In this project, I have attempted to examine the specificities of distinct historical agents’ engagements with cinema in Kerala during and around the decade of the 1950s. The thesis seeks to contribute to the scholarship on film history in India that argues for an understanding of cinema as a cultural institution that takes on specific dimensions and significance in post-colonial societies like India. The effort in this study has been to show that the history of cinema in Kerala could provide us important insights in historically placing the region within the political-cultural map of South India and India at large, while remaining attentive to the social-historical imperatives specific to the region. Within the corpus of studies on Malayalam cinema, the project has tried to resist the impulses of looking at the cinema of the 1950s on the terms set by the contemporary academic and popular debates on Malayalam cinema. It pays attention to the specificities of cinema as an industrial-cultural medium, the energies that distinct generic elements evoke, the sedimented meanings that the body of an actor/actress acquires over a period, as well as the commercial considerations within which the industry in the region had to operate during the period, in order to evolve an understanding of the interventions of various historical agents in cinema.
The thesis begins with the attempt to construct a historical account about the political economy of ‘film business’ in Kerala during the 1930s and the 1940s, which serves as a backdrop to understand the textual-aesthetic elements in the early films produced by Udaya and Merryland – the first modern studios set up in Kerala by the late 1940s. Discussing a moment in Jeevithanowka (The Boat of Life: K Vembu, 1951), it argues for an understanding of the early studio films as ‘products of bricolage’ that combined a host of generic elements, weaved together often along manipulated links, within an overarching narrative framework that privileged the central impulses of an aesthetic of contemporaneity that lays emphasis on the notions of cause and effect in narrative progression. It then proceeds to an examination of the cultural politics of the Left-affiliated artists’ interventions in popular cinema by the mid-1950s. Analyzing Neelakkuyil (P Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954), I have argued that the emphasis that the aesthetic project of social realism placed on the ideals of secular-rational politics needs to be foregrounded in order to understand the nature of the Left’s cultural vision as well as the modern Malayali nation that it envisaged based on the contract between the men of different castes/communities, negotiated by the rational communist figure. This emerges as the locus point around which we can try to make sense of the operations of the commercial film industry in Malayalam that began thriving by the early 1960s, often by engaging with the energies and affects that the dominant aesthetic of social realism relegated to its margins or delegitimized altogether.
The cinema of the 1950s offers rich avenues to trace the social-cultural vision that the Left envisaged for the modern Malayali nation, the ideological maneuverings it undergoes, as well as the ambiguities and inconsistencies that one can identify within it. The thesis tries to grasp these dynamics as resulting from the Left’s strategies of negotiating between the desires and anxieties of the masses – the major support base for the Communist Party in the region – and the emerging middle class in the region during the period. The discussion on the ‘artistic’ endeavours like Newspaper Boy (P Ramdas, 1955) and Rarichan Enna Powran (P Bhaskaran, 1956) provides us insights about how Leftist articulations about industrial modernity remained in consonance, at many levels, with the (upper caste) middle class’s cultural anxieties about industrialization, even when the Communist government that came to power in Kerala in 1957 clearly endorsed (capitalist) industrial modernization at the policy level. In contrast, the popular comedy film Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu (P Bhaskaran, 1958) adopted a much more progressive stance on industrial modernization, as I have tried to argue.

By the late 1950s, one can identify three small, broadly-defined genres emerging: ‘women’s cinema’, ‘the Christian/Muslim socials’, and the films based on folktales and mythologicals. It signaled the commercial film industry’s attempts to engage with and commodify the desires and anxieties of various sections of the population who were disillusioned with the Left’s cultural vision and the agendas of social realism. I have tried to link it with the political developments
that were happening in Kerala by the late 1950s, especially the context of Vimochana Samaram - the struggle against the Communist government by a coalition of disparate forces led by the Catholic Church. As the analysis of Mudiyanaya Puthran (The Prodigal Son: Ramu Kariat, 1961) and Puthiya Akasham Puthiya Bhoomi (New Horizon, New World: MS Mani, 1962) written by Thoppil Bhasi shows, faced with the contestations and dissents emerging with various sections within the polity, the Left provisionally set aside the agendas of class revolution and resorted to the rhetoric of the need to unite as modern Malayalees in order to ensure social progress.

As a concluding note, the thesis proposes that it would be worthwhile to examine the ‘middlebrow’ films of the 1960s and the 1970s, in which a new set of writers and directors came to occupy prominent positions, as attempts to negotiate with the coordinates of the rationalist integrationist visions of social realism on the one hand, and the tendencies to commodify the affects and energies marginalized in this cultural vision, on the other. I have discussed Bhargaveenilayam (The Haunted House: A Vincent, 1964) as an attempt to systematically articulate the dissents of vast sections of the population in the region against the social realism’s cultural vision that marginalized the affects and energies of religious faith, romance, sentiments and sensual desires.