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'Pada' review: A searing political drama that retells an act of defiance

'Pada' is arguably one of the best political movies from Mollywood



By **Nirmal Jovial** | Updated: March 11, 2022 17:58 IST



In 1893, Ayyankali, a 30-year-old man from an "untouchable" caste rode a *Villuvandi* (ox-cart)—wearing a white lungi, white vest, a matching shawl, a white turban, and sporting a thick mustache—challenging the caste law that banned untouchables from accessing the public roads of Travancore. The defiance he had shown towards the state and the power-wielding castes was a turning point in the history of the fight for social justice by subaltern communities in Kerala.

In 1996, 103 years after the *Villuvandi yatra*, a group of leftist revolutionaries formed a *pada* (battalion) in Ayyankali's name to challenge the mighty Indian state and raise the needs of one of the most marginalised communities in the country—the Adivasis. Four of them—Ajayan Mannur, Vilayodi Sivankutty, Kallara Babu, and Kanhangad Ramesan—held the then Palakkad district collector W.R. Reddy hostage in his chamber for nine hours, with toy guns and fake bombs. This telling act of rebellion is retold in Kamal K.M.'s new film *Pada*.

The film starts with a note saying it is based on real incidents, but clarifies that *Pada* is not a documentary—that there are fictional elements in it. The script by Kamal carefully weaves fictional and historical elements together to bring out a compelling tale. The most appreciable thing about the script is that it tries to explore the emotional state of every main character. Their respective backgrounds and their lives before the 'action day' are established in a minimum number of scenes. Kunchacko Boban, Vinayakan, Joju George, and Dileesh Pothan play the main characters in this thriller.

Pada is arguably one of the best political dramas in the recent history of mainstream Malayalam cinema. It directly confronts the popular narrative that mainstream left parties have always been the protectors of the marginalised and Adivasis. The film does not hold any upper caste/privileged class-gaze (just as in Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*) to talk about the issues of marginalised. It does not introduce a Messiah to save the poor and displaced. Instead, it portrays four ordinary men, who act in their capacity, to support the struggle of Adivasis. It should be noted the film does not try to project them as the representatives or protectors of Adivasis. It rather portrays their act as something that is intended to bring attention to the progressing protests by the Adivasi organisations like Gothra Maha Sabha.

Kerala's tribal population is around 50 lakh. In the 1950s, tribals lost a lot of their traditional land to settlers who came from the plains of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Successive governments at the Centre or state did not take any action against those who encroached the land. In 1975, in the wake of the spread of Naxalism in the country, prime minister Indira Gandhi had asked the state governments to enact legislation to restore the alienated tribal land. Incidentally, the Kerala government passed the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer of Land and Restoration of Alienated Land) Act in 1975 and included it in the Ninth Schedule—to avoid the Act being challenged in any court. Under the Act, all tribal land that was taken over by settlers—using force or through sale or lease—after 1960 became illegal. However, the state government then slept on the Act—it took almost a decade to formulate rules for the implementation of the Act. Even after 1986, the government chose not to do much for implementing the laws. However, in 1993, the Kerala High Court asked the government to implement the Act in six months. The government got over 8,000 applications involving a total area of 11,000 hectares for restoration. However, the state restored the land only in 13 cases; after that, it stopped the process saying the government action would result in conflict between tribals and settlers. The court intervened again. It asked the government to implement the Act by April 1996. This forced the government to amend the Act. The new law passed on September 23, 1996, legitimised all tribal land transactions between 1960 and 1986—watering down the original Act. This new law was the trigger for the hostage action by Ayyankali Pada.

Kamal keeps these historical details intelligently in the dialogues, in a simple language, to give the context to the audience.

Malayalam cinema has a notorious history of misrepresenting tribals and tribal issues. Filmmakers like Priyadarshan and Ali Akbar have portrayed tribals as "cultureless creatures", comical figures or punching bags in their films. It was in the last decade that the Malayalam film industry became more conscious and sensitised about the representation of tribals. *Kenjira*, *Perariyathavar* and *Pappilo Buddha* were some of the films that heralded this change. Mammooty-starrer *Unda* also tried to represent the issues and troubles faced by the tribals. *Pada* is the latest addition to the list of films showing sensitivity to the lives and struggles of tribals.

Music plays an important role in keeping the tempo and thriller mood of the film. It employs an experienced cast, and they all deliver fine acting moments on screen. Kamal's debut film *ID* also was an effort to tell the issues of the marginalised. Compared to *ID*, *Pada* has a bigger canvas and budget.

The film tries to speak for the people who are tagged "anti-nationals" or "terrorists", and are chased and gunned down by the state at the behest of the privileged classes. In the coming days, the film will surely open major discussions in the hyper-political Malayali cyberspace.

Movie: Pada

Written and directed by: Kamal K.M.

Cast: Kunchacko Boban, Vinayakan, Joju George, Dileesh Pothan, Prakash Raj, Unnimaya Prasad, Kani Kusruti, Shine Tom Chacko

Rating: 4/5

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