

## REVIVING LAKSHADWEEP DIALECT THROUGH FILMS: PROSPECTS AND IMPACTS OF *SINJAR*

By

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### Abstract

*The death of various dialects and languages occurs on a rapid yet slow pace due to so many reasons ranging from natural disasters, genocides, cultural assimilations to present day globalization. Saving languages demand our time, effort and energy and revitalizing process is a Herculean task also. Jasari, one of the dialects of Malayalam used by the natives of Lakshadweep, has been on the verge of extinction and the making of the film Sinjar aimed at rejuvenating this spoken variety. The article tries to analyse the prospects, challenges and impacts of this film venture in translating the language and culture to the silver screen.*

**Keywords:** *jasari, revival of dialect, lakshadweep, sinjar, autoethnography, translation.*

### Introduction

Languages make, mould, and maintain our knowledge and perceptions regarding humanity. Branching out from various language families, they evolved, enhanced, and emulated our thoughts and emotions through literature and culture. The crisis of a language or its dialect can happen if it is being replaced by one or more dominant languages which are socio-politically and economically beneficial to a land and its people. These dominant languages provide education and job opportunities rather than the native tongue. Being considered as a potential threat to their success in life and career, native speakers will gradually decide not to acquire or learn their regional language and let it die. The rich cultural heritage, folklore, and regional history will also perish along with this dying tongue. In his renowned work *Language Death* (2000), the British Linguist David Crystal asserts "Enshrined in a language is the whole of a

community's history and a large part of its cultural identity. The world is a mosaic of visions. To lose even one piece of this mosaic is a loss for all of us"(1).

*Jasari*, one of the dialects of the Malayalam language which is used in the Indian archipelago of Lakshadweep is on the brink of extinction because the majority switched on to Malayalam and English languages, the official languages of this Union Territory. This dialect is spoken by an overwhelming majority (84%) of Lakshadweep, except for the Mahal-speaking (16%) island of Minicoy. The union territory had 64,473 total inhabitants as of the 2011 census. The ethnic tribal groups of Lakshadweep islands- Amindivis, Koyas, Malmis, and Melacheris- are the custodians of this exclusive spoken variety which uses the script of the Malayalam language. *Jasari*, also known as Dweepu bhasha, is a mixture of Malayalam, Tamil, and Arabic languages and lacks a script of its own. The phonology and

grammar of this dialect are similar to Malayalam and are widely used in different islands by approximately 64,000 people as customized slang of their own.

Considering the inability to write and record this dialect and its usage in its entirety, people from mainland Kerala began to film it even though films are a big religious taboo in Lakshadweep. Although the film culture of the island is still in its infancy, Lakshadweep Administration initiated several programs to sow the seeds of it. In the wake of the 2000s, the Information and Publicity department screened informative documentaries and newsreels to make an interest for films among the islanders by bringing diesel generators and projectors from Kochi to these under-developed islands. There were no advances on the part of natives to get to know more about the cinematographic techniques and technologies. Thus, the language and culture of Lakshadweep remained unknown to the silver screen.

### **Fairyland of Lakshadweep in Films**

The panoramic wonderland of Lakshadweep has been a favorite shooting location for the Malayalam film industry since the 1970s. The eminent director Ramu Kariat introduced this wondrous landscape to the world through his film *Dweepu* (1977). The island was depicted as a haven for the protagonist Chandran who faced unemployment in mainland Kerala and sought rehabilitation in Lakshadweep. After getting a teaching job on the island, his life began to take a new turn. Being the first Malayalam film that was shot in Lakshadweep, this venture could capture the

cultural peculiarities of the island. But, the language used in the film was not *Jasari*, but Malayalam.

Other films like *Akashathinte Niram* (2012), *Mosayile Kuthirameenukal* (2014), *Anarkali* (2015), *Moothon* (2019), *Pranaya meenukalude Kadal* (2019), and *Lucifer* (2019) were also shot in Lakshadweep. However, these films seldom used the native tongue of the island. For the Malayalam film industry, Lakshadweep was as an Utopian land of peace and a facilitating terrain to find solace for the characters from the humdrum of the mainland. These films sketch Lakshadweep as an object to be enjoyed and looked at. Laura Mulvey in her essay titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" talks about the principle of vision and how the concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness" objectifies the female body. Just like that, Lakshadweep has been reduced into a landscape/body/thing considered as a 'viewed subject' to be objectified with fetishistic urges. The visuals of the island used in these films attracted thousands of Keralites and foreigners towards the island by catalysing island tourism on a large scale. At the same time, the recurring presence of the cast and crew ended up influencing the youngsters of the island to understand the potential of films - indeed, a blessing in disguise.

*Sinjar* (2018) by Sandeep Pampally has received broad recognition for documenting, preserving, and helping to revitalize the endangered language *Jasari*. It came up with the thematic and technical break away in portraying Lakshadweep as a mere 'eye candy' with fetishistic elements. The

inclination to raw folk music and dissonance create the dramatic effect and mood in the depiction of the inner turmoil of the characters. This work was screened in various National and International Film Festivals and was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018. This film was shot in *Jasari* and with subtitles, the audience was able to comprehend this film without any difficulty. This film played an important part in preserving this dialect as the local people helped in every stage of the making of the film, particularly in the script and dialogue writings.

*Sinjar*, an Iraqi city, fell into the clutches of the terrorist organization of the Islamic states of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014 resulting in the genocide of thousands of men and enslavement of Yazidi women and children. Director Pampally uses this particular scenario to place his characters Fida (Srinida Arhaan) and Suhara (Mythili). Bosom friends and to-be sisters-in-law, Fida and Suhara are from the Lakshadweep islands. They persuade Ansar (Musthafa) to let them go to Iraq to work as housemaids to put an end to their poverty. They hope to return soon, so Ansar and Fida can get married without any financial difficulty.

However, tragedy strikes these women as they are taken as sex slaves along with the Yazidi women into ISIL captivity. Ansar fights his own battle as he blames himself for the plight of his sister and fiancée. The love story that runs parallel to the main story takes prominence as the film progresses and uses extended silences to portray the depth of their agony and the moving music creates

waves of multiple emotions in the audience. *Sinjar* becomes a story of poor Kavaratti natives whose life is thrown out of gear by a butterfly effect of an international act of violence. Fida and Suhara manage to escape the terrorists, but what awaits them in their conservative island home is worse than the scars they receive from Iraq. The film also portrays the patriarchal system that prevails on the island which tries to judge these women who are back from Iraq through the eyes of morality.

Earlier, the island community used to find livelihood mainly from fishing and coconut trading. Having been taught at school in English and Malayalam and getting exposure to international tourists coming into the island, the youngsters are not fluent in their mother tongue. The people of Lakshadweep gave a lot of support as the film recorded the local lives and voices. The natives of the island, especially the elder ones, are happy to see this innovative approach to revive their language. "Featuring this film as a process of language revitalization helped in overcoming the religious barriers and it has made a powerful impact in the society", said the director in a personal interview with me. According to Crystal, "A community, once it realizes that its language is in danger, can get its act together and introduce measures which can genuinely revitalize. You have seen it happen in Australia with several aboriginal languages. And it is happening in other countries too"(1). The motive of team *Sinjar* was exactly the same- to revitalize the dying dialect. But, they wanted the local people to be aware of the immediate loss they are going to face as these islanders

were hesitant at first. The production of the film was really a Herculean task as the conservative people did not allow shooting. But, gradually people got convinced about the significance of this film. It was inspired by the life of the Nobel Prize winner Nadia Murad and was expected to hit an International audience.

The director of *Sinjar* took long three years to spend his life on the island to learn *Jasari*, understand the culture of the Lakshadweep society, and write the script of the film with the assistance of native people. The assistant directors and several actors of the film were active young artists from the island itself. The film used Lakshadweep as its backdrop and *Jasari* as its language. It could capture the culture, customs, and rituals of the island even though the theme of the film revolved around the *Sinjar* massacre in Iraq and the lives of two island women under the capture of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014. The film won Best Film in *Jasari* and Best Debut Director at the 65th National awards in 2017.

The revival of the dialect takes place through the translation of the source text (Spoken *Jasari*) to the target text (*Sinjar*). This film turns to be a historical document that preserves this autochthonic dialect which is almost in the brim of extinction. Translated dialect, thus, gets a life and an after-life through the cinematic medium. Cinematic translation quite helps in the survival of *Jasari* and calls for the attention of its audience and authorities to notice the need to preserve this dialect. To a large extent, this kind of translation gives voice to this

voiceless-scriptless spoken variety of Lakshadweep. The film could already bag the attention of critics and film lovers all over the world with its ability to portray the genuine slang and essence of *Jasari*.

### **Translation of Language into Cinematic Language**

When a language is lost, the irreplaceable elements of that culture such as folklore, customs, myths, and beliefs will be lost forever. The linguistic homogenization happening across the world as an impact of globalization results in the rapid fading of indigenous languages and their dialects. Loss of *Jasari* will eventually end up in the loss of the self-identity of this community as well. Not many linguists tried to study or analyse *Jasari*, an alloy of different languages may be because of their bias with the written language. Thus, *Sinjar* contributes to language preservation efforts and captures this dialect by translating the island language into the filmic language. Trinh Thi Minh Ha, a vibrant Vietnamese Film-maker opines in her book titled *Cinema Interval*:

Films are translations and film-makers are translators, whether the culture they show is their own or others. . . . [W]e are constantly in a state of translator-translated whenever we do anything. The question of translation is not limited to the transfer of meaning from one language to another. It is involved in the very production of meaning within one or across several contexts, mentalities, and cultures. (60)

The linguistic and cultural elements of *Jasari* have been recorded and relocated into the semiotics of film in a brilliant manner. The visuals rendered the customs, beliefs, and rituals of Lakshadweep onto the big screen. The usage of extreme long shots, eye level, high angle, and bird's eye view reveals the entire geographical landscape of the island. This helps the audience in understanding the boundary of the island which appears to be vulnerable and weak. The film marvels the audience by its use of different blue shades such as Aquamarine, azure, cerulean, cyan, teal, turquoise, ultramarine, electric, Copenhagen, and heliotrope that indicates the tranquillity, stability, and reliability of the island life. It is interesting to note that the minds of the characters have got the blues. Overwhelming feelings of depression and dejection have been brilliantly camouflaged in these tinctures of blue. The fantastic shots by the director of photography Sanjay Harris exquisitely encapsulate the frame of mind of the characters.

Recurring usage of crescendos used in the film creates intense tension and suspense by keeping an audience on edge. This music along with visuals speaks passionately about the lives of islanders, especially Fida and Suhra. The first film song in *Jasari* "Ellarum Sollundelo" sung by actor Lakshmi Menon got wide currency through this film as its promo song. The lyrics of the song were written by famous Lakshadweep poet P.I.Kalpeni and was composed by Satheesh Ramachandran. The dialect sounds sweet to ears due to its euphony and melodious nature with a tinge of fanciful folk elements.

*Jasari* aptly reciprocates the tragic situation of the two female characters through this libretto.

The film dynamically plays with the combination of shots, scenes, and sequences to create an impact by properly engaging with its audience. The camera cuts away from the calmness of the island to the brutalities of ISIL towards the women in captivity. The visual language of the film contains the actual spoken words of *Jasari* and the audience is capable of understanding the lives of islanders. The film moves in a torpid and tardy motion by binding the spectators into the visuals. However, Lijo Paul's editing felt to be brusque and blunt as many a time the audience could not immerse into jump cuts. This could have created an alienation effect among the viewers.

The enactment of Srinta, Mydhili, and Mustafa was excellent in reproducing the catastrophes faced by thousands of people under the ISIL rule. Their costumes, gestures, facial expressions, and dialogue delivery were perfect and absolutely imitated the people of Lakshadweep. The local slang of *Jasari* was beautifully recorded in the film by emphasizing the subtle nuances. Even though the film was welcomed by the audience in various film festivals and special screenings all across the world, the film was not intended for a wide release for the public to watch and enjoy. The producer of the film Shibu G.Suseelan pointed out that *Sinjar* may not satiate the eyes of audience loving commercial movies as it deals with a serious subject of global

importance. However, when the film bagged the prestigious National Awards, *Sinjar* got media attention and was widely discussed for its theme and visuals.

*Sinjar* acts as a work of cinematic auto ethnography as it records the Lakshadweep culture and language using detailed visuals to represent the cultural patterns and social life of islanders. The translation of spoken words of island culture into the cinematic medium using montage technique is appreciable. The film aurally transcribes the verbal signs and visually grabs the nonverbal signs to chronicle the cultural codes. Thus the film enabled Lakshadweep culture and language to enter into mainstream film culture.

### Conclusion

*Sinjar* could grab attention and create awareness among the people for a collective

action for preserving the dialect *Jasari*. As a powerful media in the popular culture, it has reached audience by underlining the vulnerability and precariousness of the dialect yet conveying the thread and theme of *Sinjar* effectively. The translation of this local dialect into the cinematic language was enabled through the craftsmanship of the director and artists. Attempts to revive *Jasari* through *Sinjar* tackled the significance of preserving the identity of a community and their discourses along with Malayalam. In the work titled *English as a Global Language* (1997), David Crystal observes, "Bilingualism lets you have your cake and eat it. The new language opens the door to the best jobs in society; the old language allows you to keep your sense of who you are. It preserves your identity. With two languages, you have the best of both worlds" (127).

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