

Cinema, the Reflection of Contemporary Life – Apropos to Malayalam Movie ‘Sandesham’

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Article: Received: 09/06/2026, Accepted: 16/06/2026, Published:30/06/2026.

D.O.I. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21048687>



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Abstract: Cinema has always been a medium of entertainment, and also it reflects the socio- cultural, political realities of the contemporary time. Films capture the pulses of the society through stories, characters and dialogues offering valuable insights into the collective consciousness of a society. Malayalam cinema, is the epitome of realism and socio-political sensitivity. Several films produced in Malayalam evoke the political and social life of Kerala, and one among them is *Sandesham* (1991), is directed by Sathyan Anthikkad and written by Sreenivasan, the finest reflections of contemporary political satire of Malayali life. The state of Kerala has been the breeding ground of Communism long before 1957, here is the first elected Communist Government in the world. This paper delves into the contemporary life and political affairs of Kerala in the 1990s.

Keywords: Cinema, Contemporary, Consciousness, Epitome, Reflections, Communism.

Introduction

Cinema has an incredible power of being compassionate. “If we made movies that are dedicatedly political, but we are the counterweight of politic, we are opposite of politics”- Win Wenders Cinema is the real reflection of life, as it represents as a mirror society. It is not merely as an agent of performing but as an influential medium that captures the essence of its time. It reflects political, social and cultural realities of contemporary life. In the premature days, films depicted idealized varieties of life, frequently converging on romance, and heroism, and morality. Nonetheless, as societies progressed, cinema began to depict the skirmishes of conventional people, the convolutions of social relationships, and inconsistencies of contemporary survival. The upsurge of pragmatism in world cinema—from Italian Neorealism to Indian Parallel Cinema—confirmed a shift towards legitimacy and societal consciousness. Cinema also obliges as a chronological certificate. It apprehends fashion, language, architecture, and social civilizations of different periods, offering future cohorts a vivid glimpse into the past. For instance, Indian films of the 1950s reflected post-independence cheerfulness and the encounters of nation-building, while those of the 1970s mirrored dogmatic turbulence and the rise of the “angry young man” classic. Every film reflects a mood, aspirations, and apprehensions of the age it signifies. It is a medium to reflect the bliss and grumbles of film makers. Film makers speak through their characters. Actors live through actions, they are figured into the depths of the internal conscience of the audience. It is most deep-rooted form of art among the masses. Cinema influences the people as it is the reflection of society, behavior and attitude and rather it shapes the opinions. It acts as the mirror of societal issues, flickering tête-à-têtes, and

shapes perceptions, diverse promotions, and even affect life styles and social actions. It is a medium of education, inspiration to many and provides purgation. If not criticized, it may also promote stereotypes or behaviors. Cinema also serves as a historical document. It captures fashion, language, architecture, and social customs of different periods, offering future generations a vivid glimpse into the past. Fashionable cinema endures this insightful role by appealing with current issues such as gender equality, climate change, migration, and digital identity. Through storytelling, filmmakers hold up a mirror to civilization, forcing audiences to antagonize scratchy truths or revel ethnic egotism. Furthermore, cinema does not just the of echo life—it impacts it. The emotions, ideas and values, imprinted on screen often shape public opinion, stimulate societal movements, and redefine ethnic norms. Thus, cinema becomes both a portrait and a vigor of modification within culture. Cinema enriches a dynamic form of art and it mirrors and, molds contemporary life. It decodes the spirit of the times into pictorial narratives, making it one of the most authoritative tools for thoughtful civilization in any given epoch.

The state of Kerala has been the breeding ground of Communism long before 1950s. The first elected Communist Government in the world was in the year 1957 under the powerful leadership of Comrade EMS Namboothiripad. The development of communism in Kerala due to the successive oppression of the so called scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward classes. The SCs and backward classes were treated badly in many places of the states, and the tenants who had to work in the fields of the bourgeois and paid a subsistent kinds, not wages for their livelihood. Even for many years their work in the fields, the tenants had no rights on the property. A lion's share of the population were landless laborers, they were forced to work in the fields even without proper food and other facilities. Even the Great Malayalam poet, Changampuzha Krishna Pillai had written much about the agony of the poor in his famous poem, "Vazhakula" (plantain bunch). The advent of the first Govt. in 1957, after the State Reorganization Act in this regard, the Land Reforms Act, passed by Comrade K.R. Gauri, then the Revenue Minister in the EMS government, a family having two or five members could hold only fifteen acres of land. It became a revolutionary step in the history of the state. Many landlords were forced to leave their land holdings to the landless people. Thus the tenants became the owners of the land. It became the reason for a radical change in the social setup of the state. A new class of the civilization emerged in society, the middle class. In the grass-root level, the political set up of state also began to change. The revolutionaries like Narayana Guru and Sahodaran Ayyappan played a great role to dwindle the social stigmas of casteism and untouchability. The Communist Movement in Kerala, had a prominent part in the abolition of castes and proliferated inter-caste marriages. The party itself took the initiate in the promotion inter-caste marriage, the well-known example was the marriage of K.R. Gauri and T.V. Thomas, and both of them were in the same ministry of EMS. EMS was from an orthodox Brahmin family, who broke his holy thread and came to be a part of this juncture. Following these leaders, many people left their religion and the stigma of casteism and began to work for the emancipation the humanity. Another bill was passed in this period was the 'Right to Education'. Elementary education became free to all, the children from all the neglected class could get the chance to get free education. All these steps of the popular govt. visualized a radical change in the society. The reforms in the society, revolutionized the backward minds and they became the part of building the modern thoughts. Many modern writers like Vayalar RamaVarma and Thoppil Fasi, especially in theater. The plays of KPAC brought revolutionary changes in the social setup, and it reasoned building of modern Kerala. "Bipan Chandra argues that Marxist analysis in India places primary emphasis on how class relations and economic structures influenced the nation's historical trajectory and its struggle for independence" (Chandra, 1974).

But all the above visions, the drastic politics in Kerala during the 1990s deteriorated the harmony and peace in the social setup of the state. These periods witnessed the fall of political morality and harmony owing to the over crammed instability and dishonest politics. The film '*Sandesham*' openly shows the idiosyncrasies of the early 1990s of the Kerala Politics. The film was directed by Sathian

Anthikad and written by Srinivasan. It was released in the early 1990s, came at the time when Kerala's political backdrop was alienated into two major factions, the Left, led by CPIM and the Right, by Indian National Congress. The film portrays the routine life of a lower middle class family caught in the chaos of political extremism and ideological blindness. The humor and irony, it reviews the way of family life turning into a battlefield, and emphasizes the extremism in Kerala political affairs. The two brothers, Prabhakaran and Prakashan, are fervent followers of opposing political parties — symbolic of the CPIM and Congress in Kerala. Their endless debates, slogans, and contests signify the ludicrousness of political extremism that separates entities from real-world authenticities. The father, Raghavan Nair (played by Thilakan), attitudes as the voice of intention, demonstrating the hushed, distress middle class — weary of conceptual battles that yield no palpable results.

Replication of the Malayali Intermediate Class

Sandesham beautifully captures the anxieties, aspirations, and contradictions of the Malayali middle class in the post-1980s period. This was a time when political consciousness was high, but disillusionment was also growing. The film's humor lies in its authenticity — the exaggerated yet relatable scenes of household arguments mirror countless real-life experiences in Kerala homes. Through elusive details — the father's pension woes, the mother's quiet fortitude, the children's unemployment, and the political obsession of the youth — the film sketches a vibrant picture of a society entombed between idealism and survival. The film's dialogues, corralled by Sreenivasan, have become part of Malayali contemporary culture for their sharp wit and persistent germaneness.

Family as a Microcosm of Society

The family centrally represented in this film *Sandesham* is a middle class background of late 20th century of Kerala. The father of the family always wishes harmony and unanimity in the family. The simplicity and practical outlook of the father is just contrast to his sons, they are politically obsessed. The elder son, Prabhakaran is a staunch but practical and a committed member of the Communist party. He always believes what his party is doing is right, and even he is not ready to marry also. It is the belief of his party that a staunch communist party member should never think about the family life and should work for the welfare of the party, and if a member is bounded in the family ties, he cannot work for the society. Even he takes the examples of the great leaders of party. When his parents pressurizes for him for the marriage, he puts certain conditions in front of the girl's family that the bride and the family must be a communist member and marriage is to be conducted in a simple manner, wearing red garlands from both the sides, not in the traditional marriage which is generally conducted in the temple or the other religious way. The second son Prakashan is the symbolic of the right wing politics, he wants to receive and felicitate the national leader Pothuwal, who is an absolute hypocrite from the state only, criticizes the masses of not knowing Hindi, the national language. Prakashan pretends to be the close associate Pothuwal, but he never knows Prakashan. For the greeting of the national leader, Pothuwal, Prakashan misuses the domestic properties and deteriorates the peaceful atmosphere of his family. And a lot of words of war occurs among the two brothers. The parents and the lone sister were vexed to whom they would support. The father thinks that one day his sons will become leaders of their respective parties. Even at the time the family's distress, the sons become no use. The family represents the emotional center and caught between sociopolitical quarrels. Finished this family setup, the film photocopies the fragmented political and social mindset of the Malayali middle class— opinionated, but often purposeless in accomplishment.

Political Identity over Personal Responsibility

The film discloses how the middle-class Malayali often proxies political rendezvous for real societal exploit. Both brothers are *hyper-political*, eloquent ceaselessly about party dogma, yet they do nothing fecund for their family or the public. They skip job interviews and spend their time in indigenous party bureaus, appealing to serve the public while their father qualms about domestic overheads. This reflects a middle-class predilection in Kerala during the 1980s–90s—lobbying without purpose—where every home had an outlook but few took productive ladders. Both the

brothers never think about the marriage of their younger sister and even they forget their family life, only bonded in party politics. They never worried about their old parents especially the diseased mother, and the problems which the family faces in these days. It was the political stigma of Kerala in those days. Even now certain class of younger generation of the state has nothing to do for their family, only wasting time in the party politics. Personal responsibility is victimized for political aphorisms. Political murders of northern Kerala is notable in these days. Idealism is absent everywhere, and a lot of families lose their sons in this political conflict.

The Irony of Ideological Blindness

In *Sandesham*, the sons of Raghavan Nair allege each other of being unethical or deluded, but neither understands their own insincerity. They only blame each other and advocate their political blunders in their respective party. Raghavan Nair justifies a party-led strike, as he feels that it would increase the mileage of his younger son's political career, while Prabhakaran condemns it only to substitute positions when their parties alter role annex the duplicity of political loyalty. This shifting of opinions depending on circumstances mirrors the narrow-mindedness Malayali's political thought, it not on principles, but on convenience. Middle-class Malayali shift his political behavior on ambitions and freebees. During 1990s, idealism became an absent principle, rather it worked only for mere existential one. People often forget the ideal politics of the great leaders like AKG and EMS. The convenient change shows the political blunder of the contemporary age. This mirrors how Malayali often changed opinions depending on convenience, not on principle.

The Obsession with Respectability

Beyond its dogmatic hilarity, the film offers a profound commentary on the Malayali conformist spirit, particularly its reputation, and moral pomposity, and obsession with social respectability. Moral code of Malayali middle class spirit as they are proud of their high level of education, superficial social status and sensible economic coziness. Raghavan Nair, the father embodies the old generations' apprehension and preserving family self-esteem and his sons perform a merely a routine of decorum and self-importance. The film cleverly depicts political activism not as a form of unaffected rendezvous but as a social badge. Both sons are less interested in ideology and more in how their political affiliations enhance their social identity. Their endless urgings at home, filled with hired radical waffle, are not about national well-being — they are about who seems more “principled” or “cultured.” This mirrors a cultural truth: the Malayali middle class often seeks justification through moral showboating, political accuracy, or philosophical transparency — a societal system of figurative capital. The humor is that the father's effort to mediate between the sons is motivated by the social embarrassment, not moral conviction. When the family's private squabbles spill into the locality, their biggest worry is not the loss of harmony but the loss of reputation. This fascination with “what others will think” drives much of the struggle and amusement in the film.

Respectability vs. Reality

Unique postulation of Malayalis rather than values, exclusivity around appearances, speech and resentment with the social values. Individual failures like unemployment, frustration, lack of aims and dependency on parents, are hidden over the political snobbishness of the brothers. The conceptual “respectability” is a masquerade for social lethargy. Obsession impedes sincere development, economic, social and political and even emotional as propriety replaces accountability. The contemporary Malayali philosophy was the political literacy as a sign of intelligence. The head of the family believes, “A good family must stay respectable in society.” While the family tries to seem respectable, the actual reality is muddled and conflicting. Sons are unproductive and block the decisions of the family and justify party ideology and for conflicts and they blame opposite parties for the vice happenings. Politics becomes the ego wars not service. Even when the neighbor visits the family, the father is proud of his sons and thinks his sons have better political future proudly says his sons are “politically active” — as though participation itself is a badge of honour. But the neighbor knows the truth: their crusading only create turbulences. When the daughter wants to marry an

agricultural officer, the family faces ambiguity. They believe in liberal ethics. They discuss national issues and quotes ethical principles, but in practice, the sons put conditions and try to impose political decisions over personal decisions. They never try to maintain family decorum but image. The result become vicious, cause domestic chaos. The moral spine in the film is the outburst of the father, “*Ningalude rashtreeyam veetil ninnun purathottu kondupoka!*” (“Take your politics outside the house!”). He demands the shift from image to reality. Sreenivasan’s writing dazzlingly exposes this gap through humour, irony, and everyday domestic situations.

Consumerism and Material Anxiety

Nevertheless the film not obviously wealthy, the family frequently deliberates expenses, dowries, and job security. It mirrors the economic insecurities of the middles class, the frustration of father, and problems of unemployment in the post-socialist social liberations of Kerala society. Yet the sons’ talk of altering the world while failing to take care of their own home—a symbolic depiction of middle-class romanticism isolated from ground reality. The film satirizes the political landscape of Kerala, particularly the actions of political activists and the impact of party rivalries on families. The film is a scathing political satire on regional national and global politics. The film delineates the political rivalry between two siblings who belong to two political parties ideologically opposed to each other. The political culture the movie depicts is ubiquitous and identifiable with every political ideology or system across the globe. The film is known for its political hypocrisy and endless corruption. Decades after its release, the satirical nature and misplaced political activities remains highly relevant. The film is known for its everlasting critique of political pretense and sleaze. Even decades after its release, its satire on the nature of politics and the misplaced priorities of political activists remains highly relevant. Politics often cash itself from the tangible concerns of the people, it is the most significant aspects of *Sandesham*.

A Mirror for All Times

Many years after its release, the feelings which the film left behind is still remarkable. It has relevance in Kerala’s contemporary political backdrop. The characters of the film is visualized in today’s Kerala, where political debates often dominate even the most commonplace conversations. Sathyan Anthikkad’s direction warrants that the film’s tone sojourns light and appealing, even as it delivers a sharp critique of society. The balance between comedy and clarification makes *Sandesham* an enduring classic — a cinematic essay on the Malayali spirit. Nonetheless most of the attires have been a critique on certain political system or ideology, this film keeps a separate entity in many respects. Although camouflaged in its regional identity, the film launches a scathing onslaught on the Machiavellianism of all political ideologies that are smartly cloaked in theories of socialism, equality, liberty, class struggle and intellectualism. The ideologues of these political schools of thoughts are convinced beyond doubt that no Machiavellian ideology sells if promoted directly. The political parties must have employed think-tanks to strategize the marketing of unscrupulous ideologies by cleverly veneering them with crowd-friendly terms like revolution, equality, socialism, class struggle and intellectualism. A discerning observer can easily notice that the veneer masking the Machiavellianism falls off every half an hour in this film.

Two political ideologies of two warring siblings in this film, represent two predominant ideologies of Indian politics identifiable with global politics. One sibling is a diehard Marxist and the other a diehard centrist. ‘Marxism certainly remains one of the biggest political paradigms, the country has ever seen, it created a political upheaval, and it sensitized the masses to the need to fight for social justice’. (B Chandra (1974))

Conclusion

Cinema, in its truest form, holds a mirror to life. *Sandesham* exemplifies how Malayalam cinema has used humor and realism to reflect contemporary society. Through its portrayal of a politically divided family, it highlights the deeper truths of human folly, social tension, and the need for common sense amid chaos. More than just a film, *Sandesham* is a message to every viewer to look within, to question

blind allegiance, and to remember that real progress begins at home. It stands as enduring proof that cinema is not merely an escape from reality, but a reflection of it. It is visualized that the people of Kerala are highly politicized but the common masses are victimized. Raghavan Nair is the victim of false ambitions and promises. But the changes in the family is imminent need of the time. The state politics is a maltreated one and many families are aggrieved.

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