‘Pada’ and ‘Narivetta’: Kerala’s bad conscience and the cinematic unburial of Adivasi struggles

Kerala’s civil society — long celebrated for its progressivism and political consciousness — finds itself haunted by a deep, unassimilated guilt over its complicity in the systemic marginalisation and erasure of Adivasi struggles.

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Published May 26, 2025 | 12:00 PM _ Updated May 26, 2025 | 12:00 PM

Posters of Pada and Narivetta.

***Synopsis**: Newly released Malayalam film Narivetta revisits the traumatic landscape of the 2003 Muthanga Adivasi agitation in Kerala. Pada was a gripping political thriller based on a real incident that took place in 1996 in Kerala. The two films, taken together, expose different registers of what might be understood as the “bad conscience” of Kerala’s civil society.*

Narivetta, the newly released Malayalam film directed by Anuraj Manohar, revisits the traumatic landscape of the 2003 Muthanga Adivasi agitation in Kerala — but through an unexpected aperture: The fragmented, morally ambivalent gaze of a police constable trainee embedded within the state’s coercive apparatus.

Rather than narrating resistance from its epicentre, the film constructs its ethical terrain through the disoriented subjectivity of a minor functionary, caught between institutional obedience and a

dawning awareness of systemic violence. In doing so, *Narivetta* stages history not as a linear retelling but as a fissured site of memory, complicity, and delayed moral awakening.

Directed with a box office sensibility but rooted in historical memory, *Narivetta* walks the fine line between political critique and mainstream storytelling, making it accessible to a wider audience while engaging with one of Kerala's most painful chapters of tribal resistance and state violence.

In this sense, the film not only reconstructs a buried episode of state brutality but also dramatises the very structure of Kerala's bad conscience — where guilt is aestheticised, justice deferred, and the wound of history is staged through the eyes of its least wounded.

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Muthanga and the return of repressed histories

In early 2003, the Muthanga Adivasi agitation erupted as one of the most consequential and politically significant tribal uprisings in Kerala's recent history. It was led by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS), a platform formed by Adivasi activists and intellectuals such as CK Janu and M Geethanandan, in response to decades of broken promises, displacement, and systemic marginalisation caused by exploitative land alienation, development projects, and encroachments, leaving them landless and excluded from even the basic guarantees of the Kerala model's celebrated welfarism.

Following a landmark strike at Thiruvananthapuram under AGMS in 2001, the then Kerala government had agreed to distribute land to Adivasis who were living in extreme conditions without any shelter or livelihood. But the promises were not kept, leading to deep resentment and a decision by AGMS to escalate the struggle.

Several Adivasi families, guided by AGMS, entered the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary in Wayanad district and set up settlements on land they declared as rightfully theirs. The occupation was, in their words, a matter of survival — not a protest, but an act of living.

The state, however, saw it as illegal encroachment into protected forest land and launched a campaign to evict the settlers. After failed negotiations and increasing public pressure, the government deployed a large police force to forcibly remove the occupants. As the police began to advance, Adivasi protestors mounted a spontaneous resistance, confronting the force.

In response, the police opened fire. The firing resulted in at least two confirmed deaths — one tribal man and a police constable. However, independent human rights observers later claimed that the actual number of deaths may have been higher, and that the official record suppressed the scale of violence. Alongside the firing, Adivasis were beaten brutally, their makeshift huts were burned down, and women, children, and elderly persons were not spared from the gruesome aggression.

Scores of Adivasis were rounded up and arrested in the aftermath, including prominent leaders, Janu and Geethanandan. In her Malayalam autobiography *Adimamakka*, Janu (2023) gives a harrowing account of the custodial violence she experienced, describing physical and verbal abuse, threats, and degrading treatment meant to break her spirit. Geethanandan too later recounted that he had been subjected to torture, including prolonged beatings, and psychological harassment.

Several women who were arrested alleged custodial molestation and rape, although few dared to file complaints, fearing retaliation and further humiliation. However, despite widespread outrage, no meaningful inquiry or punitive action followed. Successive governments distanced themselves from the incident, and no police officers or administrative authorities were held accountable.

The mainstream media, at the time, was largely complicit in reproducing the government's narrative that painted the Adivasi occupation as a threat to law and order. The then-chief minister of Kerala, AK Antony, not only defended the police action but strategically framed the agitation as a Maoist-inspired armed uprising, a narrative that many saw as a calculated attempt to delegitimise the

protest, deflect attention from the state's failures, and justify the brutal crackdown.

The film *Narivetta* draws directly from the real-life events of the Muthanga uprising, when hundreds of Adivasi families occupied forest land to reclaim their right to life and livelihood, only to be met with brutal police action sanctioned by the state. What makes *Narivetta* distinctive is its narrative choice to tell the story from within the police ranks, offering a layered character study of a low-ranking male constable caught between obedience and conscience.

The trainee is not a heroic figure in the conventional sense; rather, he is a conflicted witness, someone who participates in the operation without fully understanding its political implications, only to gradually grasp the depth of the injustice committed. *Narivetta* marks the second serious cinematic engagement in recent years, with the history of Adivasi agitations in Kerala, following *Pada* (2022), directed by Kamal KM, which dramatised the 1996 Palakkad collector hostage episode.

'Pada' — A locked room and an open wound

Pada was a gripping political thriller based on a real incident that took place in 1996 in Kerala. The film dramatised the events surrounding the Ayyankali Pada — a radical Maoist group — who held the Palakkad district collector WR Reddy hostage for nine hours on 4 October 1996 to protest the Kerala government's betrayal of its promises to Adivasis and Dalits regarding land rights.

The real-life incident portrayed in *Pada* took place during the tenure of EK Nayanar as chief minister. It was a period marked by mounting tensions around land rights and the growing frustration of Adivasi and Dalit communities over the state's failure to implement long-promised land restoration.

The episode unfolded as a direct response to the government's decision to amend the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act, 1975 — an amendment that explicitly undermined the core intent of the 1975 Act itself, which was to ensure the restoration of alienated Adivasi lands (Sreekumar and Parayil 2006).

The hostage drama ended peacefully, but it shook the state bureaucracy and brought the neglected tribal question into sharp public focus. By placing this act of resistance within the context of Nayanar's administration, *Pada* underscored the contradictions within Kerala's left-ruled political landscape, where radical promises often clashed with the realities of governance and developmental priorities.

Pada was more than a hostage drama — it was a searing indictment of the state's callousness towards Adivasi rights, the cynicism of electoral politics, and the ineffectual liberalism of the bureaucracy. It echoed the anguish of a people pushed to the edge, and the desperate, disciplined militancy that such marginalisation breeds.

By retelling the story of the Ayyankali Pada, the film revived a buried moment of resistance in Kerala's recent history, compelling the viewers to confront the unfinished struggles around land, justice, and dignity.

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From sacred hunt to state horror — reading the layers of 'Narivetta'

The turning point in the plot of *Narivetta* occurs with the trainee being deployed along with a large police contingent to the occupied forest land, instructed to assist in what is officially described as an "eviction drive." What unfolds before his eyes, however, is not the neutral enforcement of law but a systematic and violent crackdown on unarmed Adivasi families.

The lathi charge, the firing, the burning of huts, and the disappearance of protestors are presented with emotional restraint, allowing the horror to emerge through the trainee's growing sense of discomfort and disillusionment.

In the aftermath of the operation, the trainee finds himself haunted by what he witnessed — particularly the suspicious disposal of bodies, which were secretly buried without post-mortem or legal procedure. When he attempts to raise concerns, he is met with indifference, intimidation, and threats from within the police department.

The second half of the film transforms into a psychological and investigative drama, as the trainee turns into a reluctant whistleblower, risking his job, safety, and reputation to bring the truth to light.

His search leads him back to the forest, aided by a few tribal survivors and activists who reveal to him the names and faces of those who never returned. In a deeply moving climax, the trainee helps the judiciary uncover the grave hidden under scorched forest patches — grim remnants of a state operation that had gone unacknowledged in official records. The film ends with a subdued but powerful note: Justice remains elusive, but memory resists burial.

Narivetta is not a docufiction; it uses cinematic devices — flashbacks, fictionalised dialogue, emotional subplots, and affect — to deliver its message. It forces the viewer to re-examine state violence not from a heroic tribal perspective but from the strained moral crisis of an insider. The title itself — *Narivetta*, literally "Tiger Hunt"— is an ironic and multi-layered metaphor.

At one level, it refers to the way in which the state treated the Adivasi protestors: As wild, irrational threats to be hunted down, subdued, and silenced. The state's response — through armed police, firing, and brutal suppression — mirrored the logic of a predatory hunt, where force is used not just to restore control, but to eliminate the symbolic threat of resistance.

However, the title carries a second, culturally specific resonance within the narrative of the film. '*Narivetta*' is shown in the film as an Adivasi ritual performance practised by tribal communities in Kerala. In this ritual, a group of armed men enacts the hunting down of a tiger — *nari* — with one of them playing the role of the animal and the others as hunters. The performance ends with the dramatic capture of the tiger, whose tongue is symbolically cut off and offered to a tribal deity as a sign of subjugation and sacrificial power.

This ritual is laden with layered meanings: It reenacts the collective taming of danger, the assertion of control over the untamed, and the channelling of violence into a sacred act. Moreover, *Narivetta* also functions as a linguistic pun on '*nara vetta*' in Malayalam, which translates to "human hunt," adding another chilling layer of meaning to the title.

By invoking this ritual in its title and narrative structure, the film deftly overlays two frames of violence — ritualised, culturally sanctioned violence within Adivasi tradition, and institutional, state-sponsored violence inflicted upon Adivasis. In both cases, a body is captured, its voice silenced (the tongue cut), and it is offered up as part of a larger order — either divine or bureaucratic.

Yet the film complicates this frame by suggesting that the state reversed the ritual: It was the Adivasi who became the tiger, hunted down by those who wielded power, and sacrificed not to a god, but to the cold machinery of governance and developmentalism.

René Girard's (1972) theory of sacrificial violence illuminates the structure at play here: The state, like ancient societies, displaces its internal conflicts onto a scapegoat — the protesting Adivasi — whose ritualised elimination through police violence restores a semblance of control and civic order. Victor Turner's (1969) account of ritual as a liminal and transitional space foregrounds how moments of social inversion — such as those in which marginalised groups challenge established hierarchies — often trigger violent mechanisms of restoration.

In *Narivetta*, this dynamic plays out through the state's forceful response to the Adivasi reclamation of land, which is treated not as a legitimate political demand but as a dangerous disruption requiring ritualised containment through physical repression.

Thus, the title *Narivetta* does not merely allude to a spectacle of violence, but becomes a rich signifier to understand the film's meditation on power, memory, and silence. It questions who plays the role of the "tiger" in political narratives, who gets to perform the ritual of control, and what it means to

reclaim or subvert that role in the name of justice.

Cinemas' struggle with Adivasi agency

Nonetheless, the narrative carries within it yet another ethical tension that warrants closer examination. The film's moral pivot rests on the conscience of a whistleblower — a trainee police constable — whose eventual defiance of the system becomes the vehicle through which truth is unearthed. It is this character's transformation from complicity to dissent that drives the film's redemptive arc.

However, in doing so, *Narivetta* risks foreclosing the possibility of self-representation by the Adivasis themselves, repeating a familiar pattern in liberal cinema where the oppressed are seen but not fully heard — where their suffering is documented but their voice remains mediated through the gaze of the outsider.

Their trauma is witnessed, their death is mourned, but their voice, agency, and internal political discourse are largely delegated to others — in this case, a member of the state apparatus who undergoes a moral awakening. The decision to frame a trainee constable as the film's moral centre and whistleblower, thus, reveals a significant blind spot in *Narivetta*.

This is not to deny the emotional and narrative power of the whistleblower's journey. His perspective allows the film to penetrate the bureaucratic and moral laxity of the system, and his eventual rebellion provides the plot with tension and release. Yet, it also raises unsettling questions: Why must the truth of Adivasi suffering always await authentication from a non-Adivasi figure? Why is justice always imagined as arriving from within the system, rather than being articulated through the political subjectivity of the oppressed themselves?

While the film rips open an important political memory, it also inadvertently reaffirms the liberal melancholia of speaking for the victims rather than making space for them to speak. The film stages the wound but does not allow the wounded to narrate their own history.

When *Pada* was released, my primary criticism — despite acknowledging its remarkable cinematic craft — was that it inadvertently obscured the broader and long-standing Adivasi struggles in Kerala. In this regard, *Narivetta* offers a much-needed counterbalance. While also a work of fiction, it recentres the narrative around the Adivasi experience and, in doing so, it complements *Pada*, and foregrounds the structural and ongoing nature of Adivasi resistance in the state.

It marks a vital shift in Malayalam cinema's engagement with subaltern histories, offering a fuller, more politically attuned portrayal of a struggle that has long been marginalised in both public memory and cultural representation.

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The bad conscience — aesthetics of political guilt in Kerala cinema

The two films, *Pada* and *Narivetta*, taken together, expose different registers of what might be understood as the "bad conscience" of Kerala's civil society — a conscience formed not through enlightenment or ethical clarity, but through repression, internalised guilt, and the sublimation of unacknowledged violence.

Nietzsche describes bad conscience as the psychological condition that arises when instincts of force, assertion, and vitality are turned inward, constrained by social systems that deny their outward expression. Applied to the context of these films, Kerala's civil society — long celebrated for its progressivism and political consciousness — finds itself haunted by a deep, unassimilated guilt over its complicity in the systemic marginalisation and erasure of Adivasi struggles.

This bad conscience is not simply the recognition of injustice; it is a tormented awareness that justice has been consistently denied, and yet no structural transformation has followed. Instead of

being confronted directly, the violence inflicted on Adivasis — through land alienation, broken promises, and brutal repression — is displaced, aestheticised, or selectively remembered.

Pada dramatised a rupture where the usual liberal mechanisms of delay and containment no longer suffice, and moral discomfort can no longer be domesticated. The hostage-taking of the collector emerges as a trope against this very edifice of historical forgetting.

Narivetta explores a different axis of this Nietzschean bad conscience (Nietzsche 2006). Here, it is personified in a trainee police constable — a minor cog in the state's apparatus of violence — who internalises the horror of what he has witnessed. The film is structured around his psychological unravelling and his eventual whistleblowing, which serves as an act of delayed moral redemption.

Nevertheless, the truth of Adivasi suffering must still pass through the filter of the state's own wounded self-perception. Nietzsche might see this as a typical mechanism of slave morality — where the acknowledgement of wrong does not empower the victim but instead becomes the moral currency through which the guilty reassert their superiority by demonstrating contrition.

What both films gesture toward, though not always critically, is that Kerala's progressive civil society has turned its own historical violence into a moral self-image, where guilt replaces justice, and empathy substitutes for reparative political action. The civil society that once saw itself as emancipatory now functions as a sentimental buffer zone, displacing the demand for radical change by dwelling in the comforts of symbolic reckoning. The "bad conscience" here is not transformative; it is aesthetic, theatrical, and ultimately self-serving.

That filmmakers are now returning to these suppressed histories suggests that this bad conscience is becoming harder to contain. The political unconscious of the state — its history of violence against Adivasis, fish workers and others — is resurfacing in popular culture.

However, unless this resurgence is accompanied by a shift from moral witnessing to structural transformation, the risk remains that these films, too, will be absorbed into the consolations of a guilty society, more eager to remember than to repair.

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(Views are personal. Edited by Muhammed Fazil.)

Malayali nuns' arrest in Chhattisgarh: Tribal woman alleges threats, coercion by Bajrang Dal and police

The victim said Bajrang Dal members confronted them at Durg railway station and later coerced her at the police station.