

## **Representing Paniya Marginality in Kenjira: A Film Analysis**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Manoj Kana's work, 'Kenjira', reflects the real-life issues of the Paniya community in Kerala. His directorial work explores the root cause of their marginality. His narration clearly points out that their challenges in life such as unemployment, indebtedness, gender exploitation and landlessness are a historical reflection. Casteism and its institution in society could do the worst in its different dimension to the indigenous communities, and that is the main frame of this work. Though other structural elements are also there to point out, this work mainly focused on this version. The use of the Paniya language as the medium and paniya community members as the cast in it places this movie as more explorative in academic realm. This study tries to focus on a sociological understanding that discusses the isolated and alienated life of the Paniya community in the Wayanad district of Kerala. Thus, a post-colonial analysis will help to understand how the voices of paniya has been silenced over the years, the historical construction of 'paniya identity' and thereby the exclusion that led to their perpetual marginality. Apart from this, representation of marginalised people like this in a movie could reflect the changes that happening in Malayalam cinema.*

### **Introduction**

A historical enquiry into the Malayalam movies will bring our attention to various categories such as documentary, comedy, political satire, family relationships, etc. Some of the movies are relevant enough to think about modern challenges. Movies always leaves a space for debate at any time period, and this feature helps to maintain its status as an 'art form'. Other than the economic motive, it also looks into the social realities through satire and critical ways. The actors, directors and other persons who work with cinema become socially responsible or become artists only if their work addresses social realities. Thus, movies are records of past history and work as a realm for reflection and thoughts. However, this field has also taken much time to be more inclusive, whether it is related to casting, the nature of content or reflecting realities in various dimensions. Thus, Manoj Kana's 'kenjira' is a

reference for academicians as a live record on what happened to the Paniya community in Wayanad. The study was intended to understand how the tribal community (paniya) has been portrayed in cinema and to analyse the reflection of the same with their continuing marginal status. The methodology accepted here is textual analysis of one film -Kenjira and with other relevant literature.

### **Manoj Kana: Profile**

Manoj Kana has worked in cinema as well as dramatic fields. He is a member of the Kerala Film Academy, and all his works are narratives of issues of marginalized peoples. His other works include Chayilyam (2012) and Aameeba (2016). Chayilyam explains the story of traditional 'devakkooth' artists in Payannur. Here, these traditional customs are performed by women only. Aameeba talks about issues related to endosuphan in Kasargod, and the fund for this work was collected from the public. The 2019 movie got the best Paniya movie award at the national level and the 50th Kerala State Film Prize. Kenjira is the first 'paniya' movie produced in the Paniya language. And except the villain character, all other actors are from the community itself. He got the best story award from Kerala state, the Hassankutty prize for the newest director in the International Film Festival at Thiruvananthapuram, and the State Music Drama Academy prize for best drama as well.

### **What Kenjira Says:**

The Paniya community is a major indigenous community in Kerala. According to a report by Onmanorama (2026), a high number of the Paniya community are located in Wayanad district of Kerala. They were bonded labours in agricultural lands of feudal lords in Wayanad, and their slavery has also been recorded in history. A reading on this aspect can be found in various literature related to this including P Mathur as well as Vinil Paul. The word 'paniya' means 'those who work'; they are mainly labourers in the agricultural land, and thus their livelihood is mainly found in their 'wage' (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909). Traditionally, indigenous communities' lifestyles are eco-friendly. Likewise, bamboo and soil play major parts in building a Paniya home. However, concrete is also being used for house construction nowadays. This movie, Kenjira, starts with the image of an adult mum, who holds her child so close and says to the child, 'Dream well.' The background song in the Paniya language helps to understand the pain of an adult mom who struggles to live well. She is Kenjira, the story is also developed in her surroundings. The story clearly narrates the way the problems of the Paniya community have been created and institutionalised.

### **Kenjira: a textual analysis**

This movie has been debated and discussed in various ways and also been reviewed by

many people. A review given to the newspaper, Indian express says it as 'déjà vu', which could relate more easily (Vishwanath, 2021). Arranged in different themes, the following explains how Kenjira addressed the oppressed life of paniya communities in Wayanad.

➤ **Unemployment**

The movie starts with the helplessness of Tholan, father of Kanjira, in bringing food for his five-member family due to his joblessness. Joblessness does not mean he is not working. He works in the field of feudal lord- Krishna Gowda, as a helper to graze their buffalo and cows. However, Tholan needed a regular job enough to look after his family, and his mother's condition was very bad. He was forced to bootleg arrack illegally, and the very next day, he got arrested. When the only way to make a living has stopped, his wife has decided to go to work. The immediate solution to these communities in general is to join with those who work in ginger fields in broader Karnataka. The younger boy and an adult woman were handed over to the sick mother for looking after, and the lady went to work on the border. Her only advice to the children was to go to school, and then you will get lunch, and to her mother, never eat soil as food. This will help us to understand how the marginality is rooted and persists in indigenous communities like these, because these are not hypothetical but living realities where society pushed them.

➤ **Indebtedness**

Kanjira's mother is the only one in the community to choose this. In fact, "choice" is not the apt context here because they had no other options. The majority of the community works in the ginger field of a landlord named Pathrose. The reason for choosing this ginger fieldwork by Kanjira's mother in this movie is that she gets at least minimum wage for it. And on the other side, the employer exploits their lack of knowledge and only pays less than the minimum. The Paniya community members are neither able to question this nor escape from the arrack usage, which is promoted by the employer himself instead of wages. Thus, many of them cannot sustain themselves with what they earn but have to buy an advance amount from the employer, which later accumulates. Through this frame, the director again shows how the situations turned to make Kanjira herself a helper in the ginger field of a landlord named pathrose.

➤ **Gender exploitation**

Kanjira, a 15-year-old girl, took the decision to be a worker in the field of landlord just to escape from poverty. She had to take this decision when her brother started to eat soil instead of food and when she was forced to buy things at home in debt. Kanjira was also forced to accept an advance amount from the employer due to poverty. Even if she could

understand the difference between the amount she asked and the employer provided, she couldn't raise her voice. The sudden reaction of Kenjira's mom meeting her in the ginger field was one of helplessness, and what she had feared happened. Reflecting the age-old exploitation of feudal lords over the women working on the land, Kenjira had to return to her home with the burden of the employer in her womb. Even she had to fight to be back at home. The gender exploitation works in two dimensions: for the women, sexual abuse and liquor addiction; and for the men, liquor addiction. The most important question to be addressed here is that society is neither concerned about the way an adult is being raped nor the social conditions that forced her to accept labor in her childhood.

➤ **Landlessness**

The institutionalised marginality is the only answer to the question of why the marginalised community fails to approach the legal mechanism. Another instance shown by the director was that the village (ooru) of Kenjira stood together to fight back against the exploitation that she has faced. Her cousin accepted Kenjira and her child willingly and also supported her to complain against the landlord. However, land in the hands of the landlord and the landlessness in the oru wrote different faith. To move further with the complaint, they had to loan their property. The tribal communities have no such documentation, and thus, they naturally suffered the exploitation further. This theme itself shows the extreme impacts of landlessness which wrote the history of indigenous communities as we know it today. We have to remember, still the indigenous struggles are related to the question of land in progressive state like Kerala.

➤ **Underdevelopment**

The tribal community has to face lots of challenges from infrastructural and indebtedness issues apart from the right to land, the right to property, and the right to freedom. Their marginality has to be problematized not because they lack land, homes, jobs, or other facilities but because of the injustices they had to face. An instance is marked in Kenjira that a child in the oru lost his life just because no drivers accepted his request to travel to the hospital. Likewise, another instance marked here shows how land becomes a social construction and performs an important role in designing identity. Thus, denial of access to land itself marginalizes them from other aspects of society, which ultimately results in underdevelopment. In this frame, we have to remember why government has to play the role of protector to these communities.

**Construction of identity and restrictions on resistance**

Thematic analysis of this movie simply draws the picture of 'identity construction' of this

tribal community from the colonial days itself. A person's identity is always shaped with their culture as well as their surroundings. The impact of bonded labour and *vallipani*, earlier form of coolie works in agricultural fields oppressed the paniya community. Though bonded labour has ended in independent India, the burden in the shoulders of paniya ancestors were continued through their grandchildren. They still fight against economic inequality and structural exclusion (Biju P.V 2025). As seen in the movie, landlessness was always a trouble to them and their lack of knowledge in documenting them. They worked in the fields of land lords and thus the caste hierarchy weighed much burden on them. They were termed as untouchables and at the same time they had to do works that runs their kitchen every day. Their connection with land automatically reflected in their connection with political parties such as CPI(M) and congress in addressing land and labour issues. The Adivasi sangham by Jana sangh, Kerala Giri Varga Sangam by Communist party of India, Karshaka Sanham by CPI(M), Kerala Adivasi Samajan by Indian National Congress are the tribal wings of political parties (Thomas.T, 2019). However, political mobilization is not discussed in this movie, it only focused the challenges that brought by casteism. Casteism not only oppressed them in structural way, but also could slave them away with restricting their voices even if they were part of politics. are active in participating grama sabhas and do have welfare mechanism yet are alienated from their land for years. Thomas T, in his 2019 work states that high number landless tribes are found in Wayanad. Tribal struggles are mainly aims to address their landlessness and it is visible in movements such as Muthanga (2003), Arippa (2012) or other standstill struggles (2014) they had organized. These shows that a change has been occurred among the tribal communities in organizing movement whether it has been supported by major political parties or not.

### **Conclusion**

Though 'tribal community' is an administrative word, they absolutely stand as indigenous communities. Their culture and lifestyle are unique; they do have politics in their group. They always respect the decision of Oorumooppan. Thus, it's acceptable that they do practice the system of governance within their tribe. The climax part of the movie clearly shows their reason for migration within the forest land is alienation from their current residence for private property development by the non- tribals. The movie Kenjira is only an example which opens up the space for debate on a social issue: how the marginality of tribal communities still exists. And this movie also marks a change in the way 'how cinema is celebrated.' Cinema enlarges the public space and only this way, we can reflect changes in the society as well. Thus, subjects like this 'marginal life' and realities behind this status should be discussed enough to understand the public as well as to the concerned community to make sure that they are also representatives of this society. This movie did not explore the

political mobilization of tribal communities and the way tribal exploitation happened within regional political parties. However, this element also created the marginal status of tribal communities like 'paniya' as we see it today.

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