

**Fifty years of Malayalam Cinema**  
**(Presented in association with the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy)**

Most people, when they think of Indian Cinema, think Bollywood or Bengal. Kerala is famous for its lush beauty and serenity. Yet Kerala boasts one of the most cine-literate audience in the world, one in which taxi drivers refer to arthouse directors by their first names. Tucked away behind the serene backwaters and the swaying palm fronds, even in the remotest areas, are scores of active film societies. Film and politics are two abiding passions of the people of Kerala and they combine in a unique cinema that, except for a few names, has been unjustifiably neglected internationally.

**Socio-political contexts**

Although Malayalam cinema shares certain broad features with other cinemas in India, Kerala's specific socio-political history, which stands apart from that of the rest of the country in many significant ways, has contributed to the making of a film tradition that is quite distinct.

Following Indian independence, Kerala was reorganized as a state in 1956 by bringing together, largely on the basis of a common language, three territories-Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar – the last of which was directly under British rule, while the first two were princely states that the British controlled indirectly. The history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kerala is, to a great extent, a mixture of the consequences of several important late- 19<sup>th</sup> century struggles and movements aimed at social reform(which continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and the emergence of the Nationalist movement and the Left ideology.

The social-reform movements, across the whole spectrum of religious and caste-based communities, succeeded in initiating a process of democratization and modernization, though this also meant moving into the emerging patriarchal, capitalist economy, with caste based and religious communities trying to rid themselves of their feudal cultural past and reorganizing themselves to fit into the changing times. Soon, with the freedom struggle gaining momentum and the Left ideology making deep inroads into the social and political fabric of Kerala, the issues relating to caste and gender that the reform movements sought to highlight in their own specific ways were swept under the carpet, as it were, in deference to questions of class and nation. Yet, the fact that Kerala, for geographical, demographic, and other politico-cultural reason, had to a large extent been insulated from the developments in the rest of the country, along with the remarkable success of the Communist movement, led to the construction of a distinct post-independence political identity. So much so that, in the first general election after the reorganization of the state, a Communist Government was voted to power in 1957. The Leftists continue to have a major presence in the mainstream political life of Kerala even today.

In the 1940's and 1950's, the processes of artistic production, including cinema, were determined by the important issues of the time: caste inequality, class-consciousness, nationalism and progress. There was optimism in the air, and there was enthusiasm. All of which could be found in *Neelakkuyil*(Ramu Kariat/P.Bhaskaran,

1954), often considered a landmark film in Malayalam, for it succeeded in fusing, for the first time, a variety of ingredients: a truly local, well-crafted story; a distinct engagement with issues such as caste inequality, progress, and the construction of a modern secular subject; a remarkably distinct use of film music, drawing on folk-musical traditions; and an array of stars and technicians, including well-known writers and political activists, mostly with a broad socialist orientation, who would later dominate the Malayalam film industry. The patriarchal ideology at work in the film is quite obvious today, but the popular and critical success of *Neelakkuyil* was largely instrumental in the construction of a dominant pattern, and logic, of film narrative in Kerala. A decade later, this is further reinforced through another landmark film, *Chemmeen* (Ramu Kariat, 1965). Based on a novel by one of Kerala's best-known writers, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, *Chemmeen* is an epic portrayal of a particular fishing community in Kerala, again focusing on local culture and mythology, and the problems related to caste and community differences. Again, the patriarchal ideology at work is quite obvious from the film's founding logic: that the safety of the fishermen at sea depended on their wives' chastity and loyalty at home.

Even while reinforcing established parameters of the form and content of cinema, *Chemmeen*, with its tragic ending, also marks a broad shift from the hope and idealism of the previous decades to a growing sense of discontent and disillusionment. Historically, this works at two levels. At the national level, the dream of a free and prosperous modern India, which galvanized the anti-colonial struggle, was beginning to pale, with large sections of society continuing to be denied the fruits of independence and progress, and with the social costs of capitalist development beginning to manifest themselves. At another level, in Kerala, the Left ideology was under stress, with the developments in the USSR, Eastern Europe, and other parts of the world beginning to impact on the Communist outfits in India, leading to rifts within and discontent outside. All this helped bring to the fore the underlying tensions in society relating to urbanization, bourgeoisification, the realignment of castes and communities within the new polity, and, broadly, the conflicting trajectories of tradition and modernity.

This shift, which could be read into *Chemmeen* to a certain extent with historical hindsight, began to mark Malayalam literature in a big way in the 1960's, with the emergence of what is often called the modernist movement. The new cinema that emerged in the early 1970's spearheaded by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G.Aravindan, John Abraham and others, and often dubbed 'art cinema', was a response to the shifting grounds of politics and aesthetics. *Swayamvaram* (Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 1972), arguably the 'inaugural' film in this genre, articulates the crisis of the middle class torn between the traditional social norms relating to family and sexuality, and the modern impulse to choose for oneself and move on. The film reflects the general discontentment in urban or semi-urban life, with the problems of unemployment, poverty and lack of opportunities playing a crucial role. In the process, the film also invents a new cinematic idiom, something that will continue to inform much artistic work in the next two decades.

In a slightly different, though related, way, G.Aravindan's *Thampu* (1978) enacts the drama inherent in a village community coming face to face with certain images of modernity represented by the arrival of a circus troupe. The village youth feeling tempted to abandon his traditional role and join the circus signifies the tensions that underwrite the rural/urban divide as well as social mobility in Kerala. That the film does this without

being sentimental, or tragic, is quite significant, for it calls attention to the resilience of village life even in the face of steep challenges from within and outside.

During the 1970's, there was a stiff interrogation of several modes of traditional thought and life, including the values associated with religious beliefs and practices. The secularization and modernization of the Indian polity helped to critique the religious in more ways than one, though it should be noted immediately that, by the 1990's, the process was being reversed. But the fact that M.T.Vasudevan Nair could depict in *Nirmalyam*(1973) the degeneration that social change, with all its implications for the priests and the laity alike, brought to temple-related rituals is doubly significant today, when religious intolerance and fundamentalism are on the rise. (Nair is represented in this season with the very fine, almost silent *Kadavu*(1991), a poignant story about a young boy who runs away from his almost suffocating family and is employed as a ferryman.

It is customary to treat 1975 as a watershed in the history of post independence India, for it marks the declaration, in the face of largely imagined threats, of National Emergency-a constitutional move that seriously curtailed all kinds of political and civil rights and vested unbridled power in a handful of politicians, Government functionaries, and the police. This period produced a crop of films, of which *Amma Ariyan*(John Abraham, 1986) is a remarkable example. The film takes the form of a journey from one part of Kerala to another, and charts the dreams and despairs of a group of men who try to identify themselves with 'the cause' but finally arrive at a sense of futility, which is still politically meaningful. The protagonist's reporting to his mother that he realizes his middle-class moorings prevent him from a total identification with the revolutionaries and the working classes is a deeply significant comment on the general profile of the movement itself. The film is thus an important document on the rise and fall of the revolutionary spirit in contemporary Kerala.

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought in a whole new crop of social and political issues, with, on the one hand, the LPG(Liberal-isation, Privatisation and Globalisation) mantra beginning to play a crucial role, while, on the other hand, varieties of religious fundamentalism, especially the Hindu Right, gained legitimacy and political power. Along with this, there arose new social movements that, in an unprecedented manner, began to articulate the concerns of women, the Dalits(people belonging to the lower castes, the erstwhile 'untouchables'), and the Adivasis(the indigenous tribes), not to mention the various minorities and environmental activists.

Simultaneously with all this, Kerala, though with severe limitations in terms of size and resources, was rising to a position of preeminence in the country with the highest social-welfare index: near total literacy, low birth rate, good health care as manifested in low infant-mortality rates, and good working conditions. (Inversely, Kerala also has one of the highest suicide rates in the country). There was talk of a special Kerala Model of development, though it has to be admitted that, today, it looks more and more problematic, especially in the light of a stagnant economy marked by minimal industrial growth and revenue generation, coupled with the massive influx of foreign earnings by the large Malayalee diaspora in the middle East, Europe and the United States.

The cultural domain was a major site of contestation, though, in terms of cinema, the impact continues to be rather minimal. There is a greater degree of commercialization that, in the wake of the decline of the arthouse tradition inaugurated in the 1970's, has led to a depletion of resources as far as good, meaningful cinema is concerned. At the same

time, there is greater variety in the kinds of cinema produced: while images relating to the Hinduisation of culture are on the rise, there are also attempts at radically redefining the form and content of cinema. Shaji.N.Karun's *Vaanaprastham*(1999), for instance, reworks material drawn from Kerala's performance art traditions with a view toward redefining and re-articulating the subject of art(as well as the artist as subject) in the light of shifting societal perceptions. T.V.Chandran's work is also exemplary in this regard: while being firmly rooted in the formative political culture of the late 1970's and 1980's, his films have continually sought to redefine themselves in the context of the changing times. This is amply borne out by his 2003 film, *Padam Onnu: Oru Vilapam*.

In the history of Malayalam cinema, there has been no dearth of films that address themselves to the lifeworld of the Muslims in Kerala. Demographically, Kerala is different from the rest of India in that its population is nearly 40% non-Hindu(predominantly Muslim and Christian), while among the 'Hindus' themselves it is the 'backward' caste called Ezhavas who predominate. Yes, the representations of the minorities down the decades have been quite problematic in general, probably because, in spite of constitutional imperatives, secularism as a social agenda continues to be a vexed issue in India. It is in this context that one has to look at films such as *Olavum Theeravum*(P.N.Menon, 1970) and *Padam Onnu: Oru Vilapam*.

A word about film music. It is easy to see that the forms and traditions of music that prevailed in Kerala till the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were more or less community or region specific. There was no particular musical tradition that all the people of Kerala – or at least a large majority of the people, regardless of community, caste and regional differences – could listen to appreciate and enjoy. Different sections of society had access to different forms of music. All this changed drastically with the advent of film music, with its antecedence in theatre music and other such practices. This was one kind of music that everyone had access to; it was the kind of music that sought to address diverse sections of society. In formal terms, this was made possible by an apparently eclectic combination of elements drawn from a variety of sources – folk, classical and others. The whole process coincides with the dynamics of the democratization of Indian society. Film music in India and in Kerala specially, has actively participated in and promoted, the construction of a public sphere – a space where all kinds of people can come together and share a common experience and chart out a common agenda for life today and tomorrow.

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