

## Power Dynamics and Oppression in the film Vidheyan: A Critical Analysis

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**ABSTRACT:** Adoor Gopalakrishnan's film *Vidheyan*, based on Paul Zacharia's novel, provides a powerful depiction of power dynamics within the feudal society of 1960s Dakshina Kannada. This analysis explores the intricate relationship between power and resistance in the film, centering on Bhaskara Pattel, a feudal lord whose authority is exercised and challenged. It investigates the connection between Pattel's dominance over land and people and his underlying insecurities, demonstrating the precariousness of power founded on subjugation. By examining the film's portrayal of master-slave dynamics, the study aims to illuminate the psychological and social consequences of feudalism, not only for the oppressed but also for the oppressor. Ultimately, this analysis argues that *Vidheyan* transcends its historical setting to offer a timeless commentary on the enduring nature of power, its corrupting influence, and the persistent human struggle for agency and freedom.

**KEY WORDS:** *Vidheyan*, Power Dynamics, Master, Sexual attack

### INTRODUCTION

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's 1994 film, '*Vidheyan*' starring Mammooty, is a powerful exploration of feudalism and its impact on individuals in 1960s Dakshina Kannada. Adapted from Paul Zacharia's novella *Bhaskara Pattel and My Life*, the film offers a critical lens through which to examine Mammooty's portrayal of Bhaskara Pattel, the titular feudal lord, as a study of the exercise of absolute authority. His character embodies the oppressive nature of feudalism, seeking to control not only the land but also the lives of those around him. The film's narrative traces Pattel's journey as he is forced to leave his native land and confront the challenges of establishing his dominance in a new environment. This displacement leads to an identity crisis, as Pattel's traditional power structures are disrupted and he is forced to renegotiate his position within the social order. In the dynamics of power and resistance within a rigidly hierarchical society. Through the experiences of the migrant workers and

other marginalized individuals who come into contact with Pattel, *Vidheyan* illuminates the far-reaching consequences of feudalism. The film delves into the complex relationship between master and slave, exposing the ways in which power can be used to subjugate and exploit others. It also highlights the subtle forms of resistance that can emerge even in the face of seemingly insurmountable oppression. *Vidheyan* is not simply a historical document, but a work of art that continues to resonate with contemporary audiences. By examining the enduring themes of power, identity, and social justice, the film offers valuable insights into the ways in which feudalism can shape individual lives and social structures.

### Content

. Thommi and Omana, like the other immigrants, manage to illegally fence off a few acres of land for cultivation. By sheer chance Thommi catches the attention of Bhaskar, once the privileged Patelar of the land. Though shorn of his powers, the people around

him fear to question the Patelar-Bhaskar's authority<sup>1</sup>. Thommi is terrorized into submission and Omana is raped by Bhaskar. Thommi wants to retaliate but for reasons discussed later in this chapter is unable to do so. With the unfolding of time, Bhaskar slowly begins to take a liking to Thommi and findshim a job in the village toddy shop<sup>2</sup>. Bhaskar also commences to embark on an open affair with Omana. Eventually Thommi becomes the important aide and accomplice to Bhaskar's projects. Bhaskar's wife, Saroja, is a gentle woman who sympathizes with Thommi and Omana. Bhaskar cannot bear Saroja's efforts to restrain him. Unable to live with Saroja, Bhaskar decides to hatch a plot to kill her by taking Thommi into confidence. The plan literally misfires when Thommi gets gravely wounded from Bhaskar's misfired gunshot. Bhaskar also commences to embark on an open affair with Omana. Eventually Thommi becomes the principal aide and accomplice to Bhaskar's projects. Bhaskar's wife, Saroja, is a gentle woman who sympathizes with Thommi and Omana. Bhaskar cannot bear Saroja's efforts to restrain him. Unable to live with Saroja, Bhaskar decides to hatch a plot to kill her by taking Thommi into confidence. The plan literally misfires when Thommi gets gravely wounded from Bhaskar's misfired gunshot. Determined to put an end to the landlord Bhaskar's tyranny, the local settler population unites to seek Thommi's assistance to kill successfully kill Bhaskar. Bhaskar's wife, Saroja, is a gentle woman who sympathizes with Thommi and Omana. Bhaskar cannot bear Saroja's efforts to restrain him. Unable to live with

Saroja, Bhaskar decides to hatch a plot to kill her by taking Thommi into confidence<sup>3</sup>. The plan literally misfires when Thommi gets gravely wounded from Bhaskar's misfired gunshot. Determined to put an end to the landlord Bhaskar's tyranny, the local settler population unites to seek Thommi's assistance to successfully kill Bhaskar. The group manages to convince Thommi that killing Bhaskar will be beneficial for him. The crucial moment arrives and when the shots are fired, Bhaskar escapes with minor injuries. Bhaskar finally executes his plan to kill Saroja when he disguises himself and throttles her to death. Interestingly, Thommi is absent from the scene. However, Bhaskar seeks Thommi's help to fake Saroja's murder as suicide but the plan fails and Bhaskar is forced to leave his home to go hiding in the nearby forest. Days later a shaken Bhaskar visits Thommi in the dark to seek help by accompanying Bhaskar to his nephew's house, where he is hopeful of finding refuge. Turned down by his cowardly nephew, Bhaskar and Thommi set out to find shelter in the wilderness of the forests. Inescapably, in the wilderness of the jungle, Bhaskar meets his nemesis, as he is shot down by Saroja's brothers. The grief-stricken Thommi slowly regains his composure and removes the gun from the firm grip of the dead Bhaskar and throws it into the waterfall thundering below. At last, Thommi suddenly realizes his freedom as he runs beyond the wilderness where life and Omana await him. Before we move on, I would like to focus on my choice of using Vidheyan as my primary text of analysis and in

supplementing this discussion with Zacharia's literary text.

### **Background of the movie**

When Tipu Sultan signed the Treaty of Sreerangapattanam in 1792, all of Malabar came under British rule. Soon, the British introduced their colonial policies that ought to have hampered the existent feudal system powered by the monarchy, Ironically, the British did not dissolve the existent feudal system but appointed the feudal chiefs as tax-collectors of the land. The feudal chiefs were levied huge sums of money as tax to the British government which they, in turn, collected as revenue from the tenant-peasants. In place of the traditional monarchy, the British law courts and police helped the landlords collect taxes. These landlords were known as Janmis or Patelars in Malabar and were equivalent to the Zamindars of Northern India. The Patelars were the official landowners and they leased parts of their land for cultivation to local Kudiyan. Very often the Kudiyan were evicted from their land for trivial reasons and this led to wide dissatisfaction among the peasant group that did not own the land they cultivated. The Malabar Kudiyan Act passed in 1929 did little to help the plight of the underprivileged Kudiyan who were exploited by the Patelars. Vidheyan is set within this framework of the Patelar-Kudiyan relationship. Adoor claims that in order to make Zacharia's story valid and authentic, Adoor had to historicize the storyline by contextualising it within the reference of the Patelar-Kudiyan relationship of Dakshina Kannada<sup>5</sup>. Since there can be no exercise of absolute power Nore a diagnosis of its

pathology without a victim it is Thommy who fulfilled that draw in the film. Christian farmer, he has more from Kerala with his wife and illegally occupied a few acres of land to begin cultivation. He belongs to the last face of a series of large scale migration that begin at the end of world war second. Peasants sold their farmlands in Kerala and crossed the border into Karnataka in the hope of finding a better life. In most cases their hope were dashed and they found themselves exploited by the village chief. The film Vidheyan portray the theme similar to this through the Film Vidheyan.

### **The Abuse of Power**

This film deals with the aspect of power and powerlessness. Power and powerlessness is not absolute full stop at the beginning, Patel or was presented as the symbol of power sitting powerfully in a chair surrounded by his assistants. Thommy is the symbol of powerlessness. Power and powerlessness is not absolute. Was presented as the symbol of power but after the death of Saroja his wife, he reduced little a common human being who was assisted by tummy master slave relationship presented in this movie is a mutual relationship. Thommi behaved like a person with stockholm syndrome. Thommi shows empathy sympathy and a positive feelings towards Patelar.

Thommy experienced different impacts of power. At the beginning he tried to resist the power of Patel but his situations make him remain silent. In the second stage he started to accept and enjoy the enslavement and he lived to fulfil his master's ruthless thirst for violence. Vidheyan shows power

remained in the hands of those who had no legal right to eat anymore. In the film, Patelar has ceased to be the headmaster of the village but for practical purposes, his reign continues unchecked<sup>6</sup>

The system continued into the 60s until land legislation led to the appointment of regular revenue officials. But, as Vidheyn shows, power remained in the hands of those who had no legal right to it anymore. In the film, Patelar has ceased to be the headman of the village, but, for all practical purposes, his reign continues unchecked. It is the familiar paradox of the powerless remaining powerful within the enduring legacy of feudalism. The film's credits appear over Patelar's chair and rifle, both of which stand on the porch of the local liquor shop where he holds court. His throne is conspicuous by its loss of an arm. While its decrepit condition and location establish the depraved nature of this impoverished king, the gun links him to power and violence. Patelar prefers such a public space, overlooking the village's main street, so that he can survey the world and pick his victims<sup>7</sup>.

Adoor claimed 'home' as the basic factor which makes a person powerful or powerless. Gopalakrishnan has set that 'vidheyan' is not only associated with abuse and servility but also with the search for a stable living space for him. Both men are linked to the theme of home and homelessness within their different contexts; in the case of Patelar, his eventual loss of dwelling, social status and power marks the end of his vestigial life in the post-feudal world. Vidheyan is a study of psychology and structure of power.

Patelar's first meeting with Thommi gave a clear picture of how a lord treats his services. Yajamanar always degraded his services by calling "son of bitch". By addressing his oppressor "yajamanar" he immediately defines his servile status. Through terror, he prays for his paradise. Tommy is fully aware of his low economic and social status within a hierarchy based on caste and material power; this makes him suffer all the aggression. In India, it is quite common for those without resources to seek the protection of powerful male authority figures, so Patelar is this stereotype of the stern, disciplinarian patriarch<sup>8</sup>

### **Enslavement**

Servility acquires a certain trajectory in Thommie's case. At the beginning, his reaction to public humiliation is blind terror. When he realises about the rape, he is filled with fury. Tommy's insecurity as an outsider and his fear made him powerless. Gradually, Tommy accepts Patelar and gains a new space and identity linked with money.

Tommy meekly follows the man to Patellar, who offers him a job as a bartender at the liquor shop. The latter thus carves out a new space as well as an identity for him that is linked to money and that amounts to buying Tommy out. He also provides him and Omana with new clothes as a reward for their submission. From now on, their material lives will begin to improve. If Tommy's slavery was inaugurated with verbal and physical violence, it is now paid for with a few rupees and in kind. If he had been made filthy with betel juice, it is now the new clothes that confirm his "clean" status<sup>2</sup>. What started out as a

degrading and sordid encounter is now enclosed within the respectable. The outsider has been brought into the fold and given what he seeks most-material security and the protection of a powerful local. He happily sacrifices whatever moral scruples he had along with his conscience and accepts everything gratefully. He's now officially Patelar's slave, and Omana becomes the latter's mistress with his full cognizance. He will keep his mouth shut whenever Patelar emerges from his shack after having sex with her. from his shack after having sex with her<sup>9</sup>.

To the modern mind, Thommie's acceptance and endorsement of his wife's sexual possession seems utterly revolting. And yet it is in keeping with his abject state of servility, which can only be complete when he has nothing left to call his own. This total submission, sadly, extends to his wife and the subjugation of her body. Omana's earlier violent sobbing, following her rape, displayed her sense of anguish as well as her helplessness. But, like him, she has no choice but to submit. And, also, like him, she gradually accepts her condition, and sees no conflict in having two men share her between them. Soon, she begins to welcome Patelar's visits.

Gopalakrishnan takes the subject of threesomeness even further when he subsequently shows Omana in bed with Thommie. The latter is thrilled that his wife now reeks of Patelar's perfume—a sign that he has come to cherish her relationship with his master. It is a complex moment because a latent homoeroticism underlies it. The couple is shown in bed with Thommie embracing Omana,

but it is also apparent that they are sharing Patelar between them. Thommy started accepting Patelar and he tagging along with Patelar everywhere. Serving the most powerful man in the village makes him feel strong and defines him in a way he had never experienced before. He started accepting oppression as a part of life. Similarly in Vidheyan (Servile), Patelar assumes a mighty authoritative position and Thommi follows his master like a servile in the beginning of the film. Though there is no exact role reversal in the film as in *Waiting for Godot* with regard to characterization, but there is an instance where for the first time in the narrative both Patelar and Thommi are placed at an equal plane as both sit on the ground and have food from the same leaf when they are hunted by relatives of Saroja, Patelar's wife, in the forest towards the end of the film. Adoor depicts an overwhelming vision of human bondage which is more of a psychological bondage in the film through the two characters.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Vidheyan* offers a chillingly intimate portrait of feudal power dynamics in 1960s Dakshina Kannada. Through the complex and often unsettling relationship between Bhaskara Pattel and his 'slave,' the film transcends a simple depiction of master and servant. It delves into the insidious ways feudalism corrupts not only the powerful but also those under their sway. Even as he exerts control over land and people, he remains haunted by a sense of displacement and a fear of losing his grip. The film doesn't offer easy answers or simplistic condemnations. *Vidheyan* serves as a

potent reminder of the enduring legacy of feudalism, its capacity to shape individual destinies, and the ongoing struggle to dismantle the systems that perpetuate inequality and exploitation. It's a film that lingers long after the credits roll, prompting reflection on the subtle ways power continues to operate in our own time. Vidheyan is more than just a historical drama. It is a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of the enduring impact of feudalism<sup>10</sup>. By delving into the complex relationship between master and slave, exposing the fragility of power built on subjugation, and highlighting the subtle forms of resistance, the film leaves a lasting impression on audiences. It compels us to confront the lingering shadow of feudalism, prompting critical reflection on the ways in which power continues to operate in our own time and the ongoing struggle for social justice. The film's enduring power lies in its ability to transcend its specific historical context and speak to the universal themes of power, oppression, and the human spirit's enduring quest for freedom.

End notes

<sup>1</sup> M F Thomas. *Adoorinte Lokam*. Kozhikode: Mulberry Books; 1986. p.15.

<sup>2</sup> Aruna Vasudev. *Adoor Gopalakrishnan : Beyond The wall*. Kochi: cinemaya ; 1994, p.22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23

<sup>4</sup> Suranjan Ganguly, *The Films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan*. Delhi, : Anthem press India; 2015. p.45.

<sup>5</sup> Aruna Vasudev. *op. cit.*, p.27.

<sup>6</sup> Gauthaman Bhaskaran. *Adoor Gopalakrishnan: A life in Cinema*. New Delhi: Penguin; 2010. p.24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26

<sup>8</sup> Suranjan Ganguly. *op. cit.*, p.47.

<sup>9</sup> M F Thomas. *Adoorinte Chalachithra Yathrakal*. Thiruvananthapuram: Sign Books; 2006. p.48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50

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