figure 1. Screenshot from the music video “Kalakkatha” by Nanjiyamma, YouTube, 2020,.16 min.

Although the film emphasizes Nanjiyamma's voice as authentic and based on her identity as an Irula singer, this framing calls into question how mainstream filmmaking has commodified indigenous culture. The film seems to assert Nanjiyamma's voice as part of its narrative authenticity by referring to her as "Kannamma's mother," but it runs the risk of essentializing and simplifying her identity in order to satisfy the demands of the plot. Although *Kalakkatha* is shown as a solitary, unmediated performance, it is nevertheless filtered through cinematic forms that have the potential to romanticize or exoticize indigenous voices for the benefit of the viewer. Whether the movie truly highlights indigenous autonomy or if it mainly employs Nanjiyamma's identity as a marker of "authenticity" to boost its own cultural capital are questions raised by this.

- Jaya Thampi revisits the role of Nanjiyamma in the film, she notes :
By establishing Nanjiyamma as Kannamma's mother, it becomes difficult to separate the singer from the narrative. Further, Nanjiyamma's own identity as an Irula singer from Attappadi adds meaning to the film. In *AK*, Nanjiyamma not only comes out as a playback singer but is also at the forefront of the film. The narrative establishes the voice as her own; *Kalakkatha* is neither lip-synced to any particular character nor played as a chorus complementing a real vocal performance. It is in itself a full-fledged solo performance, a song made and sung by Nanjiyamma; in the film, it emanates from Attappadi. We have a singer, introduced to the larger public as she is, even in a staged cinematic act, contrary to the previous representation of the Adivasis in popular cinema.

Edward B. Tylor presented one of the earliest formal definitions of culture in his influential work *Primitive Culture*. He defines culture as the totality of human achievements and learned behaviors that individuals share as members of a community. Tylor indicates that culture includes a broad array of components, such as knowledge systems, spiritual and religious beliefs, artistic expressions, moral principles, legal



practices, social traditions, and all other skills developed through communal living. This definition underscored that culture is not something inherent but rather learned, transmitted from one generation to the next, influencing how individuals think, act, and relate to one another.

Taylor's perspective established a fundamental basis for contemporary anthropology by underscoring culture as a key concept in comprehending human societies and their evolution. Tribal communities have a unique and deeply ingrained worldview that is primarily influenced by their social structures, traditions, methods of sustenance, and economic activities. These interrelated aspects do not operate separately; instead, they create a holistic framework that characterizes the tribal lifestyle. The social structure of tribes typically grounded in kinship, collective decision-making, and mutual relationships significantly influences their economic behavior and cultural expressions. Customs and rituals that have been handed down through generations not only offer moral and ethical guidance but also function as means to preserve community unity and resilience.

In tribal societies, economic sustenance is intricately linked to their natural surroundings, often centered around farming, livelihoods derived from forests, pastoral activities, and handicrafts. These endeavors go beyond mere economic exchanges. When asked if she knows Prithviraj, a well-known actor in Malayalam cinema, at the song's closing, Nanjiyamma responds that she doesn't. This reaction highlights a substantial cultural gap between mainstream media and indigenous communities. Because she was rooted in oral traditions and community-based knowledge systems, she had spent the most of her life apart from the influence of popular culture. This instance also demonstrates how popular film culture is unable to reach some marginalized areas and prompts contemplation about whose perspectives are given more weight and whose are not included in the mainstream. Outside the boundaries of written language, oral traditions serve as vital tools for indigenous societies to preserve their history, culture, and social norms.

Tribes' collective memory and identity are embodied in these oral songs which can range from myths and folktales to rituals and chants. Yet, indigenous epistemologies are unintentionally marginalized as academic discourse. The video features scenes of cattle grazing and other typical activities that the tribal people do on a daily basis. Their close ties to the natural world and their traditional means of subsistence, including farming, raising animals are depicted in these images. The video also demonstrates their distinctive fashion sense, which incorporates traditional attire, decorations, and organic materials that symbolize their cultural identity.

Tribal music has become more and more popular on mainstream platforms mainly due to its rich cultural heritage and unique rhythms. Even while the music is enjoyed by people all around the world, the actual needs of indigenous groups are sometimes disregarded. Although their art generates profits for commercial endeavors, original artists are rarely fairly compensated or acknowledged. Commercialization often takes advantage of these communities' inventiveness. The fact that tribal voices are praised for amusement rather than empowerment is a deeper problem that is brought to light by this cultural appropriation. True justice entails defending their rights, livelihoods, and



maintaining the integrity of their customs. Nanjiyamma's folk song became popular in mainstream media primarily due to its rhythm rather than its meaning. Many listeners enjoy the song even without grasping the meaning or the cultural context it represents. This illustrates how traditional songs can be extracted from their original environment and used largely for entertainment purposes. While the song highlights a local voice, its deeper significance and cultural value are frequently overlooked. This trend reflects how mainstream media often showcases the superficial aspects of folk culture while neglecting its origins. Consequently, the song gains widespread recognition, yet the history and significance behind it remain obscured for the majority of its audience.

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