



Research Paper

## Malayalam Film, Sandesham (The Message) a Neutral Critique on the Provincial, National and Global Politics

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### ABSTRACT

Kerala is a southern Indian province (referred to as a state in the Indian constitution) which has produced many films that have received global acclaim. The people in the province(state)of Kerala speak a language by name Malayalam. The film chosen for study here is a Malayalam movie by name SANDESHAM-1991(The English translation means THE MESSAGE) 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 elder sibling, a diehard acolyte of Marxist ideology is livid with the party losing power to Indian National Congress of which his younger sibling is an active functionary. While the entire movie revolves around their bitter rivalry, it is the message about how politics ubiquitously beguiles the masses across the world that merits a study here. The political culture the movie depicts is ubiquitous and identifiable with every political ideology or system across the globe.

**Keywords:** Sandesham, Message, Satire, Political ideology, Provincial, National, Global

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### I. Introduction

This is not just a review of a film, the likes of which are available in large numbers on and offline. This study is about the ubiquitous phenomenon by name politics that beguiles the masses across the world. What calls for an immediate study of the phenomenon mentioned above through a film that was released in 1991? (<https://www.hotstar.com/in/movies/sandesham/1000159326/watch>) The answer is pretty straight forward. For the last thirty-one years, there has not been a single research study to explore how this film is a political satire on all political systems across the globe. There have been political satires in India from many regions(states). However, most of these satires have been a critique on a certain political system or ideology.

This is where this film looks different. Although camouflaged in its regional identity, the film launches a scathing onslaught on the Machiavellianism of all political ideologies that are smartly camouflaged in theories of socialism, equality, liberty, class struggle and intellectualism. The idealogues 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 Machiavellian ideologies by cleverly veneration 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

The 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. It is important to place here on record how the Marxist and the Centrist parties evolved in India and especially in the state of Kerala.

### Marxism

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)

Contextually, the rise of Marxism as a paradigm on the global political scenario should not be missed here. Scholarly articles on Marxism merit our reference here. (Mallick, M.A. (2022). To take it all farther, an understanding of Marxism in India is highly recommended to understand this film and especially its pretentiously intellectual dialogues featuring Marxist ideologues. Here is a work that will appeal to one's propaedeutic and heuristic interest(Riepe, D. (1970)

### **Marxism in Kerala**

Now, we have to look at the evolution, rise and indefatigability of Marxism in Kerala. The Marxist party has always been a force to reckon with in Kerala and it has shared power with the centrist party (Indian National Congress-widely referred to as congress) every five years. Its current tenure at the helm has given it the distinction of being in power for the second consecutive term. There have been splits in the party with CPI and CPI(M) differing on a few peripheral issues. However, Marxism as an ideology or paradigm has remained unscathed in Kerala. (It would be interesting to know about the rise of Marxism in the Southern parts of India. (Mannathukkaren, N. (2021).

The Marxists/communists made their presence felt in Kerala at a point in time in history that had feudalism deeply entrenched in the society. The feudalism had been approved by the monarchies of the land and, the lower caste men and women working under the feudal lords were treated with utmost disdain. The lower caste was non-affluent and illiterate and hardly knew that right to live in honour was every one's entitlement. And no one but the communists could have fought for the rights of the oppressed. The communists were mostly (and surprisingly) from affluent families. They had been educated and had read 'The Communist Manifesto' and felt they had to usher in a change. Literature on communist manifesto and slogans like "we will own the lands that we plough" became regular odes in their campaign. Needless to say, Kerala overthrew feudalism and moved into a political system where the communists have remained a force to reckon with.

### **The Centrist Party (Indian National Congress-referred to as Congress)**

Indian National Congress (referred to as Congress) is India's oldest national party. Historians widely acknowledge its contribution to India's national freedom struggle. It has produced eminent political stalwarts like Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi widely recognized as popular politicians across the world. Since India's independence, congress has enjoyed power for more than five decades. It has also extended its dominance to India's southern states especially Kerala.

### **The centrist party in Kerala**

In Kerala it has been the biggest ideological opponent of the leftist or Marxist party. The party's contribution to Kerala's development is well-acknowledged by historians and experts in political science. The ideology of the party comprises theories of big tent, social liberalism (a policy of permitting or encouraging a broad spectrum of views among its members), secularism and civic nationalism.

The party has a mass following in the state of Kerala despite the communist or Marxist party being a force to reckon with there. The party has so far received a huge support from the electorate and it remains the only strong contender against the Marxist party.

### **Kerala's youth and their loyalties**

The loyalties of the youth are divided between these two parties and their ideologies. The communist or Marxist party has often accused congress party of corruption, ineptitude, nepotism, populist agenda and economic irregularities. The congress has levelled counter accusations of the communists stalling the development of the state by being anti-industry and pro-trade union.

The children at school, in their impressionable years grow up learning, understanding, appreciating and promoting the ideologies of these political parties.

How close is the world politics to the politics in Kerala?

Communism is one of the finest paradigms to have emerged in politics. Socialism, liberalism, imperialism and even Machiavellianism have inspired the political systems now in vogue in world politics. Everything that we see in Kerala's communism and centrist ideologies (of congress) are implicitly or explicitly present in all political ideologies across the world.

### **Understanding the film**

With the information above, it becomes easier to comprehend and assess the film. This film starts with the temple bells ringing alongside a religious chant; something diametrically opposed to the Marxist belief of atheism. A rail track with two rails in parallel again is a representation of how the lives of the masses and the

politics run in two opposite directions. A young boy at school trying to challenge his teacher is quite a representative of the audacity that comes from the political indoctrination in schools.

### **The sibling rivalry**

The retired father is at first over awed by the political intellectualism of his sons. They represent a global political system of which most of the masses are in awe. The siblings are indeed the embodiment of the globally ubiquitous phenomenon by name politics that beguile us.

The elder one, the Marxist is peeved at the reference of what has happened to Marxism in Poland. The party's embarrassments in Poland are difficult for the Marxist brother to be reminded of. (Aleksandrowicz, D. (1992)

Like most other acolytes, he remains an apologist all through. His interaction with his party head throws light on the hypocrisy that generally defines his party. The head desires that he remain a bachelor. He curtly asks why one ought to disobey the social structure of family being an accepted institution. Although irked, the head tells him that the party is under obligation to fight against every social establishment. Quipped about his secret visit to the temple, the party head relents and tells him that he may enter a married life as he wishes.

The younger sibling belongs to the ruling power block which witch-hunts the opposition. To be fair to him, he is convinced that compliments are only being returned for what they have faced while the ruthless Marxists were in power. Indian national congress, India's grand old party is not new to witch-hunting! Kerala ideologues of the party are only perpetuating the legacy here! (Park, R. L. (1975). Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India suspended the constitution, declared emergency and witch-hunted her political adversaries. The world's political history is replete with ruling political parties targeting opponents while in power and the opponents returning the compliments later. The global politics is replete with multiple instances of witch-hunt, too.

The Marxist equivocation builds up to its crescendo when a post-mortem on the party's loss takes place at the party's designated office. The chief ideologue waxes eloquent by blaming the proletariats, bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie. No one understands his assessment, yet every one ought to believe he or she has understood the terms like proletariat and bourgeoisie! The Marxists across the world have been indoctrinated into believing that Marxism faces its challenges from bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie! And it is placed in the popular imagination of the fans that only intellectuals understand Marxism.

If someone were to believe this film and its political messages would be confined to the tiny Indian state of Kerala, that would indeed be missing the presence of an elephant in the room. In the entire history of films, there have been very few political satires comparable to this work. This film and its message have been well-received in Kerala and later in India after the viewers started enjoying a regional film with sub-titles.

On the global forum, this film has remained an obscure incumbent without any acclaim or even citations for inexplicable reasons. The film was released in 1991. The year 1991 is quite monumental for India as the economic liberalization was launched in this year. However, it took a few years for industries to enjoy the dividends of liberalization. The entertainment industry was no exception. Had this film been released post 2010, its global impact could indeed have been different. It must be noted here that this paper is not to attempt a film review on this movie.

### **The Marxist sibling and his delusions identifiable with his global comrades**

The Marxist brother's visit to his prospective bride's home evokes a sense of DeJa'Vu attributable to every Marxist ideologue. The man wants his future wife to be prepared for a life with a revolutionary comparable to Che Guvera and Fidel Castro. He gives vent to his illusions of being underground all his life as a revolutionary and anti-establishment guerrilla. That every Marxist ought to be a revolutionary engaged in an armed rebellion is one passionate idea deeply entrenched in his psyche. His passionate desire that his wife be well-versed with 'Das Capital' and 'The Communist Manifesto' is indeed a classic example of how indoctrinated minds can behave. Experts in Clinical psychology and Mental Illness have long defined these behavioural patterns as signs of delusion that need medical intervention. (Von, M. L., Ebeling, R. M., Greaves, B. B. (2006)

The grandeurs of delusion we see in this man is attributable to almost every adherent of Marxist philosophy across the world. The pseudo-intellectualism and the pretentious socialism deeply ingrained in their minds are not easy to dislodge. Their indifference to healthy debates on the flip side of Marxist socialism is too notorious to be missed out by any scholar in political science.

The great empires like the USSR have disintegrated and China has been following its own brand of developmental communism modelled after capitalism. Yet the Marxist ideologues believe that theirs is the only political paradigm in the world.

### **The centrist sibling and his ideologies identifiable with global politics**

The younger sibling represents some of the most successful and popular models of political governance the world has seen during the emergence and post the collapse of communism. A Nehruvian centrism dominated India, a large democracy for many decades. Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi ruled India for years. The congress party has won the heart of the electorate with its centrist position in global politics. Its non-alignment policy during the US-USSR conflict has often excited the imagination of scholars in political science. Bush senior, Carter, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Nixon, as argued by some scholars have adopted a policy of centrism. Besides Nehru's egalitarian ideologies, the congress in India has also benefitted from the surname

'Gandhi'. Nehru's son-in-law assumed the surname, Gandhi. Nehru's daughter thus became Indira Gandhi and the surname has now been enjoyed by the generations ever since.

How has the surname 'Gandhi' helped the party? Mahatma Gandhi's popularity and his martyrdom have had immense effect on Indian and global political philosophy. Martin Luther King Jr and many other popular crusaders of human rights acknowledging Gandhian principles as their primary inspiration are testimonies to his popularity. And the surname Gandhi placed in the popular imagination of Indian masses has helped the cause of congress immensely. Needless to say, they dominated Indian politics for many decades.

That the congress rule in India has witnessed the biggest scandals of financial irregularity is quite a well-documented fact. Nepotism and family politics have been the other issues the party has never ever addressed. The inner party democracy in congress has always been debatable with the party chief being invariably from the Gandhi clan.

On the global scenario, non-communist, centrist governments have had the dubious distinctions of being corrupt, nepotistic, or amenable to sexual harassment controversies. The scandals the US Presidents have gone through are classic examples. The other political faux pas by the US presidents hailed as centrist are instances of how the masses forgive the centrist political ideologies and believe that the centrist ideas are superior to those of the rightwing and left-wing ideas.!

The younger sibling has all the qualities of a centrist ideologue. He has used his political clout to embarrass his own brother-in-law who is a law enforcement officer. His ruthlessness is not confined to that. He has no qualms about having tried to stall his sister's marriage and transfer the husband to a different locality.

### **The work-life asymmetry caused by political indoctrination**

There is a work life imbalance or asymmetry easily noticeable in both the siblings. The sister's marriage, the mother's ill-health or other issues at home hardly prevent each one from throwing innuendoes at the other's party and its ideologies. The communal riots in 1984 and 2002 in India have hardly helped the people understand how the political parties operate. The misery of the masses have not stopped any party from indulging in a conflict with the other. India is a country mired in poverty and illiteracy. The political parties have seldom checked on the welfare of the masses except when the elections are on the heels. For the politicians, charity does not begin at home.

How does the father view the sibling rivalry of his sons? Until the first half of the film, the father believes his sons are the nation's future and any strangeness in their behaviour ought to be attributed to his plain ignorance in politics? He is convinced that his sons are intellectuals whose thoughts are best understood only by intellectuals.

### **Paradigms in global politics**

It is neither the movie nor the characters that are being reviewed here. It is about politics, the ubiquitous phenomenon and how it beguiles masses across the world. In global politics, usually there are choices between two parties if there is a political system. In a dictatorship, parties do not exist as the dictator's ideology is the political doctrine. Political paradigms were founded by the world that had hitherto suffered monarchs, dictators and autocrats.

Political paradigms were floated as alternatives to the undesirable forms of governments. The paradigms of Marxism, Right Wing and Centrism took the world by storm when the whole world had been fed up with colonialism, monarchy, and other forms of dictatorship.

### **Are political paradigms equally bad as the doctrines they have replaced?**

How good have the political paradigms been in serving the world? Are they nothing but the proverbial old wine served in new bottle? Has rhetoric not replaced the guns and swords? Has chicanery not replaced the canons? How different are they from those systems they have replaced? Are they an extension of the evil we have seen in the past?

India's liberation from Britain happened with many freedom fighters like Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Subash Chandra Bose, Gopala Krishna Gokhale and a host of others fighting relentlessly to achieve it. Incidentally, not all the names mentioned in the list agreed on core issues related to the freedom struggle, yet they were all unanimous in acknowledging that their aim was the same!

Post-independent India has always been a country with a system allowing a multi-party system. With a federal system in place, the states have had their regional parties at power. Corruption, nepotism, and other scandals have taken precedence over the welfare of the nation and its people.

The Marxists started off promisingly in West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala. Except in Kerala, Marxism has now been decimated. There is a widespread belief that in Kerala, the political think tank has revisited the Marxist paradigms and followed more of a developmental agenda. This is indeed far removed from the truth. Kerala, with its best literacy rate in India, rejects the right-wing ideologies of any party that desires to polarize the masses on communal lines. With three parties such as Marxist, Centrist and the Right wing staking their claims to serve the people, Kerala chooses the trade-off in the form of Marxists or Centrists being preferred. Despite a multiple party system in vogue in the country, the choice in Kerala is to vote in or vote out either the Marxists or the Centrists.

### **What is India's right-wing ideology?**

Bhartiya Janata Party (popularly known as BJP) has been enjoying people's mandate in India for almost a decade now. The party once believed to be a 'pariah' or an outcaste, has risen from nowhere to decimate the centrist congress party since 2014. As trends indicate, congress, the centrist and the grand old national party will struggle to make any inroads for itself in the upcoming elections of 2024. The Marxist party is non-existent at the national level and there are no national parties formidable enough to challenge the right wing.

The right-wing ideologies developed long before India got her independence from Britain. Although, the adherents of right-wing ideologies were never engaged in any large-scale freedom struggle against the colonialism, they were more into building the foundation of an independent India based on Hindutva or the doctrines enshrined in Hindu scriptures.

Hinduism is incidentally India's most followed religion. The ideology is diametrically opposed to the centrist idea of secularism and the Marxist idea of atheism. (Eviene Leidig(2020))

### **Why does Kerala not buy into Hindutva doctrine?**

As mentioned earlier, Kerala's boys and girls grow up in their impressionable years idolizing the Marxist and Centrist ideas that reject communal polarizations in politics outright. The siblings in the movie are unconsciously united at least on secular lines. Kerala has the 6 highest literacy rate in India and the young minds in the state have invariably grown up reading the political doctrines and paradigms that are globally popular. An ideology like Hindutva is relatively new and confined to national political ethos.

### **The presence of right wing in global politics**

The right-wing politics in global politics has been adopted as a populist agenda in global politics. It has been a successful model that has beguiled masses who are amenable to rhetoric and nationalist agenda. The Marxists and Centrists have vehemently opposed right wing nationalism. In fighting against the populist right wing agenda, the Centrists and Marxists are united. They are united in telling the masses that their choices of political doctrines should be between the Leftist and Centrist ideologies and the right-wing ideologies are dangerous for a liberal world order.

### **The protagonists and their abhorrence to right wing propaganda**

Although veiled, we can see that neither of the two warring siblings has any time to care for right wing populist agenda. Both their parties have long rejected the right-wing doctrines.

And this could be compared to the global politics where centrists and leftists are into a strange matrimony to keep the right-wing nationalism at bay.



Both the siblings have members in their parties with different affinities in caste and religion. Their party doctrines liberally accommodate members with any religious or caste affinities. These doctrines have perhaps made their parties popular among the literate masses!

### **Kerala's literate masses and their amenability to the Marxist and Centrist ideologies**

Kerala's masses are the most literate voters as per the available national data. By and large Kerala and its masses have rejected right wing doctrines. This rejection is attributable to their knowledge of global and national politics. However, when it comes to the Marxist and Centrist parties, they are as gullible as those who buy into the right wing agenda, especially in the other parts of the country.

What could be the reason behind this amenability or gullibility of Kerala's literate masses? It could be argued that there apparently are two reasons:

- 1) confirmation bias
- 2) The brilliant skills of persuasion of the Marxist and Centrist ideologues

What is a confirmation bias? It is a cognitive dissonance defined by cognitive psychologists as 'the tendency of people to favour information that confirms or strengthens their beliefs or values, and is difficult to dislodge one affirmed'. (Nickerson RS(1998).

It is a cognitive bias that can affect any human irrespective of their education, profession or domain of knowledge. It is indeed a ubiquitous phenomenon. Kerala's masses firmly believe that the Marxist and Centrist parties are the best and they have the welfare of the people as their priority!

### **The film and its identifiability with India's national politics.**

The film was released in 1991. Till 1996, it was the centrist congress party that had ruled India for almost five decades. That the party again captured power in 2004 and stayed in power till 2014 is quite an indication of how the masses are amenable to the centrist ideology which promises egalitarianism. The scandals and communal conflicts during its long stints at the office have never convinced the masses that a change at the helm could be experimented. Until 2014, the very thought of replacing the centrist party was looked upon with derision and disdain.

Once again confirmation bias and the brilliance of persuasion of the party think tank are the reasons why the masses vote for them.

### **The film and its identifiability with global politics.**

Governments are too complex to be defined in one dimension. In global politics, it is not easy to determine as to whether a government is truly leftist, socialistic, centrist or even right leaning. The popularity of Marxism has dwindled to a level where it is difficult to term a government Marxist or Leftist. The right-wing politics is not too dangerously explicit to be condemned. Now comes the centrist adherents of politics.

Ever since monarchies disappeared and dictatorships challenged, politically stable governments have made their presence felt globally. Politics as an entity has come to stay albeit through different forms of governments. India and USA, the biggest democracies of the world have happily embraced centrist, right wing and left leaning governments through democratic processes. Any analysis on global politics has to bring in India's and the USA's political systems as models or samples.

The film's message to a discerning mind is quite simple. Masses across the world are amenable to the persuasion of political parties. The US has its left and right leaning governments that are popular among the masses. There appears no incontrovertible evidence to separate the right leaning party from the left leaning in terms of the developments on record. It could of course be argued that a party may have witnessed some watershed moments in the country. The Republicans or Democrats voted out of power bounce back with a bang in the next election. Presidents with centrist ideas have triumphed in the US, too.

### **The film's dig at global democracy**

Globally, democracy has been a recommended model of governance. However, the GBS or Global Barometer Surveys on international politics has found democracy to be replete with complacency as there appear to be no alternatives to replace key political parties in democracy.

The Global Barometer surveys conducted in 2019 and 2020 do not have many encouraging things to say about political systems in general. The survey of 2020 was conducted by Bennet Institute of Public Policy (New Centre for the future of Democracy) and it published a report titled 'Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020'. [https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/report2020\\_003.pdf](https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/report2020_003.pdf)

The key findings include

- 1) The state of malaise democracy is in
- 2) Highest level of dissatisfaction spotted since 1995
- 3) The rise in dissatisfaction since 1995
- 4) Downward trend noticed in the US, Brazil, Nigeria and Mexico
- 5) Large democracies and the dissatisfaction
- 6) Dissatisfaction recorded by citizens from large democracies
- 7) Dissatisfaction owing to different kind of politics

One can see that the study is no rant. The study has used constructs and variables as samples for data experiments. The most scientific methods of surveys, interviews and data corroboration have been done to draw conclusions, too. The article makes a passing reference on the political machinations leading to the downward trend although that is basically not within the scope of the report.

### **How prescient was the movie?**

The movie was prescient about how perfidious politicians could indeed be! The difference between dictatorship and democracy (as depicted by the characters) could only be the veneer under which the latter hides! Discernment is what one requires to see through the chicanery of politicians.

Incidentally, there are regional Indian movies that have satirized politics and politicians. However, the global identifiability and an objective evaluation of two opposing political ideologies have been conspicuous by their absence in these movies. Most of these movies have been critical about how the masses suffer under a certain system. It is too complex a task to draw parallels with national and global politics as far as these films are concerned. Nodoubt, they are all satires in their own rights and qualify to be positively reviewed by the viewers and critics.

'Sandesham' (The Message) on the other hand can lay its claim to be a movie that lampoons/lambasts the major democratic political systems across the globe despite its regional identity and depiction. There could not have been a better title than the one this film carries. The word 'Sandesham' means 'The Message'. And the message is an exhortation to the global audience to look beyond what is being directly and humorously depicted in the script. Contextually, the script writer was once a hard core leftist idealogue. And his revisionist thinking must have taken some time to happen. Not too surprisingly, he plays the role of the elder sibling with ridiculous ease. As mentioned, earlier, this is no review of a movie as an art form or a craft. This is rather a study on why this film ought to be seen as a critique on regional, national, and global politics. The study hopes that the film will be watched by more discerning minds across the globe.

This article has also looked for regional, national and international films that have been equally critical of different political paradigms. There have been a few that begin with sarcastic references on political systems. However, as the scripts move along, most of the narratives move into a serious plot with the protagonist, antagonist and deuteragonist becoming the focus of attention. And more often than not, it is about a particular political doctrine and its impact on the characters. Some of these political satires have a global audience and have been run-away successes from the commercial perspectives. Kerala has produced a good number of political satires besides the one we have just studied about.

However, they have all been critiques on a certain political doctrine and have confined themselves to regional identities. A few political satires have had cryptic and equivocal narration, the complexities of which are hard to decipher. And, 'Sandesham' could legitimately be called a 'prescient film' on how the phenomenon by name politics work today.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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