



FILM REVIEW

“*Njan Prakashan*”

— PHILIP MATHEW

Beloved Indian poet and playwright Rabindranath Tagore once penned the immortal words: “I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.” The 2018 Malayalam language film *Njan Prakashan* (lit. “I am Prakashan”), with English subtitles, brings to life Tagore’s words in a story bursting with the universal themes of humor, joy, empathy, tragedy and, ultimately, rebirth.

The film shines a light on the transformational power of servant-leadership as the main character, Prakashan, frees himself from an ethic of manipulation and self-centeredness to ultimately embrace the paradox that is servant-leadership. In the process, he learns that the best way to find oneself is to lose oneself in the service of others.

Set in the picturesque southern Indian state of Kerala, director Sathyan Anthikad, introduces us to our hero Prakashan, a Malayali youth living a listless directionless, and unemployed life. Though formally trained as a nurse, Prakashan spends most of his time hanging out with his



similarly jobless friends, daydreaming of what they consider the good life—a life that involves getting by, by doing as little as possible. While Prakashan desires the material rewards that come with a successful career, pride, laziness, and a bit of envy prevent him from rolling up his sleeves and earning an honest living as a nurse, a profession he considers beneath his dignity, particularly as a young man.

Prakashan has big plans though. He dreams, like many Indian youth, to go abroad and make it big in a foreign country, achieving financial success and social status. In pursuit of this dream, Prakashan decides to legally change his name to a more ‘sophisticated’ and ‘stylish’ “*P.R. Akash*,” believing this will make his prospects of moving abroad even better. Through this name change, the director provides not only a clever word play on the movie’s title, but a vehicle that takes us on a journey of a young man seeking to find his place in the world by becoming someone he’s not (Mr. “P.R. Akash”). Perfectly willing to use dishonesty and deceit to serve his own interests, Prakashan’s name change proves significant for the viewer, as the director brings it full circle at the end of the film.

One day, Prakashan (or as he constantly reminds everyone in his village in a self-assured tone, “P.R. Akash”) runs into former classmate and ex-flame Salomi, whom he learns has just achieved what he’s been yearning for—a visa to work in Germany as a nurse. With this shocking news, Prakashan finds his interest in nursing and Salomi suddenly “rekindled.” He spends a significant portion of the film trying to woo her in hopes of convincing her to marry him, so he too can get to



Germany on a family visa. Through other scenes in the film, however, we learn that he really has no affection or love for Salomi, but rather views her as a means to an end; she is his one-way ticket out of Kerala. Indeed, later in the film, he proudly tells his friend Gopalji that he plans to dump Salomi as soon as he lands in Germany.

Prakashan's machinations in pursuit of Salomi, and ultimately a flight to Germany, know no end. In a series of humorous scenes, he buys her flowers, writes poems, and takes German language classes right alongside her. Prakashan, a Hindu, even convinces Salomi's family that he's a Christian in hopes of gaining their approval for her hand in marriage. These scenes play particularly well to the audience, as Kerala, one of India's most religiously diverse states, is known for its interfaith harmony.

Prakashan learns that all Salomi needs to get to Germany is money for airfare. Eager to help, he sells his motorcycle and a few other belongings. When this isn't enough, he convinces his friend Gopalji to sell his wife's gold jewelry behind her back, with the promise of repaying him as soon as he lands in Germany. The plan backfires, however. In a plot twist, Salomi and family, after taking Prakashan's money, suddenly disappear—leaving nothing behind but an empty house and no clue as to their whereabouts. Ironically, Prakashan the deceiver has fallen victim to a deception.

Now in hot water with his friend to whom he owes a significant amount of money, Prakashan reluctantly agrees to work off his debt by doing whatever Gopalji wants him to do.



Gopalji's job of choice for Prakashan is to work as a live-in nurse for a single mom whose young daughter, Tinamol, is suffering from a brain tumor. The assignment proves difficult, as Tinamol plays a spoiled child with an incessant craving for junk food and a bossy attitude; yet this encounter with Tinamol proves to be a pivotal turning point in Prakashan's life.

In the days and weeks that follow, Prakashan spends time with Tinamol, caring for her needs and learning about her lonely battle with cancer. Through this empathic interaction, there emerges within Prakashan a *natural feeling* to serve (Greenleaf, 1977). In a series of funny, endearing, and moving scenes with Tinamol, Prakashan discovers the joy of serving others.

By serving Tinamol, not only as her health care provider, but also as her companion, confidant, and friend, Prakashan is transformed. Slowly, we see him letting go of his ambitions to move abroad and make it big; he uses his medical training, knack for humor, and uplifting presence to make a difference in Tinamol's life as she faces a terminal illness. A confirmation of his changed heart is a scene near the end of the film where Prakashan unexpectedly crosses paths with a sheepish Salomi. He chooses the moment to extend forgiveness to her—an evidence of his newfound peace.

In the final scene of the film, we see Prakashan working contentedly as a nurse in a local hospital. The director closes the film with a memorable scene in which a hospital visitor meets the hero of our film as he is going about his duties and asks his name. He pauses and responds with a big smile, "*Njan*



Prakashan.” “P.R. Akash” has (re)discovered his true identity.

Anthikad’s brilliance as a director is displayed in how he juxtaposes the universal struggles of identity and a search for meaning alongside the beauty of a servant-oriented way of life. Prakashan’s lack of purpose and desire to make something of his life is relevant and relatable to audiences around the globe. Anthikad takes on the most haunting questions of our humanity such as: *What is the meaning of life? How can I find true joy and happiness? What is my purpose? Where do I stand in relationship to others?* The philosophy of servant-leadership answers these questions by challenging us to live for something greater than ourselves.

In an essay on servant-leadership and the interior of a leader, Ferch (2011) described two dynamics that we see in Prakashan as he made this quest toward significance. First, Ferch explained how the human spirit instinctively longs for inward depth, lasting community, and goodness. Much like a flower seeking the sun, servant-leadership provides the light that pulls us toward such virtues, making personal transformation, relational authenticity, and interpersonal and societal healing possible.

Ferch (2011) also cautioned us about another human dynamic: interior hiddenness, which stunts this natural process:

When a person is hidden, that person’s leadership is also hidden, and he or she tends to use hidden measures such as dominance, manipulation, and fear. Such measures can be very effective at times achieving powerful results, but they keep those who are led in darkness, subservient



and oppressed. Servant-leaders become students of the areas of their own life they try to hide, working to bring these areas to light. (pp. 22-23)

Both darkness and light were present in Prakashan. His hiddenness was evident as he tried to find significance through manipulation, control, and illegitimate power in relation to Salomi. In his encounter with Tinamol, Prakashan faced that hiddenness and moved toward light and healing.

Interestingly, Greenleaf (1996) described a spiritual force he called *entheos* that enables such a transformation. *Entheos* literally means to be *possessed of spirit* and describes the force that empowers a servant-leader, providing nourishment, strength, and endurance for the road less travelled. Greenleaf noted, “When one is down, in the doghouse, as we all are once in a while, one needs sustenance, something to help muster one’s own resources. This calls for *entheos*” (p. 82).

Greenleaf (1996) warned that detecting *entheos* requires caution as status and material success, social success, family success, and busyness can be false positives. Looking at Prakashan’s life, the audience can see how he pursued, possessed, or nearly obtained all of these. Yet Greenleaf instructively noted that “*entheos* does not emerge in response to external incentives....The individual cannot will it” (p. 83). So what should one look for instead? Greenleaf (1996) provided some clues, which we observe in Prakashan as he embraced servant-leadership.

The first sign of the growth of *entheos* is the presence of a



dual paradox (Greenleaf, 1996). First, there exists concurrent satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the status quo. A servant-leader is purposeful and productive, yet also yearns for deeper growth. The second is an increased sense of responsibility matched with definitive focus and grounding (“this is the one thing I will do”) (p. 84).

Other signs of *entheos* include an overriding sense of single-mindedness, new and deeper life interests, increasing vulnerability with others, greater awareness and appreciation for time, a willingness to slow down because one’s present work matters (rather than a constant search for greener pastures), and an ability to “connect the dots”—sensing unity between the here and now and other life events. Each of the signs was present in Prakashan as he began living a servant-oriented life.

One sign in particular is worth noting as it speaks so clearly to the core message of the film. Greenleaf (1996) described it this way: “There is a developing view of people. All people are seen more worthy of being trusted and believed in and are seen less as beings to be used, competed with, or judged” (p. 85). This expanded view of others is especially visible when one considers the stark contrast between how Prakashan related to Salomi and then to Tinamol.

At first, he pursued material and personal gain at any cost and by any means; deception and manipulation were fair play. Later, he oriented himself toward servant-leadership, making a commitment to a cause much greater than himself, which provided the significance he was seeking. Greenleaf (1996)



explained a related dynamic also present in the film. He noted that *entheos* is difficult to achieve when one concurrently tries to pursue material gain *and* personal meaning. The problem is that one cannot serve two masters, "...status and material striving needs must definitely have taken a permanent secondary place" (p. 85).

Greenleaf (1977) asserted that the best test of servant-leadership is whether those who are served become "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants" (pp. 13-14). We see these outcomes as Prakashan prioritized the needs of those around him—ensuring sure that their highest needs were met. In becoming a servant-leader, Prakashan was simultaneously transformed, as he emerged healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous.

This accessible and wonderful film reveals the transformative power of servant-leadership and service as the true meaning of life. The prayer of St. Francis of Assisi reminds us:

For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

References

- Ferch, S. (2011). Servant-leadership and the interior of the leader: Facing violence with courage and forgiveness. In S. Ferch & L. Spears (Eds.), *The spirit of servant-leadership* (pp.21-49). Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.



- Greenleaf, R.K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1996). *On becoming a servant leader*. (D. M. Frick, & L. C. Spears, Eds.) San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Philip Mathew is the founding and lead faculty for Olympic College's Bachelor of Applied Science in Organizational Leadership and Technical Management and a full-time faculty in Olympic College's Associate's degree program in Organizational Leadership and Resource Management. He earned his Ph.D. in Leadership Studies from Gonzaga University. He is a licensed mental health counselor and a member of the editorial review board for the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership* and the *Journal of Leadership Studies*.