

**The Formative Years of Malayalam Cinema and the Progressive Public Sphere of Kerala**

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*Abstract: This paper takes a brief look at the formative years of Malayalam Cinema. The Malayalam cinema has been lauded for its socially relevant themes from the early years itself while other languages depended on mythic and puranic themes for films. This paper analyses the cultural reasons behind this speciality of Malayalam cinema.*

The history of Malayalam cinema begins with a failed attempt to screen *Vigathakumaran* in 1928 at Capitol Theatre in Thiruvananthapuram. "Daniel could not succeed because there was no market for films in Kerala at that time. There was neither any distributing agency for the distribution of films nor adequate number of cinema halls for the optimum screening of films. There were hardly 10 cine-theatres in the whole of Kerala" (Oommen 30). The caste-conscious Kerala could not accept the *dalit* heroin which ended up with her exile and bankruptcy of the hero-producer JC Daniel. The notable fact is that unlike the film industry of other languages that depended on devotional dramas for their content, in the initial years, Malayalam started with relevant social themes as in *Vigathakumaran*. The second film *Marathandavarma* (1931) was also unlucky as it was caught in a legal battle regarding copyright and never screened in theatres. The first talkie named *Balan*(1938) was the first to reach theatres. In the formative years from the 1930s to the 1950s, Malayalam cinema depended on Tamil production infrastructure and did not have any unique quality that makes it the Cinema of Kerala. It has been observed that this dependency of Malayalam cinema on Tamil production units came to be a blessing in disguise because many films were shot at the time of intervals in studios and in minimal backgrounds

which resulted in a sort of realistic effect. The claim that Malayalam cinema always adapted a sort of realism was an effect of its initial handicaps.

It was only after the establishment of Udaya Studio in Alapuzha in 1947 that Malayalam cinema began its Kerala phase. The film *Jeevitha Nauka* (1951) can be called the first successful movie produced by a production house in Kerala- KK Productions, Alappuzha. The movie ran for nearly 300 days in Thiruvananthapuram alone and was dubbed into other languages too. The second film studio, Merryland came into existence with its production house named Neela Productions in 1951 at Thiruvananthapuram and produced its first movie in 1952 named *Athmasakhi* introducing the first star in Malayalam- Satyan. In the same year, another film, *Marumakal*, came out with Prem Nazeer who shared the star platform with Satyan for the years to come.

The release of the film *Neelakuyil* in 1954 changed how Malayali audiences watched films. Its progressive stance was lauded as a representation of anti-caste and progressive social sentiments of that period. The so-called progressive theme of the film has gone through severe criticism after the emergence of Dalit Studies though. The film also won the second-best film award in the national level and thus became the first film to win national recognition for Malayalam. *Neelakuyil*, the screenplay of which was written by famous Malayalam writer Uroob, could bring a new sensibility of producing movies from famous literary works. The film is viewed by writers like Zacharia in the context of accession of the Communist party into power in Kerala (Anwar 48). Anyway, the success of *Neelakuyil* is connected to many progressive movements in Kerala like the Public Library movement and the organisation of *Purogamana Sahitya Sangham* (Progressive Writers' Movement) started in 1944. In 1955 there were 1747 public libraries in Kerala (Mathew 7) to cater to the need of the reading public and these libraries became public spaces for cultural activities of the youth who represented the modern Kerala.

Another cultural factor was the strong theatre movements backed by the political left in Kerala like the Kerala People's Arts Club with their plays like *Ningalenne Kammunisttakki* ( You Made me a Communist) which later became a legend in the history of the left movement in Kerala. Such activities could create a reading public that became a cause for the strong literary connection of Malayalam cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1955 an experimental film *Newspaper Boy* directed by Ramdas was released. Though the film is now considered the first realist film in Malayalam it failed miserably at the box office.

After the formation of Kerala state in 1956 attempts were made to redefine Malayalam cinema in connection with the culture of Kerala. According to scholars like C S Venkiteswaran (*Marunna Malayali Samooham*, 126) the period from the 1950 to 1970 in Malayalam cinema was a literary period. Famous writers like Uroob, PonkunnamVarkey and MuttathuVarkey started writing the scripts for films. Poets like P Bhaskaran and Vayalaar Ramavarma worked in many films of this period. Many of these writers depended mainly on their experience in the left theatre movement in Kerala. The exceptions were the films like *Rarichan Enna Pauran* (1956 ) directed by P Bhaskaran and *Chemmeen* (1965) directed by Ramu Karyaath, the story of which was written by famous novelist Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. *Rarichan* was a failure at the box office but *Chemmeen* was an enormous success and is even now regarded as one of the classic films in Malayalam, by critics and ordinary viewers. Though this studio period of Malayalam cinema could not bring any unique language, it established Malayalam cinema in Kerala.

In an article written in *Close-Up* film magazine in 1970, Adoor Gopalakrishnan writes, "Virtually our films are sheer celluloid copies of stage plays enacted against painted backdrops and occasionally natural locales. The style of acting is very much reminiscent of the stage. Characters, whether inside a studio- set or outdoors, line up before the camera posing as if for a group photograph

and deliver long passage of dialogue while others in the row wait eagerly and nervously for their cue" (61). He continues his criticisms of Malayalam films by pointing at the abundance of dialogue that reminds him of popular stage plays. He writes, "Everything finds expression through dialogue, the thought process of characters, their antecedents, their ambitions, their anxieties, their conflict, their reconciliation....(Why not?)... even the SILENCE" (61). This trend continued until the middle of the 1970s which was marked by the declaration of emergency in India and intense political activities in Kerala as a stronghold of left parties who opposed the emergency.

### **The Search for Identity: Cultural Background of the Formative Phase**

The criticism raised by Adoor Gopalakrishnan who was at the initial stage of his career as a director can be seen as the perspective of an academic filmmaker on the contemporary popular filmmaking practice. From another point of view, in this period Malayalam cinema developed into a full-fledged entertainment industry that reflected the taste of society. The increase in the number of theatres from 30 in 1938 to 300 in 1960 (Mathew 7) shows the strong viewership claimed by Malayalam cinema in these decades. The rate of production was one film per year until 1950. In 1950 it went up to six films (Vallachira 15) and in 1970 the number of films produced per year increased to 40 (Vallachira 17). In India 241 films were produced in 1950 and 1960 the production increased to 318 and in 1970 again increased to 396 (Oomen 24). So, a straight comparison may reveal the sudden growth of the film industry in Kerala in the two decades mentioned from a mere 2.5 % in 1950 to 10% in 1970. In the case of the first talkie *Balan* the production cost was Rs.22500/- and the net collection was Rs. 200000/- and a devotional film *Kumaarasambhavam* released in 1969 with a production cost of Rs. 576328/- could collect Rs.1291690/- from the box office (Ooman 24). From *Jeevithanauka* in 1950 to *Aranaazhikaneram* in 1970, 324 films were released in Malayalam (Vallachira 15-17). It can show the popularity that this medium achieved in the initial stages itself. From another angle, movie houses

emerged as public place that provided legitimate access to all classes of people and many of whom started enjoying public visibility only after colonial modernity set in. In a letter written to the editor published in the periodical named *Film* published in January 1950, we can find a person name Vallachira Madhavan Nair who wrote a letter of protest to the magazine *FILM* in April 1950 complaining about bugs on chairs in theatres is a representative of this new middle class who started seeking novel ways of entertainment. He says that he is not a rich person and watches films out of sheer interest in the media (31).

The whooping margins collected by films in these decades show a sympathetic audience of which the cultural self was being formed after the official formation of Kerala state in 1956. According to GP Ramachandran, this phase of Malayalam cinema was marked by the influence of Malayalam and Tamil folk theatre, Malayalam literature, melodrama, Songs and music and ideas of social justice and conventional family ideals (*Sinimayum Malayaaliyude Jeevithavum* 20-21). As a form of entertainment that belongs to the mass culture, cinema would invariably address the mass desires and cultural attitudes and tastes of society. According to C S Venkiteswaran the period from the 1960s to the middle of the 1970s can be considered as an age that established the Malayalam Film industry and its aesthetics (*Cinema Talkies* 80).

As identified by Geetha Sen the surge of social reform movements in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought in the democratisation of society in which hitherto invisible sections could find expressions (Lieten 50). The missionaries had already established a strong educational system that could function in many tangents like eradication of illiteracy and caste discrimination and empowerment of *dalits*. A detailed analysis of the educational progress of *dalits* and the project of modernity can be found in a lot of scholastic works including Sanal Mohan (various chapters). The *Jeeval Sahitya Prasthanam* started in 1937 by the leftist writers in connection with the

communist party and expanded to a bigger organization called *Purogamana Sahitya Sangham* in 1944. Many writers who later came to associate with cinema-like PonkunnamVarkey, PC Kuttikrishnan (Uroob) and KP Kesavadeve were active members of this organisation. With its strong belief in the idea of literature as a tool of social change this organization had a very strong presence in Malayalam literary scenario. Their leftist ideological stance was basically inspired by the paradigms of modernity introduced by the colonial regime. In this way, literature functioned as a part of the continuing project of colonial modernity which strengthened after the political formation of Kerala state.

In the formative years of Kerala state, the label of a 'progressive-literate-reading-public' provided Malayali with an aesthetic framework that connected literacy with progress as a continuation of the project of colonial modernity. This assimilated label of literate progressive Malayali against the illiterate Tamil, later played a significant role in the cultural choices of Malayali audiences including cinema. Since the above label suggests refinement and civilization as defined by ideals of colonial modernity which formed the fundamental patterns of social visibility through various colonial forms of education executed by missionaries in Kerala, it remained the central theme even in the discussion of the famous 'Kerala Model'.

Another aspect of the progressive label was the left leniency embedded into the social structure of Kerala. After the formation of the Communist Party of India in Malabar in 1939, they provided strong support for anti-feudal movements in Kerala. Various movements lead by social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru in the Southern part of Kerala and the strong presence of the Communist movement in the northern part supported by the educational reforms of missionaries influenced the formation of the cultural self of Kerala in the first half of the twentieth century. Communist accession into power in 1957 filled the society with socialist hopes for a developed future. The progressive measures initiated by the first communist ministry of Kerala like the Agrarian Relation Bill (1957) which resulted in the historical

Land Reform Act in 1969 and the Kerala Education Bill (1958) also gave impetus to the socialist attitude in the society. Malayali always tried to differentiate himself with this progressive label from the north and other southern states until the late twentieth century in various cultural discourses. So, the progressive-literary aspect of Malayalam cinema of this period - and in later periods to a certain extent - was a reflection of such desires in society.

The mutual influence between the political changes and cultural production was very strong. For example, the first Malayalam film that won the President's Gold Medal, *Neelakuyil* (1950) is regarded as one of the cultural factors that supported the success of the Communist party in the first election to Kerala assembly in 1957 like the play *Ningalenne Commumunistaakki* (Anwar 48). Some scholars noted that after the formation of Kerala state, the equal influence of the Left and Right front in elections lead to competitive responsibility and both of them were forced to follow policies to ensure support from every possible section of the society. This also led to comparatively faster progress in various sectors (Lieten, *The Human Development Puzzle* 52). According to K Gopinathan cinema of this period was inspired by the humanitarian attitudes upheld by all these social reform movements and people's struggles (*Samoohikamaattavum* 25).

The influence of theatre created strong melodramatic elements in cinema. Apart from the folk and traditional theatre arts like *Kathakali* and *Theyyam* by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kerala had a strong presence of modern theatre. In the context of progressive theatre activities a theatre organisation named *Malabar Kendra Kala Samithi* was born. Under the influence of the Indian People's Theatre Association, the Communist party formulated a cultural policy and formed *Kerala People's Arts Club* (KPAC) in 1950 and in 1952 the legendary *Ningalenne Kammunistaakki* (You made me a Communist) was staged for the first time. The play became a part of the communist movement in Kerala. Anyway, in this period theatre activities by youth organisations were rampant in Kerala.

The same persons who worked for these theatres worked on films too. In an article written in 1988 PK Nair says, "Most of the artists and directors came from the stage. They brought with them whatever knowledge they had of the stage and continued to go about under the strange misconceptions that cinema is just an extension of the stage- an attitude, which continues to prevail even to this date. They had limited ideas of the nature of the new medium and did not bother to find out on their own" (2). And he continues, "The approach of most Malayalam film-makers as adaptation of literary works is concerned, has been to picture them in simple narrative terms, making it too obvious, melodramatic and load to suit the so-called tastes of the mass-audience" (4). What the popular cinema expressed was an extension of the popular taste which still sowed its affiliation to textual content and the visual remained just an elaborate interpretation of the text.

As argued by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Malayalam cinema in the period from the 1950s to the middle of the 1970s showed formal crudity and existed merely as an extension of the theatre and literary texts. The minimalism displayed in the settings and characterisation in this period was a result of financial and infrastructural handicaps rather than a deliberate aesthetic choice. However, by the 1950s Malayalam cinema industry could establish a finance-production-distribution system that helped it to stand on its foot in the later decades (Gopinathan 27). Cinema of this period cashed in the hopes and desires of the society that was fed by various reformatory and progressive movements but It could not come out of the textual boundaries established by the traditional cultural self and the experience of visuals was limited to the interpretations of the text.

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