

Political Satire and Democratic Discourse in Malayalam Cinema: A Qualitative Analysis of Sandesham (1991)

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Abstract: This study presents a qualitative content analysis of the South Indian political satire *Sandesham* (1991) a Malayalam cinema translates with meaning 'Message' to explore the persistence of political realities over time since the year of release. Utilizing qualitative content analysis, the research examines how the film critiques partisanship, political leadership, and citizen disillusionment with governance through narrative structure, characterization, dialogues, and cinematic techniques. Findings indicate that despite being over three decades old, *Sandesham* remains pertinent to contemporary Indian politics, particularly amid ideological clustering and media-driven narratives. The film functions not only as a reflective medium but also as a critical instrument revealing cyclical political dysfunction and advocating for active, informed citizenship.

Keywords: Indian cinema, political satire, *Sandesham*, political discourse, political leadership, content analysis

1. Introduction

Cinema operates as a cultural and ideological apparatus that reflects, critiques, and shapes societal realities. In the Indian context, where politics permeates everyday life, cinema serves as a potent medium for expressing political ideologies, conflicts, and public sentiments. Malayalam cinema has established a niche in exploring socio-political issues through realism and satire, providing an essential platform for examining the interplay between culture and governance.



P.1 Movie poster

Sandesham (1991), directed by Sathyan Anthikad with a screenplay by Sreenivasan, critiques ideological dogmatism, partisanship, and performative political activity within democracies. By portraying political conflict within a middle-class family, the film offers a microcosmic view of societal divisions, illustrating how political ideologies infiltrate personal and social spheres, fracturing unity. The narrative depicts covert alliances among political actors, the influence of dynastic politics, the unquestioning loyalty of party cadres, and intra-party power struggles shaped by electoral competition. The continued relevance of *Sandesham* is evident in the context of the 2026 Kerala Legislative Assembly election. The film's portrayal of political realignments, internal factionalism, leadership struggles, and electoral mobilization closely parallels several characteristics of Kerala's contemporary political environment, making the election a pertinent case for examining the film's enduring political commentary.

Through its compelling screenplay, memorable dialogues, and relatable characters the evidence of its enduring impact can be seen in the reflections of political leaders. During a visit to the residence of film producer P. V. Gangadharan, Satheesan, then the Leader of the Opposition and presently the Chief Minister of Kerala, acknowledged that viewing *Sandesham* had profoundly influenced his political perspective, underscoring the film's continuing resonance within Kerala's political discourse. “ആ സിനിമ കണ്ടശേഷം ഉറക്കം നഷ്ടപ്പെട്ടു. ഓഫീസിലേക്ക് പോകാനുള്ള മടി മാറിയാണ് അതിനുശേഷമാണ്.” (Translation: After watching the movie I lost the sleep and film motivated me to pursue a career in law with greater dedication, and practice as an advocate for nine years (Mathrubhumi, 2026)). Satheesan also acknowledged the resemblance between the character portrayed by the late actor Shankaradi with the Late veteran Communist leader E. M. S. Namboodiripad. His observation highlights the film's deployment of recognizable political archetypes and its engagement with Kerala's political culture. The continued relevance of such character representations is evidenced by their recognition and interpretation by contemporary political leaders decades after the film's release (Mathrubhumi,

2026).Shankaradi in the film did the portrayal of Revolutionary Democratic Party (RDP) president Kumara Pillai which is a reflection of LDF party leadership from Kerala.



File photo (p.2) courtesy online edition Mathrubhumi: P1 : Shankaradi. P2. V D Satheeshan chief minister of State of Kerala

സന്ദേശം എന്ന ചിത്രത്തിൽ ശങ്കരാടി, മുഖ്യമന്ത്രി വി.ഡി. സതീശൻ | ഫോട്ടോ: സ്ക്രീൻ ഗ്രാബ്, മുഹമ്മദ് ഷഹീർ സി.എച്ച്\ മാതൃഭൂമി

Political engagement has increasingly migrated to digital platforms, where discourse is often polarized, laden with misinformation, and marked by symbolic loyalty rather than substantive policy discussion. The ideological stances portrayed in the film, adopted uncritically by characters, resonate with contemporary tendencies in political communication, particularly in the social media era.

The film critiques opportunistic politics, where personal ambition and party loyalty overshadow public welfare. These cyclical political patterns suggest continuity within the system, affirming that the realities portrayed in *Sandesham* transcend its temporal setting to govern present-day politics.

Research Question:

How does *Sandesham* reflect political realities in the Indian context that persist decades later?

Research Objective:

To analyze the significance of *Sandesham* in the contemporary political landscape through its narrative and socio-political commentary.

Cinema and politics share a reciprocal relationship, mutually influencing public perception and ideology (Kellner, n.d.). Political films transcend mere reflection to shape interpretive frameworks through which viewers comprehend political processes and power structures. Accordingly, *Sandesham* functions as both a reflective and critical text, revealing the persistence of political behaviors and challenges to meaningful democratic engagement.

This research contributes to broader discourse on political cinema, media representation, and democratic participation by analyzing *Sandesham's* contemporary relevance. It argues that the film exposes cyclical political stagnation while fostering critical and informed political engagement.

2. Literature Review

Political cinema represents ideological stances through narrative, aesthetics, and representation, aiming to critique power structures and provoke socio-political reflection (Mazierska, 2014). South Asian cinema, particularly in South India, has historically intertwined with political movements, mobilizing public sentiment through film culture (Velayutham & Devadas, 2021).

Malayalam cinema is noted for its realist and socially conscious narratives. Pillai (2011) identifies political themes as central to this genre, offering valuable cultural insights into regional political awareness. Holtmeier (2016) highlights political films' role in shaping audience perceptions of governance and social frameworks. The concept of cine-politics expands political cinema's role beyond ideological messaging to the formation of political subjectivity (Hutnyk, 2018). *Sandesham* exemplifies a work transcending its era, commenting on political recurrence and systemic stagnation. Jeong (2022) emphasizes contemporary political cinema's capacity to foster critical political awareness through interpretive spaces.

Media images and tone significantly influence public perceptions of political figures, affecting electoral outcomes (Van Remooster & Vliegthart, 2023). Media representations also shape voter understanding of party positions, indirectly influencing voting behavior (da Silva, 2025). This underscores media's role in constructing political reality. Political communication research identifies digital political advertising as pivotal in shaping voter preferences and engagement (Abbas, 2024). Narrative-driven political content enhances voter turnout by fostering emotional attachment and local resonance (Utami & Wahid, 2024), underscoring cinema's effectiveness through narrative and emotional appeal rather than direct persuasion.

Political marketing integrates communication strategies with voter psychology, influencing long-term political attitudes (Kocaman & Coşgun, 2024). Studies on youth political communication reveal that credibility, interactivity, and satire significantly affect political participation (Hassan et al., 2024). Satirical films like *Sandesham* employ humor to criticize political systems while encouraging critical reflection. Social media's role in political participation and voter turnout is increasingly recognized (Kumar & Yadav, 2024). Experimental studies on the 2024 U.S. elections demonstrate that narrative-driven content creators can alter political attitudes and voting preferences more effectively than traditional campaigns (Chmel et al., 2025). Media influence is complex, involving framing, priming, and perception development (Ahrens, 2024). Public opinion and voting behavior are intricately linked, mediated by media narratives.

Collectively, these studies indicate a shift toward interactive media influence models where audiences actively negotiate and interpret political meanings. Cinema, as a participant in creating political consciousness, aligns with this trend.

Sandesham remains relevant in this evolving media environment, critiquing performative politics, ideological stagnation, and superficial engagement, paralleling contemporary research on media-driven

political behavior. The film anticipates dynamics revealed by recent studies on voter behavior and media influence.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis methodology, a well-suited approach for examining cultural texts such as films, enabling an in-depth exploration of symbolic meanings, narrative structures, and thematic elements embedded within the cinematic work. This methodology facilitates a systematic and interpretive examination of how Sandesham articulates and critiques political realities, providing insights into both explicit and implicit socio-political commentaries.

The analysis is structured around four principal dimensions:

Narrative Structure:

The study investigates the film's storyline, focusing on how the plot development, sequencing of events, and overarching narrative arcs convey political themes. This includes examining the framing of political conflict within the domestic sphere and how the narrative progression reflects cyclical political patterns and ideological tensions.

Characterization:

Attention is given to the construction and portrayal of key characters as embodiments of political ideologies and behaviors. The analysis explores how characters such as Prabhakaran, Prakashan, Raghavan Nair, K G Pothuval, Yashwanth, Anandan and Kumara Pillai represent ideological rigidity, opportunism, and citizen skepticism, respectively. This dimension assesses how characterization facilitates audience identification and reflects broader political subjectivities.

Dialogues:

The study analyzes the film's dialogues to uncover the use of irony, satire, and performative political language. This involves exploring how conversational exchanges reveal contradictions, ideological dogmatism, and the symbolic nature of political discourse, emphasizing rhetoric over substantive policy engagement.

Cinematic Techniques:

The analysis considers visual and stylistic elements such as camera framing, shot composition, mise-en-scène, and editing choices. These techniques are examined for their role in symbolizing political polarization, stagnation, and the embedding of political conflict within everyday life, enhancing the film's critical impact.

Through this multi-dimensional qualitative content analysis, the study elucidates how Sandesham critiques political systems and maintains thematic relevance decades after its release, particularly in relation to contemporary political contexts such as Kerala's 2026 state elections. This methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of the film as both a reflective cultural artifact and a critical instrument fostering political awareness and engagement.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Characterization and Ideological Representation

Sandesham primarily employs characterization to convey its critique of political ideologies and practices. Rather than abstract political discourse, the film embodies ideological stances through character conflicts, interactions, and lived experiences, enhancing relatability and sustaining relevance. This section explores the characters' appeal and their reflection of political culture.

Prabhakaran active worker of Revolutionary Democratic Party (RDP) (Left wing,) and Prakashan involved in Indian National Secular Party (INSP) (Centre politics, resemblance to UDF) represent contrasting political engagements. Prabhakaran epitomizes ideological rigidity, prioritizing party loyalty over practical governance and personal responsibility. His idealism is disconnected from reality, critiquing politics dominated by intellectual dogma that yields ineffectiveness.

Conversely, Prakashan embodies opportunistic politics, marked by adaptability and self-interest. His allegiance shifts pragmatically, reflecting political behavior driven by personal advancement rather than conviction. Despite differences, both characters fail to affect meaningful change, highlighting the symbolic nature of political commitment over substantive policy focus. This resonates with contemporary politics, where rhetoric often eclipses governance.

Their placement within a middle-class family enhances relatability, portraying politics as embedded in everyday life rather than elite institutions. Their unemployment and social dependency mirror common citizen experiences, underscoring politics' pervasiveness in daily existence.

Prabhakaran's ideological identity reflects a democratic tendency to define selfhood through political affiliation. His active participation, despite practical ineffectiveness, reveals the performative dimension of ideological investment. Prakashan's pragmatic opportunism mirrors real-world political actors navigating coalition politics and careerism.

Raghavan Nair, father character of Prabhakaran and Prakashan, represents the pragmatic, skeptical citizen affected by political dysfunction. His critique targets both political actors and disengaged citizens, advocating informed and active participation. His stance reflects generational divides and critiques political institutions as power-maintaining entities rather than public servants.

Grassroots political workers are depicted as ideologically loyal yet uncritical, highlighting democracy's vulnerability to blind allegiance alongside corrupt leadership. *Sandesham* illustrates how ideological differences permeate personal relationships and social interactions, fracturing unity. The characters Lathika, Latha, Uthaman, Udayabhanu, Achuthan, and Anandan function as representations of the ordinary citizen within the socio-political landscape portrayed in *Sandesham*. Collectively, these characters embody the perspectives, concerns, and lived experiences of the common people, articulating their anxieties regarding the prevailing political and social realities. Rather than serving as passive observers, they voice the frustrations and aspirations of the electorate, thereby reflecting the broader public sentiment toward political institutions and governance.

Uthaman, a member of the fictional RDP political party, explicitly expresses his disillusionment with the party's poor electoral performance. He attributes the party's defeat to its inability to meet the expectations of the public, criticizing its reliance on electoral promises without translating them into meaningful action. His observation that the party merely "made promises" while failing to deliver tangible outcomes serves as a critique of performative political rhetoric and the widening gap between political commitments and governance (*Sandesham*, 21:42–22:10). This dialogue underscores the film's broader commentary on political accountability and public dissatisfaction with unfulfilled electoral mandates. A comparable

pattern can be observed in the results of the 2026 Kerala Legislative Assembly election, where the electoral outcome contrasted sharply with the victory anticipated by the incumbent government led by former Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. The election results reflected the electorate's reassessment of governance and campaign promises, echoing the themes of political accountability and public expectations portrayed in *Sandesham*.

The characterization aligns with political subjectivity theory, demonstrating how ideology operates in everyday interactions (Hutnyk, 2018; Jeong, 2022). Characters function as archetypes of enduring political practices, normalized through their ordinariness and social embeddedness.

Raghavan Nair's cynicism encapsulates common public disillusionment, emphasizing stability and practicality yet implicitly critiquing political disengagement as sustaining flawed systems.

Udayabhanu, a government employee in *Sandesham*, serves as a representation of the ethical public servant who challenges the misuse of political authority. Through his character, the film critiques the coercive practices employed by political party members to collect financial contributions from government employees for party-sponsored events. Udayabhanu openly (1:16:45-1:17:58) refuses to contribute a substantial portion of his salary, arguing that such demands are unjustified and that political activities should not interfere with official duties or disrupt public administration. His resistance to partisan coercion ultimately results in his transfer, illustrating the institutional repercussions faced by individuals who oppose the abuse of political power. The character of Udayabhanu serves as a vehicle for political critique by questioning the accountability of political parties and their leaders in fulfilling their responsibilities toward society, particularly in generating employment opportunities for young people, reducing poverty, and promoting national development.

This narrative episode highlights the film's critique of political patronage, the politicization of public institutions, and the vulnerability of civil servants who uphold professional integrity in politically charged environments.

The domestic setting as political stage enhances accessibility and impact, enabling audiences to relate complex political concepts to familiar contexts. This positioning challenges viewers to reflect on their complicity in perpetuating polarized, superficial political engagement.

Thus, *Sandesham's* characters serve as reflective archetypes, simultaneously embodying and critiquing social-political conventions. Their actions mirror contemporary political rhetoric, including social media discourse, grassroots activism, and electoral strategies.

4.2 Dialogue and Satirical Discourse:

Dialogues in *Sandesham* are central to its political critique, employing irony and humor to expose contradictions in political language. The film illustrates political discourse as performative, symbolic, and detached from substantive governance, echoing Edelman's (1988) assertion that political language constructs reality rather than communicates.

The character Yashwanth Sahai, portrayed by the late actor Innocent, symbolizes the communication barriers that emerge from linguistic and cultural differences within India's diverse political landscape. Through this character, *Sandesham* satirizes the disconnection between local audiences and national political discourse by illustrating how language can become a source of misunderstanding and misinformation. In one notable scene, Sahai requests a tender coconut by saying, "Naariyal ka pani chahiye" ("I would like coconut water"), but his statement is deliberately mistranslated, leading others to believe that he is asking for a woman (*Sandesham*, 1:20:21–1:22:00). This humorous misinterpretation functions as a

narrative device that critiques the distortion of communication and demonstrates how inaccurate translation can alter meaning, influence public perception, and create unnecessary controversy.

The film's dialogic form prefigures the phenomenon of unresolved argumentation characteristic of modern political language. Exchanges are marked by polarization and stasis, reflecting not only political actors' shortcomings but also discourse's inherent weaknesses due to lack of accountability.

Contemporary political communication research corroborates this, highlighting media's emphasis on visibility and framing over substantive engagement, influencing public perception and voting behavior (Van Remoortere & Vliegenthart, 2023).

Satire enables the film to avoid ideological partisanship, instead provoking critical audience reflection. This aligns with Mazierska's (2014) view of political cinema as a space for ideological interpretation rather than didacticism, enhancing message efficacy through relatable and enjoyable presentation.

Humor underpins serious structural critiques of political communication, portraying discourse as belief-based rather than deliberative. Election communication studies reveal that elites encode and audiences decode political narratives variably, conditioned by social backgrounds (Iswarinda et al., 2024). Party leaders' ideological language, unquestioned by grassroots workers, exemplifies institutionalized discourse distribution.

The film also interrogates audience roles in political discourse comprehension. Its humor-laden yet revealing dialogues foster critical awareness, transforming passive spectators into active interpreters.

4.3 Visual Symbolism and Cinematic Techniques:

Sandesham employs minimal cinematic effects, focusing on the domestic environment as a symbolic political arena where ideological struggles unfold. The family home serves as a microcosm of broader political structures.

The camera frequently utilizes medium-wide, static shots encompassing multiple characters, emphasizing relational dynamics over individual subjectivity. This spatial arrangement exemplifies Bordwell and Thompson's (2010) concept of staging in depth, where meaning emerges from character positioning within *mise-en-scène* rather than rapid editing.

Visual framing accentuates ideological opposition, with characters frequently positioned on opposite sides of the frame, separated by physical barriers such as furniture or doorways. This spatial metaphor visually represents political polarization.

Static shots during debates underscore political rhetoric's monotony and stalemate, resonating with Stuart Hall's (1997) notion that representation is shaped by structures facilitating and constraining meaning.

A notable example is a dining table argument scene, filmed with a fixed, eye-level camera capturing all characters simultaneously, illustrating Bela Balázs's (1970) theory that visual composition can convey psychological and social relations without dialogue.

These cinematic techniques parallel modern media habits, such as televised political debates characterized by superficial deliberation and limited substantive outcomes. The film's visual language reinforces its critique of political stagnation. *Sandesham*'s use of satire is particularly effective in fostering critical

awareness without resorting to didacticism. By employing humor and irony, the film creates an interpretive space where audiences can engage with complex political issues in a manner that is both relatable and thought-provoking. This approach aligns with contemporary understandings of political cinema as a site for ideological negotiation rather than mere transmission of messages (Mazierska, 2014; Jeong, 2022).

The film's cinematic techniques further reinforce its thematic concerns. The use of static, medium-wide shots and spatial arrangements that visually represent ideological polarization contribute to the portrayal of political stagnation and performativity. These stylistic choices echo the monotony and impasse characteristic of political rhetoric and media debates, enhancing the film's critical impact.

4.4 Political Stagnation and Contemporary Relevance:

Sandesham foregrounds the cyclical nature of political behavior, critiquing both officials and the citizenry for perpetuating systemic flaws through blind obedience.

This theme is especially pertinent in India's current political milieu, shaped by coalition dynamics, regionalism, and media discourse. Contemporary political communication often relies on emotional appeal, repetition, and strategic framing rather than policy substance (Van Remoostere & Vliegenthart, 2023). Digital platforms facilitate misinformation and partisan reinforcement, impeding critical examination (Chadwick, 2017; Sunstein, 2018). *Sandesham* anticipates contemporary challenges in political communication, particularly in the digital age where discourse is often fragmented, polarized, and driven by symbolic loyalty rather than substantive policy discussion. The film's critique of opportunistic politics and performative engagement is thus prescient, offering insights into the dynamics of modern political behavior and media influence.

The cyclical nature of political behavior highlighted in *Sandesham* underscores the systemic continuity of political dysfunction. The film critiques not only political elites but also the citizenry, whose blind allegiance and disengagement contribute to the perpetuation of flawed democratic processes. This dual critique invites a re-examination of democratic participation, emphasizing the ethical responsibilities of both leaders and voters.

In light of Kerala's political context, especially the 2026 state elections, the film's themes gain renewed significance. The persistent polarization, coalition politics, and media-driven narratives observed in contemporary politics mirror the film's portrayal, validating its status as a critical mirror of political realities. This contextualization affirms the film's predictive qualities and its utility as a tool for understanding ongoing political dynamics.

Conclusion

Sandesham remains a seminal work in the realm of political satire within Indian cinema, particularly in Malayalam film culture, and its enduring significance is anchored in its incisive critique of ideological dogmatism, opportunism, and the gradual decline of democratic engagement. The film's portrayal of political realities, though rooted in the socio-political context of early 1990s Kerala, continues to resonate profoundly with contemporary audiences, underscoring the persistence of systemic issues that transcend temporal boundaries. This persistence affirms the film's role not only as a cultural artifact but also as a critical lens through which political behavior and societal dynamics can be examined and understood.

At the core of *Sandesham*'s enduring relevance is its ability to expose the performative nature of political actions and discourse. The film deftly illustrates how political engagement often devolves into symbolic gestures and rhetorical posturing rather than substantive governance or meaningful policy development. This performativity is manifest in the characters' behavior, dialogues, and interactions, which collectively reveal the cyclical stagnation and superficiality embedded in political systems. Through satire, *Sandesham* challenges viewers to critically reflect on the political settings in which they participate and to recognize the ethical imperatives necessary for advancing societal welfare.

Political discourse, as explored in the film and supported by scholarly insights such as those from Cook (1989), is inherently rhetorical and persuasive. This rhetoric serves as a tool for influencing public behavior and opinion, often prioritizing emotional appeal and identity affirmation over rational deliberation. *Sandesham* captures this dynamic by depicting political language as a mechanism for constructing political realities rather than merely communicating factual information. The film's satirical treatment of political rhetoric thus serves as a meta-commentary on the nature of democratic participation and the challenges it faces in achieving genuine engagement.

The film's characters embody archetypes that reflect enduring political behaviors and attitudes. Prabhakaran and Prakashan, representing ideological rigidity and opportunistic adaptability respectively, illustrate the limitations of both extremes. Prabhakaran's unwavering ideological loyalty blinds him to practical realities and personal responsibilities, while Prakashan's pragmatic self-interest undermines the potential for principled political action. These characterizations highlight the deficiencies in political commitment and the consequences of performative politics, where symbolism eclipses substantive change.

Raghavan Nair, the patriarch, symbolizes the skeptical citizen whose disillusionment with political dysfunction reflects a broader societal malaise. His pragmatic stance critiques both political actors and disengaged citizens, emphasizing the necessity of informed and active participation. This generational perspective underscores the complexities of political knowledge and engagement, suggesting that cynicism, while understandable, may inadvertently sustain flawed systems by discouraging meaningful involvement.

The film's domestic setting serves as a microcosm of the broader political landscape, illustrating how ideological conflicts permeate personal and social relationships. This spatial metaphor enhances the accessibility and impact of the film's critique by situating political discourse within familiar contexts. It also implicates viewers in the perpetuation of polarized and superficial political engagement, inviting self-reflection on individual and collective complicity.

The broader implications of *Sandesham* extend to discussions on political cinema, media representation, and democratic engagement. By revealing the performative and cyclical nature of politics, the film encourages a more critical and informed attitude toward political participation. It challenges audiences to move beyond symbolic loyalty and engage substantively with governance and policy issues.

In conclusion, *Sandesham* stands as a classic political satire whose relevance endures more than three decades after its release. Its incisive critique of ideological dogmatism, opportunism, and democratic decline continues to resonate, offering valuable insights into the nature of political behavior and communication. The film's ability to provoke critical reflection and ethical consideration underscores its importance as both a cultural text and a catalyst for democratic engagement.

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