

Cinema and its Fragments: A Social History of Malayalam cinema from its origins to 1990.

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What cinema does according to Deleuze is the “seeding of images as precisely a political activity, enabling access to knowledge that one day may be able to be utilized.”¹ Thus cinema remains as the biggest reference of human commitments towards the efforts to understand, interpret and imagine the ‘social’ and ‘political’ in modern times. That makes it hard to differentiate between writing the history of cinema and its people. This work attempts to preface the social history of Malayalam cinema, the regional cinema of Kerala,² from its beginning to 1990. The period of study has been chosen based on a comprehensive reading of historical events and discourses that have shaped the social terrain as well as the structure and practices of the political economy of Kerala.

The state of Kerala, situated at the southern part of India, was formed in 1956, uniting Malabar (which was part of Madras Presidency during the British rule) and the princely states of Cochin and Travancore. The states were reorganized and united on the basis of the common language spoken in these regions, which is Malayalam. In 1957 a communist government was elected in Kerala that foregrounded the “extraordinary strength of the communist movement” in the state.” In the 1970s, grounding on the enhanced social development (even in the absence of significant economic development) in Kerala, the researchers have formed a new development narrative for the state, which was later called ‘the Kerala model of development’ that is anchored on the ideals of “social democracy” and “welfarism.” One of the major factors that pushed forward the narrative was the economic boom that happened in Kerala associated with the Gulf migration. In the early 1970s, the rising demand for workers in the oil Industries of gulf countries, which were less in population, set out large scale migration of workers from different parts of India, especially from Kerala.³ Bourgeoning foreign remittance flowing to Kerala created a flourishing economy with a stable middle-class, that redefined the ‘Kerala Model’ incorporating new ideals of progress and prosperity. However, the trajectory of Kerala’s progress and prosperity has faced staunch criticism for its imagined assumptions of ‘equality and progress’ and proved to be a failure beyond the statistical derivations of development. Scholars like J Devika argues that the Kerala model have rejuvenated the existing terrains of social exclusion by re-casting casteism and patriarchy through new ways that “reduced marginalized people in Kerala, particularly the lower-caste Dalits and tribals, to a state of abjection”⁴.

It was by witnessing and conversing with these contradictions, addressing diverging discourses on development, exclusion and marginalization, Malayalam cinema has evolved into the most influential cultural medium of modern Kerala.. However, it should be also noted that the interaction with these socio-political domains of Kerala has inevitably shaped the aesthetical and structural foundation of Malayalam cinema. So the present work suggests studying the history of this reciprocal process by outlining various instances that include films, filmmakers, film movements, and genres that have determined the history of Malayalam cinema.

The history of Malayalam cinema starts from J C Daniel’s silent film *Vigathakumaran*(1928) (which is the first feature film in Malayalam even though it was never credited to Daniel till recently.⁵ As a beginner, even though admiring the works of pioneer filmmakers like Phalke and Mudaliyar, he didn’t choose to follow their path to make devotional films. *Vigathakumaran* was a family drama; that inaugurated social cinema in

¹ Felicity Colman, *Deleuze and cinema*, Oxford, Berg, 2011, p.160

² Malayalam is the language spoken in the South Indian state of Kerala and the union territories of Lakshadweep and Puducherry spoken by the ‘Malayalee’ people.

³ Prakash, B. A. “Gulf Migration and Its Economic Impact: The Kerala Experience.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 50, 1998, p. 3209

⁴ Devika, J. “Egalitarian Developmentalism, Communist Mobilization, and the Question of Caste in Kerala State, India.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 69, no. 3, 2010, pp. 799-800

⁵ M. Jayaraj, *Malayala Cinema Pinnitta Vazhikal*, Mathrubhumi Books, Kozhikode, 2018, p.30.

Malayalam.⁶ But more than what was made on the screen, the movie is known for how it was received by the first generation filmgoers of Malayalam. The people representing a rigid casteist society couldn't tolerate P.K Rosy, a Dalit girl acting boldly as an upper-caste character in the film. The audience who gathered for the first show of *vigathakumaran* at capitol theatre, Trivandrum, got displeased by the sight of Rosy on screen and created a skirmish inside the hall. They have even burned down the screen and started attacking the crew members who were present for the inaugural show. Later, this petty mob frenzy altered its course into full-fledged caste violence that was objectively directed towards Rosy, resulting in her run away to Nagercoil.⁷ The "caste violence" faced by Rosy and the "narratives that have emerged around it" have to be seen as a "nodal point in the highly diffused history of caste relations" in Malayalam cinema.⁸

After a long break with a few attempts to make films, the Malayalam film industry got established in 1950s. In this period, Malayalam cinema advanced with "thematic conventions and political considerations" that was predominantly "associated with the Left (politics) in Kerala". In the mid-1950s, the Left was going through a shift in orientation by "incorporating the anxieties and desires of a middle class, emerging mostly from the privileged castes and communities in the region". Thus cinema has become one of the crucial "political-pedagogical" devices in the hand of the left leadership for producing "mobilizational narratives and rhetorics addressing the masses"⁹ Films like *Navalokam* (1951), *Neelakuyil* (1954), *Newspaperboy*(1955), *RarichanEnnaPawran* (1956), *Randidangazhi*(1958), *MudiyanayaPuthra* (1960), *Punnapravayalar* (1968), *Mooladhanam* (1969), *NingalenneCommunisaki* (1970) are few examples for them. Even though many of these films failed to articulate a 'complete cinematic language', they surely represented the political dynamics of the period.¹⁰

This period is also characterized by the strong influence of literature over cinema. The 60s can be called the 'decade of adaptation' in Malayalam cinema. *MudiyanayaPuthran* (1961) adapted from Thoppil Bhasi's famous play of the same name and directed by Ramu Karyattu, *Bhargavi Nilayam* (1964) of A. Vincent adapted from Basheer's *Neelavelicham* are only a few of them. When Filmmakers like K .S Sethumadhavan's adaptations had imbued the art so strongly into the Malayalee consciousness, others like M.T Vasudevan Nair through their well-crafted screenplays touched even the tiniest emotions of the Malayalee mind. It was in a way, a transitional period for Malayalam cinema.

After the first Indian international film festival conducted in 1952, we can see a gradual change in attitude among the Indian Filmmakers that made them think of cinema as a responsible art that is capable of shaping the terrains of social living. This was visible in Bollywood film-makers like Raj Kapoor and Bimal Roy, earlier known for their popular-entertainers, who turned to serious filmmaking that resulted in the creation of path breaking works like *Aawara* (1951) and *Do bigha zameen* (1953).¹¹ Such serious efforts were consolidated in the 1970s that resulted in a "renaissance"¹² of Indian cinema; paradoxically in a period of great economic struggles and political crisis (including the internal emergency). It is mainly because, by this time, cinema of India along with the discourses and practices produced around it, had evolved into a potent medium that could address the "growing disillusionment with the existing sociopolitical system and the emergence of new forms of revolt and resistance."¹³ Scholars argue that this decade gave birth to the "parallel cinema" in India creating a "notably porous boundary between mainstream and parallel, art and popular."¹⁴

At the same time, Kerala witnessed a new batch of "film institute trained film makers and actors" renegotiating the cinematic experience of the Malayalee.¹⁵ Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Swayamwaram*(1972), a watershed in Malayalam cinema, foreseen a movement (similar to what *PatherPanchali* [1955] has inaugurated in Bengali cinema) along with the distinct changes Malayalam cinema was about to embrace in the later decades. By an unusual assemblage of visual compositions, music and temporality, *Swayamvaram* handed over a world-class cinematic experience to the Malayalee audience. Along with Adoor, filmmakers like P.A Backer,

⁶ Daniel overcame his inexperience through his enthralling enthusiasm- as he realized that a studio was inevitable for movie production, with the help of others, he started 'The Trivandrum national pictures' that became the first film studio in Kerala.

⁷ Chelangad, Saju. "The Forgotten Star." *The Hindu*, 24 Nov. 2013, www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/the-forgotten-star/article5383387.ece.

⁸ Menon, Bindu. "Affective returns: biopics as life narratives." *Biography*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2017, p.118

⁹ Joseph, Jenson. "Contemplative Spectator, Universal Art, Contingent Realities: Aesthetic Trajectories in Two Early 'Art Films' in Malayalam." *Positions*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2017, p.130.

¹⁰ V.K. Joseph, *DeshamPourathwam Cinema*, Chintha Publications, Thiruvananthapuram, 2010, p.76.

¹¹ Vijaykrishnan, *MalayalaCinemayudeKadha*, Poorna Publications, Kozhikode, 2017, p.67.

¹² "Editorial board." *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 10, No.3, 2012, p. 1.

¹³ Venkiteswaran, C. S "Reflections on Film Society Movement In Kerala." *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol.7, no. 1, 2009, p.66.

¹⁴ Editorial board, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁵ RatheeshRadhakrishnan, "Aesthetic dislocations: A re-take on Malayalam cinema of the 1970s," *South Asian Popular Culture*, 10:1, 2012, p.91

John Abraham, and Aravindan steered into “realism” in contrast to the popular “melodramas”¹⁶ that essentially defined the new wave in Malayalam cinema. According to C S Venkiteswaran, such efforts that varied from earlier films in terms of themes, forms and narrative formulas have brought in a “new self-consciousness” to Malayalam cinema.¹⁷ This new self-consciousness in return created a background for the development of ‘social criticism’ as a constituent component of film making. For instance, Suranjan Ganguly argued that Adoor’s films criticized the logic of development which was based on exclusion and alienation by portraying a Kerala which was not the ‘god’s own country’¹⁸, but that belonged to the marginalized and deprived sections of the society¹⁹.

Apart from the role of filmmakers, another major factor that fostered Malayalam new wave was the setting of film societies. The film society movement in Kerala followed a “different trajectory,” comparing to other states where the “membership” was “restricted to the urban *bhadralok*.”²⁰ Kerala witnessed the burgeoning of numerous film societies addressing cinephiles throughout the state. Thus the film society movement helped in creating a new awareness about cinema among the masses that provided a backdrop for the advancement of the new wave.

Ratheesh Radhakrishnan argues that the migration of Keralites to the Persian Gulf has also contributed to the shaping of the new wave by constituting a symbolic other for the Malayalee regional culture. Apart from the financial boom brought into the economy, that helped in the commercial growth of the Malayalam film Industry, the symbol of “gulf migration” has helped the new wave filmmakers to create a “distinct Malayalee cinema” situated out of the influences of other regional industries, by addressing “a strong historical and cultural argument made for the ‘local’ which was understood as an inside, that needed to be kept isolated from the ills of an outside, that now included the Gulf.”²¹

The New wave cinema obviously inspired the upcoming filmmakers, which shaped their aesthetical and political consciousness. But what is more interesting about the finest among these followers of the New Wave is the straightaway divergence they made from the spirit of art-house to a framework of the popular-commercial cinema.²² For instance, debut films like *Swapnadanam* (1976), *Prayanam* (1975) and *Peruvazhiyambalam* (1979) which were directed by K.G George, Bharathan and Padmarajan respectively, followed the characteristic features of the new wave, but also served as a point of departure towards their lifelong engagement with the ‘popular-commercial’ that constituted the ‘middle brow’ in Malayalam cinema.

The genre of movies called *Madhyavarthi cinema* (middle brow cinema) was ubiquitously staged as a genre of quality, in-between films which defied some of the cinematic conventions of both Malayalam *Kachavada*(commercial) and *Kala*(art) cinemas and self-consciously indulged in new film practices, carefully developed through principles of adaptation and refusal. K. G George, P. Padmarajan and Bharathan are considered the chief proponents and practitioners of this genre of cinema. As a genre which follows the art films of the 1970s, middle cinema deserves special attention in terms of its cinematic language and spectator address.²³

K. g George was a genius who dared to challenge the patriarchal forces amalgamated into rigid exertions on morality and varied dynamics of power in social and interpersonal relationships. Films considered as the best of George includes *Swapnandanm* (1976) and *Irakal* (1985), *Lekhayude maranam oru flashback* (1983) and *Yavanika* (1985), *Adamintevariyellu* (1983) and *Mattoral* (1988). The films mentioned above are not in chronological order but intentionally put in pairs which are based on same themes or premises. In *Swapnandanm* and *Irakal* we can see the brilliant portrayal of characters with disarrayed psyche; one with a memory disease and other with chronic anti-social disorder. The grandeur of these films is where the psychological disorders are used to represent the malevolent forces of power politics and the anomic modern family. In *Lekhayude maranam oru flashback* and *Yavanika* George experimented the possibilities of meta-art for the first time in Malayalam cinema. The last pair, *Adamintevariyellu* and *Mattoral*, that portrayed adultery, domestic abuse and sexual violence in two women-centric narratives, was an attempt rarely made in Malayalam cinema till that time.

Padmarajan, who became a cult figure of Malayalam middle brow cinema is popular for the characters he created on screen (also as a screenplay writer) emphasising on individual freedom and agency. His

¹⁶ Ibid., 92

¹⁷ Venkiteswaran, *Op. Ct.*, p.66

¹⁸ A symbolic phrase often used to describe high standards of living and social development of Kerala

¹⁹ See Ganguly, Suranjan. “Not God’s Own Country: The Cinema of Adoor Gopalakrishnan.” *Asian Cinema*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2013, pp. 161–174.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Radhakrishnan R. The Gulf in the imagination: Migration, Malayalam cinema and regional identity. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. 2009;43(2),p.221.

²² Vijaykrishnan *Op Ct.*, p.167.

²³ Bindu Menon, *Malayalam Middle Cinema and the Category Of Women*, in Meena T Pillai (ed.), *Women in Malayalam cinema*, Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2010

characters transgressed the barriers of social morality without exhausting or withdrawing from the usual terrains (typical to conventional storytelling) of romance, friendship, and family. Another important remark about Padmarajan films is the way characters traverse the conventional image of the gendered body. A rough masculine nature²⁴ attributed to female characters like Sally in *Desatanakilikal Karayarilla* (1986) and the stout wrestler who represents a crisis in masculinity in *Oridathoru Phayalvan* are examples for the same.

With Bharathan, Malayalam cinema witnessed an aesthetic revolution on screen. Derived from an artist himself, the 'Bharathan-touch' deeply impacted the sensual and emotional grounds of Malayalee mind. It was Bharathan who introduced a new visual language in Malayalam cinema that was constituted of symbolic interaction between the narrative and the ever-evolving 'backdrop' of the film. For instance, the forest landscape that forms the background of Vaishali's seductive secrets in *vaishali* (1988) and the sea that symbolises familial unity in *Amaram* (1991) shows the same remarkability of the Bharathan touch.

By 1980s, Malayalam cinema has acquired an engaging cinematic language that conversed with the social and aesthetical imagination of the masses. This period also witnessed Malayalam cinema gaining complete independence from the Tamil industry and reclaiming an authenticity of culture in its making and expressions.²⁵ By then, with the imaginations fired by the gulf migration, the city life has started making strong impressions in the form and substance of Malayalam cinema, realizing the very essence of this visual art as urban.²⁶ City was endlessly portrayed as a place where the hero arrives, from the burdening realities of poverty and insecurity of rural life, in search of fortune.²⁷ In opposition to the traditional life styles, beliefs and innocence of the rustic village life, the city was always portrayed as; shady, alienating and opportunistic on one side and rehabilitating on the other.

Along with changing social outlooks, Malayalam cinema of the 80s has also brought in a culture of "revivalism" that created a social ambience of tolerance among the viewers towards the import of a traditional past to justify the treacherous, exploitative and alienating attitudes of the present. The best way to explain this is by focussing the "overindulgence" shown by Malayalam cinema towards the portrayal of caste, class and patriarchy. In the words of Dr. K Gopinathan:

An unprecedented but active presence of upper caste elements and a reactionary orientation to it has become the staple component in the saleability of mainstream films. Even if the storyline of a film doesn't demand an upper caste Hindu background for the effective realization, the equations of contemporary Malayalam film industry make a beeline for it. Poverty, unemployment, and female insecurity are 'real' problems, only if the victims of these are middle class caste Hindus. The compulsive display of the high caste rituals and mores are so enmeshed in the popular psyche that even the government sponsored international film festivals identified the Kerala culture with *nalukettu*, *thulasithara*, *sarppakkavu* etc.²⁸

Gopinathan argues that growing disillusionment and emptiness in the social intelligentsia of Kerala, resulting from the gradual disintegration of the soviet union and reorganization of the world as a "village under a single power system" might have also contributed to the growth of revivalistic attitudes in Malayalam cinema.²⁹ Casteism and patriarchy that remained latent till this period was reclaimed with an insidious affection, to be delineated in a set of neo-feudal, hegemonic and hypermasculine films like *Druvam*, *Advaitham*, *Aryan*, *Devasuram*, etc. These movies invariably constructed the symbol of the 'benevolent and just feudal lords' and focused on the systematic erasure of imprints of struggles fought against caste/feudal/patriarchal oppressions from the cultural memory of Malayalee.³⁰ such films also tend to create an ideological environment with roots in traditionalism and conservatism but simultaneously preserving a relationship with the delusions of capitalist modernity.³¹

.Another significant factor that defined Malayalam cinema in this period was a transforming economy. In the late 70s and early 80s, the boom in Gulf migration positively contributed to the stability of the economy and the commercial interests of the film industry. With a burgeoning number of films released in every year, Malayalam cinema had even become capable of introducing new technological initiatives in film making.³² But in the last phase of the decade, certain issues that includes "decreasing budgets" and "a decline in the size of the

²⁴Dr. T. Anithakumari, *Padmarajan: cinema sahithyanjeevitham*, Pranatha books, Kochi, 2013, p.198

²⁵Radhakrishnan, *Op Ct.*, p.92.

²⁶C.S. Venkiteswaran, *Cinema Talkies*, DC Books, Kottayam, 2011, p.86.

²⁷ Viswam and Sitha eloping to the city in *Swayamvarm* in search of stable life or the city-made gangsters in films like *Aryan* (1988 and *Abhimanyu* (1991) are few instances that represents the same.

²⁸Dr. K. Gopinathan, "Revivalism and contemporary Malayalam cinema," *DeepFocus*, Volume VII No:2, 1997, p.59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.61.

³⁰ V.K. Joseph, *Op Ct.*, p.64.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.61

³² *My Dear Kuttichathan* (1984), the first 3D film of India and *Padayottam*(1982) which was the first indigenous 70 mm movie in India are examples for the technological advancement. [C.S.Venkiteswaran, Op Ct.](#), p.126.

audience due to the commencement of “State-sponsored television transmission and the video industry” shackled the industry. The prominent issue was the unfavorable changes happening in the economy caused by the decline of “blade companies” (private financing agencies that emerged with the gulf boom and became one of the major sources of investment for the Malayalam film industry), due to government intervention. As a consequence, “Malayalam cinema was now compelled to function on a much lower budget” that gave rise to two new genres of cinema namely the “soft porn” and the “comedies” that reaches prominence in the 1990s.³³

The soft porn films through the symbolism of “*madakarani*- a sexualized figure who is unabashed about her sexuality and uses her charms to her advantage”- portrayed women distinctively from the earlier films that confined defining womanhood through the lens of sentimentalism, domestic abuse and romance. So even when creating social anxieties regarding the “spread of low-brow taste” in the society, these films have opened up different ways to look upon how “gendered demarcations and implacable desires enter the discursive space of the cinema”³⁴The same scenario also witnessed the rise of low-budget comedies roughly beginning with films like *Ramji Rao speaking* (1989) directed by Siddique and Lal that has become the culminating point of a decade long shift to the “laughter films”. Jenny Rowena argues that both these genres that were about to determine the course of Malayalam cinema in the next decade were also the result of a ‘crisis in masculinity’ that arose with the financial instability caused by the “decrease in opportunities in the gulf” and cultural tension that emerged with “the rising visibility of upper-caste women marked by their feminist activities, threatening men of all communities”. So it was these cultural pressures, according to Rowena, that resulted in the discovery of laughter films, which were destined to “capture” and “remasculinize”³⁵ “the space of Malayalam cinema”, by “implanting the desire for laughter” as an antithesis against the “feminized project of emotion, tears and sentiments”³⁶

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³³ Rowena, Jenny, “Reading Laughter: The popular Malayalam Comedy Films of late 80s and 90s English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad, 2002, *Shodhganga@INFLIBNET*, p.2.

³⁴ Mini, Darshana Sreedhar, “The spectral Duration of Malayalam Soft-porn: Dissapearance, Desire, and Haunting.” *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2016, p.129.

³⁵ Rowena, *Op Cr.*, pp.1-2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*,58.