The first and foremost difficulty that researchers of early cinema in a regional industry like Malayalam face is the unavailability of films made before the 1950s for viewing. In a way, this scenario enables us to move away from the dominant text-determined analyses of a modern, globally-circulating, medium like cinema and to bring to the fore the industrial-cultural factors – not always contingent on the ideological and territorial parameters of the nation or a particular region – that determined the commercial production of films in a region like Kerala. This paper tries to propose a framework of understanding the aesthetic traits of the studio films of the late 1940s in Malayalam, by foregrounding the commercial considerations of the distribution and exhibition sectors, already in operation in the region since the late 1920s, with which the first studios in Kerala had to negotiate to cull out a space for their own films.

The dominant tendency in the thin strand of academic writings on early Malayalam cinema is to consider the early filmmaking initiatives as moments of rupture beginning to constitute an autonomous field of ‘regional cinema’, wherein the socio-political imperatives of the region influence and directly reflect
on the local attempts to make films. This framework remains insensitive to the dynamics of global cultural flow and the network of production and circulation stretching beyond the regional and national boundaries – factors that shaped the nature of early cinema across the world (See Bhaumik 2008; Vasudevan 2010a).

In the regions that constitute the present administrative unit of Kerala 1, films made in other languages, and in provincial production centers outside of Madras, were immensely popular since the 1920s. The distribution and exhibition sectors in the region depended on these production centers outside for a steady stream of films to sustain them, at least until the late 1950s. The first studios in Kerala, set up in the late 1940s, had to engage with this wide commercial network of production and circulation as well as other popular entertainment forms like drama – an aspect that crucially determined the dominant aesthetic form of the films they made. That the filmmakers of this period succeeded to a large extent in responding to the commercial and cultural considerations of a global circulation network is evident from the fact that a good number of the films made in Malayalam during the late 1940s and the early 1950s collected most of their revenues from screenings (of their re-made/ dubbed versions) in other South Indian regions as well as the markets in Sri Lanka and South East Asian regions like Malaysia and Singapore. Rather than extolling the offshore reach of some of the early Malayalam films, the attempt here was to

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1 The linguistic state of Kerala came into existence only in 1956. The state was formed, during the linguistic reorganization of states in India, out of a majority of Malayalam-speaking areas of two princely states, namely, Travancore and Cochin, and the Malabar area of Madras Presidency, in southwest India.
foreground the need to understand the operations of the early film industry in Malayalam within the terms and constraints set by the wider networks of production and circulation, especially the industrial and aesthetic terms set by the production base in Madras. Broadly, the paper is an effort to reinsert the early history of Malayalam cinema into the larger field of South Indian cinema of the period, so that the specificities of the former emerge in relation to the latter, not independent of it.

In the first part of this chapter, I intend to posit a few tentative formulations about the political economy of the film business in Kerala between the 1930s and the 1950s, by foregrounding the economic/industrial conditions of the region in which the distribution-exhibition sectors operated during the time. These formulations help us situate the industrial-cultural considerations that determined the aesthetics and the textual form of early films produced by the local studios by the late 1940s and the early 1950s. For the information required for constructing this historical account, I have depended on archival sources like newspaper reports and advertisements, memoirs of the early entrepreneurs in the film industry, autobiographies, official records and reports and historical accounts about cinema in other regions of the South India. I have also depended on the CD, Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema (2003), brought out by Chalachitra Academy, Thiruvananthapuram, for the information on various aspects about the early years of the distribution-exhibition sectors in the region.
The reliability and authenticity of the information in this source is questionable, and it is indeed risky to rely on them; the dates and names used in this source need to be verified by thorough research. Nevertheless, my attempt here is to put together as much useful information about the ownership patterns in various sectors of the film business/industry between the 1930s and the 1950s, the modes of their operation and their negotiations with the industrial-cultural conditions that prevailed in the region during the time.

The industrial structure and cinema in the region: 1920s - 1930s

In India, after the advent of the talkies, film production, which was scattered in various urban centers, gradually became concentrated in metros like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras - the centers of India’s industrial activities during the time - where an industrial working class, even though nothing compared to India’s total labor force, had already formed. While permanent theatres were set up in these cities in the early 1910s or before, travelling cinema catered to the rest of the country. Most of these cinema houses, especially the ones located outside the main urban centers, preferred screening foreign films since Indian films were costly to acquire and could not guarantee a sufficiently large audience to recover the huge hiring and transport costs (Vitali, 2008: 3-6). In Madras, the early permanent cinema houses were set up by western entrepreneurs, initially to cater

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2 In South India, the early filmmaking centres were Madras, Vellore, Nagercoil, Salem, Coimbatore and Mysore. See Baskaran, 2009, for a history of early South Indian cinema.
to the small audiences of the Europeans and elite Indians (Hughes, 2000; Baskaran, 2009: 46). Against this scenario, the following section tries to map the socio-economic conditions in which a film business, dependent predominantly on travelling cinemas exhibiting Tamil, Hindi and foreign films, operated in Kerala until the 1950s. Many of these conditions enabled Tamil studios and a number of Tamil distribution companies, mostly owned by Tamil Brahmins – an influential caste group that enjoyed government patronage in the Travancore princely state (Jeffrey 1975, Chapter 4) – to dominate the film business in the region.

In Kerala, a number of factors contributed to the establishment and extension of a cash economy in Travancore society by the mid-nineteenth century. Robin Jeffrey (1975) identifies some of these factors as the land reform law enacted by the Travancore government in 1865 granting full ownership rights to the holders of the 200,000 acres of government pāttam land, enabling many landlords to sell their land if they wished to do so; the creation of the Public Works Department, which, apart from encouraging trade and entrepreneurship, offered the slave castes an alternative form of employment; the emergence of trading activities, mostly by non-Malayali Brahmins, Muslims and Syrian Christians; and the expansion of the plantation sector (Jeffrey, 1975: 79-92). However, as studies suggest, a predominantly agro-economic structure prevailed in the regions that constitute the present Kerala, especially the princely state of Travancore, during
the first two decades of the twentieth century. There were hardly any (capital-intensive) modern industries. Most of the economic activities were centred on plantation agriculture and agro-processing industries. Also, there was a near absence of an indigenous entrepreneurial class. European capital maintained a complete dominance and hegemony over these sectors, and the majority of the labour force was engaged in these traditional sectors. Raman Mahadevan, in his study on the history of industrial development in the princely state of Travancore, observes:

The industrial structure of the region continued, at least till the early forties, to be characterized by the dominance of the export-oriented plantation and agro-processing industries. [...] As a percentage of the value of total exports, coconut and its products, the plantation crops, coffee, tea and rubber together with other hill produce, accounted for 80.4 per cent in 1870-1, 80.5 per cent in 1919-20, 82.1 per cent in 1938-9 and 85.5 per cent in 1945-6. [...] Even as late as 1940-1, the work-force in plantations and the agro-processing industries accounted for over 84 per cent of the total work force in organized industries. The phenomenal growth of the cashew industry in the forties further strengthened the work-force in the traditional sector. (Mahadevan, 1991: 160-62)

The wages for the work force in the traditional sectors remained considerably low, compared to the wages in other parts of the country. The abysmally low wage rates was one of the major factors that, on the one hand, attracted investment from other parts of the country in the region before the 1940s in these
traditional sectors, and on the other, resulted in the emergence of a strong trade union movement in this sector.\textsuperscript{3} This scenario had direct implications for the film industry as well. In fact, a committee assigned to look into the living conditions of labourers in the coir manufacturing industry reports that even as late as in 1952, many of the respondents had not been able to watch a cinema for years due to low wages and awful living standards.\textsuperscript{4}

The agriculture-based industrial economy in Travancore, with the overall predominance of foreign capital, gradually began to change by the 1930s. The Depression resulted in severe fall in the prices of agricultural products\textsuperscript{5}; more people began leaving agriculture and moving to urban areas; the princely state adopted an industrial policy encouraging investment in industries as a solution to issues like growing unemployment (see Pillai & Shanta, 1997; Isaac & Tharakan, 1986; Mahadevan, 1991). The falling prices of agricultural products

\textsuperscript{3} See Pillai & Shanta, 1997. The Report on the Annual Survey of Industries, Kerala, 1962, says that the annual wage rate per person employed in Industries in Kerala is Rs.977 as against Rs.1905 in Madras and Rs.1922 for all of India. The report says, though the population of Kerala is 3.8 per cent of the all India population, the productive capital employed in major industrial units in Kerala is only 1.6 per cent of that of all India. At the same time the employment in these units in the state is about 4 per cent of the total employment in the units in India as a whole. The report says most of the industries in this state were traditional industries using outmoded technology and in which the wages are comparatively low. (The Report on the Annual Survey of Industries, Kerala, 1962: 7-8).

\textsuperscript{4} Travancore-Cochin Minimum Wages Committee for the Manufacture of Coir Report, 1952: 15. Also see Lindberg (2001) for the labour conditions in the cashew nut industry, the workforce in which represented from thirty to fifty per cent of the formal factory workforce in Kerala since the mid-1920s.

\textsuperscript{5} As a percentage of value of total exports, coconuts and its products, plantation crops (coffee, tea and rubber) together with other hill produce accounted for more than 80 per cent between 1870 and 1945. (Pillai & Shanta 1997: 10)
resulted in the transfer of capital from agricultural and plantation sectors to other industries, though at a marginal rate. The census recorded an increase of 40.4 per cent in the number of persons engaged in organised industries from 103,490 in 1931 to 145,291 in 1941. A nascent entrepreneurial class, mainly from within sections of the Ezhava and Syrian Christian community, emerged during this time, even though the growth of this class tended to be somewhat tardy. To compensate for the sluggish entrepreneurial response of the local business groups, the princely state sought to actively intervene in promoting industries, often playing the role of an entrepreneur. This scenario, however, did not result in any significant spurt in industrial investment which occurred only in the 1940s (Mahadevan, 1991: 163). Nevertheless, there was a growing migration to the employment generated by the setting up of a few industries and a number of cottage industries in textiles, cashew nut processing, tile making, coir making, etc, which heavily depended on cheap labor. In short, three points need to be emphasized: (a) agriculture and related sectors reached a level where it could not absorb capital and work force anymore, (b) the units of traditional and cottage industries increased, even though the prevailing conditions did not result in the setting up of modern industries in any significant way, (c) these circumstances accelerated the commercialization and urbanization process and the emergence of a work force engaged in organized industries.

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6 Census of India, 1941: Travancore. The Census also reports that the population of the city and the population of the towns have both increased by 33.7 per cent, while smaller towns registered an increase between 16 per cent and 20 per cent.
Early instances of indigenous investments in film industry

During this period, one of the sectors that the emerging entrepreneurial class invested in seems to be the film business, especially in setting up exhibition and distribution networks. Tamil capital had a significant presence in these sectors. The monopoly of European capital in almost all other sectors of the economy and the absence of other significant industrial areas to venture into could have propelled investments in speculative enterprises like film industry. In addition, cinema’s modern attributes could also have been a major factor.

The investments in various sectors of film business were marked by their speculative and rotating nature, and in most cases, the prospect of good returns was not the motivation behind them. Talking about his foray into the field of art in the late 1920s, P J Cheriyan, who made Nirmala (P V Krishna Iyer, 1947), one of the early talkies in Malayalam, says in his memoirs: “It was a risky decision to leave the traditional agricultural occupation and venture into the art sector. The field of art did not seem to be offering the prospects of a prosperous life at all” (Cheriyan, 1964: 11). Leaving his father’s business of edible oil trade, Cheriyan set up a photography studio (Royal Studio) at Ernakulam in 1927, and later started a professional drama company named ‘Royal Cinema and Dramatic Company’ in 1929. Similarly, N X George, who was from the rubber trade,

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[7] See also Srinivas (2010) for an account on the migration of agricultural capital based in rural Andhra regions to the film industry based in Madras during the post-Depression period.
migrated to film distribution by setting up Geo Pictures in the late 1930s, and, despite running into huge losses initially, continued in the sector (N G John, 2011a). These accounts points perhaps to the lack of other avenues into which capital from the stagnant agricultural and related sectors could move.

**Exhibition and distribution sectors**

The first distribution company in Kerala was started in 1928 by Nenmara Lakshmana Iyer to distribute films made in other parts of British India, especially Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. Lakshmana Iyer also set up temporary exhibition centers at Kochi, Ernakulam and Alleppey, under the name Imperial Talkies. The exhibitors and distributors depended mainly on Madras, Bombay and Calcutta for a regular supply of films, along with imported films mainly from America and Britain, and also from Germany, Italy and France. Theatres had to change films regularly, most often every two weeks and sometimes every three days (see Johnny & Venugopal, 2009: 20; Baskaran, 2009).

The exhibition-distribution sectors started expanding from the mid-1930s, with a considerably good number of films from across the world in circulation in the region. Between September, 1936, and May, 1937, the Censor Board examined 240 films (Nasrani Deepika, 22 May, 1937). The region's first permanent cinema houses were set up in the late 1920s and 1930s. The exhibition sector mainly
consisted of travelling and temporary cinemas until the 1950s. According to a newspaper report, 209 exhibition centers operated across Kerala by August 1950 - 125 in Travancore, 43 in Cochin and 41 in Malabar. Of this, only around 10 were permanent theatres. The license granted to the temporary and semi-temporary exhibition centers had expired by 1950. The report mentions that the Thiru-Cochin Film Chamber of Commerce, formed on August 7, 1950, appealed to the government for granting the temporary exhibition centers permission to continue in operation (Malayala Manorama, 8 August, 1950).

The memoirs of K V Koshy, ‘the first Malayali distributor’, provides us with a glimpse into the scenario that prevailed during the 1930s and the 1940s. The films that circulated in Kerala were mostly damaged copies of Tamil, Telugu and Hindi films, after their screenings across various regions for months. The distributors would procure films from companies based mainly in Madras, Salem, Bangalore or Bombay by paying a fixed amount (around Rs.700 in the 1930s, as per Koshy’s account). The revenue that these films could generate from screenings across Kerala was considered just a bonus by the film production companies (Koshy, 1968: 12-3; 23-4) until the first studios set up in Kerala began

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8 The report does not give any indications as to who owned these exhibition centres. However, it can be safely assumed that a good number of these must have been owned by non-Malayalees, especially Tamil Brahmins who were a major presence in the distribution and exhibition sectors in Kerala since the late 1920s. Some of the early permanent exhibition centres owned by Tamil Brahmins in the region are: Ramavarma Theatre, Thrissur (1929) of T A Naganatha Iyer; Menaka Theatre, Eranakulam (1938) of T D Narayana Iyer; Central Theatre, Thripunithura (1938) of S Suryanarayana Iyer; and Sreekrishna Talkies, Thodupuzha (1938) of N K Krishna Iyer. (“Initial Years”: Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema, 2003).
making films in considerable numbers by the early 1950s. The theatres would procure films from the distributors for a few days and try to collect as much revenue as possible by conducting more screenings per day than were agreed and allowed, and also by screening the films at more than one venue. Until at least the late 1950s, the distributors in Travancore used to procure the rights of Tamil films as soon as their production began, indicating their popularity and the shortage of films in circulation in the region. The travelling and temporary cinemas dominated the scene, often competing with other entertainment forms like popular dramas, both Tamil and Malayalam.

The Arrival of sound

In 1932, when Marthandavarma, a silent film on a Travancorean theme was released, Tamil cinema had already moved to the era of talkies. The arrival of sound gave the Tamil industry an upper hand over the popular and cheaply available foreign films. Even though the first sound studio in South India (Srinivasa Cinetone, Madras) was set up only in 1934, the Tamil film industry began appropriating the technology for consolidating the linguistic market much before. The first sound film in Tamil-Telugu was made in 1931 (Kalidas; H M

9 For example, Nasrani Deepika, on 13 January, 1939, reports that the municipality authorities have warned three theatres, conducting shows till early morning in Mattanchery [near the present Kochi], not to conduct screenings after midnight.

10 The editorial in Nasrani Deepika, December 29, 1948, says that the setting up of studios in Kerala is the only way to avoid this scenario of the distributors and exhibitors in Kerala procuring unfinished or even just-announced Tamil films without having any idea about how the film would turn out to be.
Producers based in Madras went to studios in Bombay, Calcutta and Kolhapur, where facilities for making sound films were available, and made talkies in Tamil and other South Indian languages in considerably large numbers. In 1935, after sound studios were set up in Madras, 35 talkies were made; and more than 240 films were made in the first decade of Tamil talkies (1931-1941).

Buoyed by this, by 1936, the number of cinema houses in the Presidency increased to 225, of which 12 were in the city of Madras, and about a hundred were touring cinemas (in contrast to 46 permanent houses and 12 touring talkies operating across the Presidency by 1927) (Baskaran, 2009: 49-50).

Silent films continued to be screened in Kerala at least until the early 1940s. Though we do not have much information about when cinema houses in Kerala began to introduce the sound system, it seems safe to assume that they started screening talkies as early as this trend emerged in other parts of South India, and that Tamil talkies were popular in the regions of Kerala, mythologicals being a prominent genre among them. However, the narrow size of the linguistic market that a Malayalam talkie could possibly cater to seems to have initially dissuaded many from the business. Koshy notes that filmmakers in Madras

11 In 1952, a commentator, writing about the popularity of Tamil talkies in Kerala, wrote: “The business of selling mythological films is more prominent in North India. In Hollywood, the birthplace of cinema, there is no market for gods. In South India, Tamilians seem to excel in this. In fact, film viewers [in Kerala], for a long time, have been under the impression that Tamil is the mother tongue of gods! However, some Malayalees have now started importing gods from Tamil cinema [into Malayalam cinema] in order to end the former’s monopoly over gods. Recently, one of my friends, after watching a Malayalam mythological film, said: ‘Finally, Lord Siva spoke in Malayalam!’” (P A Seythu Mohammed, ‘Our Cinema’, in Vidyabhivardhini, January 1952; emphasis added.)
thought that making a film in Malayalam would not be commercially viable “because Kerala is not even 1/5 of the size of Tamil Nadu” (Koshy 1968: 46). The economic conditions following the Great Depression and the Second World War further delayed the emergence of the Malayalam talkie era. In short, it took a while for the emergence of initiatives to capitalize on the sound technology and consolidate the linguistic market in Malayalam-speaking regions, the way the industry in Madras appropriated it to seize the linguistic markets in the south from foreign films.

Nevertheless, a number of local entrepreneurs as well as some of the production bases far from Madras were motivated by the advent of sound to explore the commercial prospects of talkies in Kerala. The first talkie in Malayalam, Balan (S Notani, 1938), was produced by T R Sundaram who owned Modern Theatres, Salem, which showed a distinct interest in the Kerala market. Alleppey Vincent, who was instrumental in the setting up of the first studios in Kerala, acted in the film and worked as its production executive. The production of the film was started by collecting Rs 25,000 from the exhibitors beforehand. Advertised as the ‘first Malayalam social’, the film did commercially well. (Gopalakrishnan 2004).

12 Though T R Sundaram of Modern Theatres, Salem, produced only three films in Malayalam, its interventions in the Kerala market are noteworthy. Apart from Balan, he produced and directed the first full length colour film in Malayalam (Kandam Becha Kottu, 1961) which was also one of the first Muslim socials in the language. Established in 1936, Modern Theatres became a major banner in South Indian cinema, and also produced seven films in Sinhalese.
A number of unsuccessful attempts at making films also marked this period. There was an attempt to make a film based on Bhootharayar, a novel by Appan Thampuran. The film, which was to be directed by S Notani, could not be completed (Vijayakrishnan, 1987: 47). Similarly, a Tamil company had plans to make a Malayalam talkie titled Prema Vaichithryam in 1938, which was to be based on a play by a drama troupe in Allepey (Mathrubhoomi, 13 January, 1938). A report in Malayala Manorama on 29 December, 1938, said that a film production company named Kairali Talkies would soon be registered at Palakkad. Similarly, a society named ‘Kerala Fine Art Society’ was set up in Madras to make films in Malayalam, and to encourage Kerala’s art forms like Kathakali and Kalaripayattu (Mathrubhoomi, 1 November, 1939). Nevertheless, only two more films – Jnanambika (S Notani, 1940), and Prahlada (K Subrahmaniam, 1941) – were made in Malayalam until 1947, as the industry in South India was hit by the acute shortage of raw stock due to the Second World War for almost a decade.

The late 1930s and the early 1940s also witnessed the emergence of a number of initiatives which were to act as catalysts in the evolution of a commercial film industry in the region after the War, when circumstances became more conducive. In 1938, K V Koshy set up his film distribution company, Filmco. This was closely followed by other initiatives of a similar kind. N X George started the distribution company Geo Pictures at Kottayam in 1939, which later became a major production and distribution banner. Swami Films, another major
distribution firm, owned by K S Akhileswara Aiyar, was set up in 1939. ("The Distribution Companies", Nana, January 1974). Iyer later produced films like Yachakan (R Velappan Nair, 1951) and Manasakshi (G Vishwanath, 1954). He was also instrumental in the setting up of the All Travancore Cinema Association at Kottayam in 1947. T E Vasudevan, who was to become a major producer in the 1950s, started his distribution company, Associated Pictures, in 1940. Associated Pictures entered film production in the 1950s and made films like Amma (K Vembu, 1952), Ashadeepam (G R Rao, 1953), Snehaseema (S S Rajan, 1954), Nayaru Pidicha Pulivalu (P Bhaskaran, 1958), Jnanasundari (K S Sethumadhavan, 1961), Puthiya Akasham Puthiya Bhoomi (M S Mani, 1962), etc. P Subrahmaniam, who set up Merryland Studio and his production banner Neela by the late 1940s, made his first film Prahlada in 1941, which was also the first mythological in Malayalam. In the same year, Kunchacko, along with Alleppey Vincent and others, founded a permanent production house named Udaya Pictures, which in 1948 became Udaya Studio at Alleppey – the first studio in Kerala with sound recording facilities.

The post-war economy and the context of linguistic nationalism

By the late 1940s, with the end of the War, and in the context of an industrial buoyancy especially in the Travancore princely state (Mahadevan 1991), the film

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13 P Subrahmaniam began his career as an exhibitor by setting up New Theatre and Chitra Theatre at Thiruvananthapuram in 1930.
industry in the region witnessed a significant spurt in initiatives in all sectors, including production and the setting up of studios. This enthusiasm was also nurtured by a bourgeoning linguistic nationalist discourse. Around 70 films were produced in Malayalam during the decade—a considerable increase compared to the number of films made till then. This was the result of the increased investments in setting up studios, distribution firms and new cinema halls, together with the entry of some of the distribution banners—especially those owned by K V Koshy, T E Vasudevan and Akhileswara Iyer—into film production. The first two films from Udaya Studio, set up by Kunchacko at Alleppey in 1947, were released in 1949 and 1950 (Vellinakshathram, Felix J H Bais, 1949; and Nallathanka, P V Krishna Iyer, 1950). K V Koshy tied up with Kunchakko and launched their banner K & K Productions in 1949. In 1951, P Subrahmaniam, who produced Prahlada, set up Merryland Studio in Thiruvananthapuram in 1951 by investing around Rs 10 lakhs.¹⁴ His production banner ‘Neela’ released its first film Athmasakhi (G R Rao) in 1952. Neela simultaneously made a Tamil version of the film also, named Priyasakhi.

A number of other important initiatives also emerged during the time. V Ramakrishna Iyer, one of the distributors of the 40s, entered production and made films like Vanamala (G Vishwanath, 1951) and Premalekha (M K Mani, 1952), along with S. A. Narayanan, who set up his company in Bangalore to distribute

¹⁴ Interview with S Kumar (son of P Subrahmaniam); 8 November, 2010.
American films. In 1949, A T Abraham set up his distribution banner ‘Cochin Pictures’, and later, in 1950, started the distribution firm, Prabhat Films, along with P V Varghese. He also set up temporary cinema halls in central Kerala. Johnson M A started a distribution company called Jaya Films in the early 1950s and opened cinema halls in Kochi. In 1952, T K Pareekkutty, who later produced a number of socialist realist films during the 1950s and the 1960s, set up his distribution outfit ‘Chandrathara’ (“Initial Years”: Seventy Five Years of Malayalam Cinema 2003).

The changed economic-cultural conditions seem to have enabled the local studios and Malayali entrepreneurs to take on the powerful Tamil producers and distributors. K V Koshy says he “felt it was much more viable to make films on our own by spending around Rs 1-1.5 lakhs, rather than acquire Tamil films for amounts like Rs 2 lakhs, and then run into losses.” (1968: 62) The strategy was obviously to make films at low costs – often ranging between Rs 1 lakh and Rs 3 lakhs – by keeping in mind the possibilities of remaking or dubbing them into other languages. Udaya’s Nallathanka was made at the cost of around Rs 1 lakh, and Neela’s Athmasakhi with Rs 2.5 lakhs.\footnote{Interview with S Kumar} This was the time when a big budget Tamil film would spend up to, or more than, Rs 20 lakhs for its production. The industry operated mainly based on a rotating capital base. S Kumar, son of P Subrahmaniam, said in an interview that none of the producers of the time had

\footnote{Interview with S Kumar}
enough money with them to spend lavishly, or make more than one film at a
time. The producers were not concerned as much about making huge returns
from their films as about ensuring moderate revenues from the screenings to
cover their expenses, and re-investing the money in producing new films on a
rotational basis.

**Appropriating the linguistic nationalist discourse**

As the initiatives commercially exploiting the prospects in cinema gained
momentum, simultaneously, a growing culture of writing about the medium,
mainly through newspapers and periodicals, also emerged. K V Koshy, after
setting up his distribution firm, immediately launched a film magazine called
Cinema in 1939 (Koshy 1968: 40-42). Similarly, the Malayala Manorama announced
a dedicated feature page for news and reports about cinema in the same year
(Malayala Manorama, 7 May, 1939). While Koshy’s intention was, among other
things, to provide the necessary information regarding new releases to the
exhibitors and to highlight the problems faced by those who are in the industry,
especially the exhibitors, Malayala Manorama stated its purpose as to educate the
masses about cinema. The newspaper wrote:

> We have not attempted to provide necessary information to the masses
about films. In English, as well as in some other Indian languages, there
are writings about cinema that provide information about cinema to
audiences. But similar initiatives have not yet been taken in Malayalam. This is one step towards that goal. (Malayala Manorama, 7 May, 1939)

As was the case in most other parts of India, one major concern raised by the commentators was the evil influence that cinema could have on certain sections of people. Cinema was figuratively marked as the favourite medium of the plebian masses with poor tastes, and cinema halls as contaminating spaces. At the same time, cinema’s ability to capture ‘social reality’ and its positive potentials as a medium, ‘if utilized properly’, was unambiguously acknowledged. Consider these comments for example. The first one is by K Ramakrishna Pillai, a cultural critic, about the power of cinema and its implications for theatre:

The world is changing very fast. The desire for a new world order can be seen everywhere. It is cinema, rather than plays, that is more useful for dissemination of ideas needed for such a change. Plays cannot compete with cinema in the latter’s ability to capture the social reality. (‘Naalathe Naadakam’, Nasrani Deepika, 10 January, 1941)

The second one is from a ‘letter to the editor’ in Mathrubhoomi:

Film-going has become part of the routine for city dwellers. [...] The travelling cinema has started reaching even the remotest places. No other art form has touched human lives so profoundly, and influenced human

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16 See also Bindu Menon (2005) for an elaborate account on the nature of debates about exhibition halls in Travancore during the early 20th century. She points out that the fears about cinema halls as public spaces accessible for people across castes generated various anxieties and influenced the governmental regulations about exhibition halls.
emotions so deeply. [...] While cinema is being used in Russia for the betterment of human lives, in our country, it is being misused for invoking animal instincts. [...] Our cinema halls have the character of brothels and the attraction of toddy shops. There will be dance sequences just for fun and vulgar scenes in the name of comedy, even though they don’t have any relevance to the story. Most of them are mythologicals. What would the audience feel when they see the sight of our supposedly most venerated mythological heroes running helter-skelter to get mates like massive stud bulls? (Mathrubhoomi, 21 December, 1937)

The letter indicates some recurring features in writings about cinema during the time: (a) it marks cinema and the cinema hall as a contaminating medium/ space (b) by comparing cinema halls to brothels and toddy shops, the letter indicates an (illicit) desire for cinema (it may be noted that the writer uses the word ‘attraction’ – ākarshanam - in this context) as well as a disavowal of it, (c) it points towards a growing disapproval of mythological films.

These anxieties and responses from the cultural elites in Kerala naturally took the form of contempt for Tamil films, since Tamil mythologicals and musicals were popular in the region. These commentaries attributed certain cultural sophistication to the ‘Malayalees’, as against the ‘uneducated’ Tamilians who produce the ‘morally contaminating’ films and ‘dump them on Malayalees’ for commercial exploitation. Announcing the beginning of a film feature page, Malayala Manorama, wrote in 1939:
Unfortunately, in Kerala, Tamil films are more popular. These Tamil films cannot be compared to Hindi and Telugu films, and not least to English films. How come such films gained popularity among us? The reason cannot be the lack of aesthetic sense among Malayalees, who are proud of being superior in their educational and cultural standards as well as having better aesthetic sense than people in any parts of India, a fact even foreigners have approved of. The reason could be the similarities between the two languages. We [Malayalees] can easily follow Tamil. This could be the reason why we [Malayalees] often decide to watch these dreadful [Tamil] movies by spending our precious time and money for the sake of some cheap entertainment. (Malayala Manorama, 7 May, 1939; emphasis added)

In such writings, Tamil cinema and Tamilians emerged as the cultural ‘other’ of the ‘culturally sophisticated’ Malayalees as a whole. One of the objections against Tamil films was that they contained sexual obscenity, like kissing scenes. Production of films within the region, by indigenous artists, set in the region’s context, was proposed as the solution. Setting up studios in Kerala and regular production of Malayalam films, it was suggested, would enable the entrepreneurs and filmmakers in Kerala to grab the market from Tamil films and distributors, which in turn would liberate the local viewers from the ‘morally degrading’ Tamil films. Nasrani Deepika, in its editorial on 13 September, 1949, wrote:

The [distribution] companies in Kerala concentrate only on securing the rights of Tamil films, and the exhibitors here focus only on their business. In short, profit is the only motive for those engaged in film business in
Kerala. However, some [Malayalees] have started making Malayalam films with the help of the studios outside Kerala. The main reasons behind the failure of Malayalam films are the lack of capital inflow and the lack of cooperation of the experts and the experienced people in the industry. [...] It is important that we make good films in Malayalam. It is also important that we make them within our region. The first aspect is related to supporting our own aesthetics and culture through films, and the second is related to the economic aspect. (Emphasis added)

Moreover, the proponents of Aikya Keralam explicitly declared their patronage for a regional cinema and local production base. Pallathu Raman, a renowned poet, talking at a meeting of Sahithya Parishad, Kannur, in the context of the campaigns for Aikya Keralam, highlighted the need for setting up a production base in the region to prevent Tamil industry from commercially exploiting the Kerala market:

The [Tamil] film industry is an institution that comes like flood waters and steals money from the pockets of Malayalees. Cinema is well suited for the promotion of music and literature. Fire can be used to burn down a house, but also to cook food. Similarly, cinema also has two aspects. Cinema should propagate moral values. Don’t we [Malayalees] have beauty, culture, music, and women who are experts in dance and other arts, in our land? (Malayala Manorama, 4 May, 1948)

The cultural elite’s contempt for Tamil cinema became a useful marketing strategy for the early filmmakers in Malayalam, who tried to cash in on the cultural pride in Malayalam and the native land. This political context enabled
the filmmakers to adopt most of the popular elements deployed in Tamil cinema, make them available in a cheap format and still claim distinctiveness from popular Tamil films. Udaya’s first film Vellinakshatram was advertised as “the Malayalam film, made by Malayalees at a studio set up by Malayalees, in the Malayali land” (Nasrani Deepika, 10 February, 1949). The case of Nallathanka, Udaya’s second film, is an interesting case indicating the dependence of the burgeoning industry in Kerala on Tamil cinema for content. The film was based on a story which was made into film thrice in Tamil already with almost even the same name – Nallathankal. The Tamil versions were popular in Kerala and this was precisely the reason the filmmakers chose the same story when they were looking for a theme to make a Malayalam film on (Koshy 1968: 85-6). Thus, while freely adopting from the visual registers and thematic content widely employed in popular Tamil films, the producers were indeed resting their hopes on the cultural elite’s promise of endorsement and patronage for the local industry. Whenever the writing cultural elites went back on their promise of support, the industry circles retorted sharply. For example, Nallathanka was indeed criticized for being a poor adaptation of a worn-out theme in Tamil films and dramas. Replying to such criticisms, Annamma Kunchacko, wife of Kunchacko, wrote that such “unfair” criticisms were the reasons for the sad plight of Malayalam film industry (Nasrani Deepika, 9 January, 1950). Besides, the studios used advertising strategies seeking to distance their films from the popular Tamil films in order to appeal to the cultural elites, mainly by the claim that their films
were “suitable for family viewing”. Another promotional strategy to appeal to the elites was to associate the films with personalities holding respectable positions. An advertisement of Udaya’s Nallathanka claimed:

The screening of Nallathanka at Madras Star Talkies will begin in the presence of Madras Mayor Dr. P V Cheriyan. Also playing at Bombay (Dadar), Ootty, Salem, Nagercoil, Madurai and Pudukkotta. (Nasrani Deepika, 15 April, 1950)

Udaya also arranged special screenings of their first films and managed to get famous personalities and politicians to write about their experience. Meanwhile, the Tamil Nadu-based studios tried to retain their Kerala market by including songs and reels of comedy scenes in Malayalam. Some of them started releasing their films in multiple theatres in one area. Tamil films started flaunting their lavish spending, thus promising more entertainment and spectacle, as a marketing strategy to counter the ‘family-friendly’ claims of Malayalam films. For example, advertisements of Krishnabhakthi (1949), a Tamil

17 For example, Vellinakshatram (1949), Udaya’s first film, was advertised as a “Malayalam film that can be watched along with your family members”. (Nasrani Deepika, 10 February, 1949).

18 After watching the premiere of Vellinakshathram, C Kesavan, State Congress President, wrote: I was a bit skeptical when I began watching this film, as I remembered the dismal failures of the Malayalam films made in non-native studios so far. But this time, two hours passed in ‘filmy’ speed, and I realized it only when the film got over. […] It is suitable for family viewing. (Nasrani Deepika, 1 January, 1949)

19 For example, the Tamil film Parasuraman included three reels of comedy scenes in Malayalam, and Gemini Pictures included Malayalam songs in one of their films (Koshy 1968: 50).

20 The Tamil mythological Krishnabhakthi (1949), a big budget film, seems to be the first film to have been released in multiple theatres in a town simultaneously in Kerala, according to a report in Nasrani Deepika, 20 June, 1949.
mythological, capitalized on the claim that the film was made at a budget of Rs 20 lakhs (Nasrani Deepika, 1 June, 1949; Malayala Manorama, 25 May, 1949). An advertisement of the Tamil film Vijayakumari flaunted its scenic locations, sets and dance sequences (Nasrani Deepika, 8 February, 1950).

Until at least the late 1950s, the distribution and exhibition sectors in the region were heavily dependent on the Madras-based industry for a steady supply of films even when the production of films in Malayalam increased gradually. Hence, far from taking an anti-Madras position, the distribution-exhibition sectors deployed similar strategies used by the studios in Kerala to remarket Tamil films (see also Figure i.1). Moreover, the producers of the early talkies in Malayalam depend heavily on revenues from screenings of their films in non-Malayalam speaking regions. Many of the early Malayalam films generated most of its revenues from screenings in Tamil and Andhra regions as well as in countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Sri Lanka (N G John, 2011b). Udaya and Merryland studios made films at phenomenally low costs, at regular intervals, and keeping in mind the possibilities of simultaneously remaking them into other languages, targeting a larger South Indian audience. These conditions placed the commercial film industry that emerged in Kerala by the late 1940s firmly within the economic and cultural structures of South Indian cinema. The challenge before the first studios was to mould an aesthetic that can address a socially mixed audience by drawing on the already popular visual registers and
generic elements, and capitalizing on the tenuous promises of patronage and endorsement offered by the cultural elites in the wake of linguistic nationalism.

![Figure i.1: Advertisement of the Tamil film Jnanasundari inserted by Geo Pictures, Kottayam, proclaiming in English that the film is suitable for a family audience. (Nasrani Deepika, 8 November, 1948). Source: Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi.](image)

**Negotiating with the middle class and the bureaucracy**

The available accounts about the nascent film industry in Kerala provides interesting information about how the industry sought to achieve economic stability by negotiating with the middle class, bureaucracy and pre-industrial forces, often by seeking patronage. The history of the Censorship Board in Travancore is an example of how the industry itself took initiatives to constitute legal procedures like censorship in order to ensure economic stability and
unpredictable hassles that the distributors and exhibitors in Kerala often had to face.

Distributor N G John’s account of the industry’s nature during the 1930s and 1940s offers some insight into this history. Just before launching his film distribution firm Geo Pictures in the late 1930s, N X George, the writer’s father, had tried his hands at securing the distribution rights of Tamil films and distributing them in Kerala. One such film, Dayaalan, produced by T R Sundaram of Modern Theatres, Salem, ran into trouble after its commercially successful screenings at Thiruvananthapuram and Nagercoil for the initial few days. The government officials confiscated the film on the fourth day of its release. Apparently, the then Diwan of the Princely State of Travancore, C P Ramaswamy Iyer, was displeased with the content of the film – a story of revenge by a prince in a mythical kingdom against the scheming and cruel minister who secured the throne after imprisoning the King. The prince kills the minister, restores the King, and declares the country as “belonging to the people”. The Diwan recognized the political undertones and confiscated the film, the distribution rights of which were secured for a considerably high amount. P Subrahmaniam, owner of New Theatre, Thiruvananthapuram, where the film was being screened, found a solution for the standoff. He approached Diwan C P Ramaswamy Iyer’s private secretary, and it was decided that a censor board would be formed for Travancore. The board – which included the chief secretary,
the Inspector General of Police, the Mayor and P Subrahmaniam himself – reviewed the film, and proposed removing the reels “which showed the cruelties of the Diwan”. The film was re-released and brought huge profits for the distributors and the exhibitors. John has mentioned that the success of the film led to the setting up of Geo Pictures. (John 2011a: 11-13) The initiatives from the part of the distributors and exhibitors to set up legal frameworks like a censor board was thus a way of bringing certain operational stability to the distribution-exhibition sectors, wherein the films once reviewed by the board will not have to face the ire of the authorities any longer.21

Another interesting aspect about the industry’s negotiations with the bureaucracy, the middle class and the pre-industrial forces is the custom of ‘free passes’. K V Koshy’s accounts provide us with useful insights into the ‘free-pass’ system, a mechanism of patronage, and how the exhibition sector negotiated with this. Koshy says that owners of temporary and permanent theatres had to offer free passes to “the powerful people” in an area if the shows were to run smoothly. Often, they issued family passes to influential people including government officials and other socially powerful figures. Bureaucrats used to harass theatre-owners in various ways if they were not given customary free

21 The Thiruvithamcore Film Censor Board was dissolved in January 1951, as the government ordered that the films thereafter would have to be cleared by the Central Censor Board. (Mathrubhoomi, 17 January, 1951)
passes whenever a new film opened for exhibition. Though Koshy claims that this often caused huge losses for the exhibitors, there are indications in his account which suggest that this arrangement functioned as a system of patronage. Moreover, it had a de-stigmatizing effect on cinema as a cultural institution. Koshy remembers a travelling cinema operator telling him about his modus operandi:

Once we reach a new place for conducting exhibition, we first find out the rowdies in the locality. We keep them happy by offering free passes. Then, we offer family tickets to the officials in the Police, Excise, Revenue and other major departments. They come for the show without fail; we welcome them. The sight of some respectable people coming to the theatres would encourage more people to come for the cinema. (Koshy 1968: 24)

It is possible that the ‘free pass system’ was initiated by the exhibitors as a way of seeking patronage from the socially powerful in a locality, which became a class privilege for the bureaucratic elites. By the 1940s, while a beneficiary of the free-pass system used it to watch films with a sense of being a privileged viewer (invoking his official position), the theatre owners used the same system as a device to de-stigmatize cinema in the eyes of the middle class.

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22 See Koshy 1968: 24-26; 37-43. The free pass system is mentioned in a number of autobiographies and memoirs of famous personalities in Kerala. For example see the autobiography of K M Mathew (Mathew 2008: 70-71) and P Ramadas’s memoirs about the making of Newspaper Boy (Paul 2008: 26).
Early studio films as products of ‘bricolage’: The case of Jeevithanowka

As evidences suggest, the bourgeoning studios in the region identified ‘the social’ – understood in the scholarship on Indian cinema as a hold-all genre – as the convenient aesthetic and an economically viable formula to incorporate a host of attractions and address a wide audience. By the early 1950s, the studios used strategies of bricolage and genre-mixing to mould a new cinema. This allowed them, on the one hand, to respond to the cultural elite’s call to contribute to the rationalizing agendas of the state and thus gain legitimacy as modern cultural institutions and, on the other hand, to incorporate and appropriate the popular elements of spectacles (targeting the masses) which were considered as sustaining the commercial cinema in South India in general. An examination of the organization of generic elements in Jeevithanowka (The Boat of Life: K Vembu, 1951) provides insights into how the early studio films functioned by competing with, and adopting freely from, the popular theatre and Tamil films, while positioning themselves on the side of an “aesthetic of contemporaneity” (Prasad)

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23 Talking about the general tendencies in the studio films of the time, Cynic, a famous commentator, wrote in 1952: “A caring elder brother, his scheming wife, an ideal romantic couple from disparate social backgrounds, the problems that the couple has to face due to the disparities in their social status, the final triumph of their love, and some comedy scenes: these have become the essential ingredients for almost all Malayalam films these days.” (Mathrubhoomi weekly, 14 September, 1952: 30)

24 In his recent essay, Madhava Prasad (2011) has shown instances of the film industry in India deploying fabricatory techniques of bricolage and genre-mixing as strategies to respond to social change during the 1950s. Christopher Pinney has also pointed out pastiche and bricolage as creative devices widely deployed in the mass-produced print images in India to convey new meanings out of the existing repertoires of visual culture practices (See Pinney 2004: 178-79).
which was emerging as dominant in India as well as across the world during the 1950s.

Produced by K & K Productions of K V Koshy and Kunchacko, the film ran for 284 days at Thiruvananthapuram (Vijayakrishnan 1987: 62) and is considered the first major commercial success in Malayalam. The story goes like this: Raju (Sebastian Kunjukunju Bhagavathar) and Soman (Thikkurissi Sukumaran Nair) are brothers. Raju, the elder brother, is like a father-figure for Soman. Raju works as the secretary of a stingy local landlord; his wife, Janu (Pankajavalli), is a greedy, cantankerous woman. The protagonist Soman, an educated man, wants to marry Lakshmi (B S Saroja), his childhood sweetheart and a lower caste woman. Raju and Janu oppose the marriage. Raju, who is more considerate to Soman’s desires, eventually agrees to the marriage; thus, Soman and Lakshmi get married. However, the couple has to leave the joint family to a new house as Janu begins to harass Lakshmi. Soon, Soman goes to the town in search of a job, and meets with an accident when a rich family’s car hits him down. The family takes Soman to their house and appoints him as the estate manager. Soman decides to stay in the town for a while to make money. He keeps sending money and letters to Lakshmi, but, each time, Janu and her brother destroy the letters and pocket the money. Meanwhile, Lakshmi and her son live in utter poverty amidst harassments by Janu, her relatives as well as the landlord. She decides to leave the place along with her son and reaches the town where Soman lives.
Lakshmi decides to end her life when she accidentally sees Soman along with a woman from the rich family whom she mistakes for Soman’s new wife. Reminded of the duty of a mother, she gives up the idea of suicide and starts a welfare organization for beggars. She acts in plays to raise money for the organization.

In the meantime, Janu and Shanku, the landlord’s assistant, make plans to steal money from the landlord. While trying to escape with the money, the landlord’s advocate gets killed. Mislead by Shanku, the police suspects Raju for the murder and the theft and arrests him. Eventually, it becomes clear that the theft was planned by Shanku, as the Police catch hold of his aides. Meanwhile, Soman returns to his village and learns about the harassment that Lakshmi and his son had to face. In the end, Soman and Lakshmi reunite, and join Raju and a reformed Janu, forming the joint family again.

The narrative is constructed within an overarching framework of the rationalist, egalitarian discourse which was gaining cultural dominance in the wake of the birth of the nation-state as well as the growing sentiments of linguistic nationalism in the region. Meanwhile, the film introduces contrived moments in the plot so as to include sequences from mythological plays, featuring B. S. Saroja, by then a prominent star in Tamil, in central roles. In doing so, the filmmakers were clearly trying to capitalize on the two ingredients that were
deemed to be good business in popular cinema in India – mythological tales and the female star. Besides, this was also an attempt to incorporate the attractions of popular dramas and wean people away from theatre. Incorporating such elements as independent units was a common practice in the cinema during the time. One interesting aspect about this film is the superficial evocation of the rationalist notions of cause and effect, within which these ‘spectacles’ were sought to be incorporated and subsumed, as I shall try to demonstrate.

As the film approaches its climax, it is through a sequence which involves the staged performance of a Bible tale that the film sets in motion a chain of events that would lead to the re-union of Soman and Lakshmi, the estranged protagonists. The film has already shown us how various circumstances make Lakshmi think that Soman has deserted her for a rich woman. After coming to the town, Lakshmi decides to join a drama troupe and performs at various places in order to raise money for the charity organization that she is part of. Coincidentally, Soman, along with the young woman from the aristocratic family where he works as the manager, comes to watch a performance by Lakshmi’s troupe. The drama is based on the story of Snapakayohannan – John the Baptist – and Lakshmi (B S Saroja), sporting a beard and carrying a stick, plays the role of the Baptist who invited the wrath of the King by criticizing him for engaging in

25 Drama performances based on the story of Snapakayohannan were famous in the region since 1920s and were repeatedly enacted by commercial drama troupes. Sebastian Kunju Kunju Bhagavathar, one of the leading actors in Jeevithanowka, owned his own drama troupe and was a prominent figure in commercial theatre.
adultery and ignoring his duties towards his family and the kingdom. The performance starts with a song-dance sequence that shows the king flirting with women. The song is disrupted, as John the Baptist, played by Lakshmi, enters the scene and begins to scold the king for his immoral ways. As this scene progresses, Lakshmi sees Soman sitting in the first row among the audience, along with the aristocratic woman. However, Soman does not recognize Lakshmi in her make-up. Lakshmi, playing the role of the Baptist, begins to see the image of her own husband in the wayward king. The Baptist's dialogues, now beginning to convey Lakshmi's trauma as well, suddenly attain a sharp accusatory tone. In one shot, the camera is placed behind the stage: the audience can see the king, partly, from behind, and John the Baptist/ Lakshmi criticizing the king by pointing his/ her finger at the former. In the background, we can also see Soman sitting among the audience, along with the aristocrat woman (Figure i.2). As the moral admonishment progresses, there is a cut to Soman's face, showing him becoming increasingly uncomfortable as if the moral chastisement has had some bearing on him, though logically there is no reason why the moral charge of this scene should upset Soman, since he is not culpable of disloyalty or irresponsibility. Eventually, Soman faints, as if ridden by guilt, and the play comes to an abrupt end when Lakshmi also faints during the performance. Later, Soman decides to return to his village to meet his wife and son, saying that the prophet's speech reminded him of Lakshmi.
Figure i.2: B S Saroja as John the Baptist. Source: Jeevithanowka (K Vembu, 1951)

The primary purpose of this sequence is to push the narrative into a resolution by bringing the protagonists together, while providing the film with another opportunity to include attractions of the popular theatre – a major source of content for the commercial cinema, as well as its competitor in the entertainment industry during the time.26 The mythological tale is deployed here to evoke certain emotions (guilt, responsibility towards his family) in Soman so that he would want to go back home and meet his wife. However, interestingly, the

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26 Baskaran notes that all the 61 films made in the first five years of Tamil talkie era were reproductions of stage plays – a practice that continued till the 1950s in South Indian cinema (2009: 30).
particular mythological tale that was being recounted on the stage – of the
prophet reminding the wayward King about his responsibilities towards his
family and kingdom – did not have any bearing on what was happening to the
protagonists in the film. The protagonists are estranged as the result of the evil
characters’ harassments; what Lakshmi thinks about Soman is the consequence
of a misunderstanding – two things that the film clearly conveys to the audience
without any ambiguity.

One can identify the filmmakers creatively deploying strategies of fabrication
and bricolage to evolve a new aesthetic by appropriating popular religious
mythological tales (which the Tamil films and popular theatre freely adopted
from) and subsuming them under the rationalist, secular discourse privileged
and propagated by the modern nation-state as well as the cultural elites. These
rather conflicting generic elements are linked through a superficial evocation of
the notions of cause and effect in the narrative progression – notions that the
popular cinema was exhorted to follow from its inception. The strategies of
appropriating from the existing registers of popular visual culture as
independent units, subordinating them to the rationalist narrative progression,
and often bringing these disparate generic tendencies together through
fabricated links, were crucial for the early studio films in Malayalam to survive
commercially and attain legitimacy as a cultural institution.
By the late 1940s, when Udaya and Merryland – the first modern studios set up in Kerala – started commercial production of films in Malayalam, the hold-all genre of ‘social’ provided them with a basic structure to negotiate with the dominant industrial terms set by the Madras-based South Indian cinema on the one hand, and the demands placed on them by the cultural elites in the region as well as the changing socio-historical context during the period, on the other. In industrial terms, these studios adopted the strategy of making films at phenomenally low costs, keeping in mind the geographically narrow linguistic market and the possibilities of simultaneously remaking their films into other languages, thus targeting the South Indian market at large, if not the wider South East Asian market. The popular Tamil films, unassailable in producing grand spectacles out of mythological and fantasy tales, provided a ready source of content and re-deployable visual registers for the early studio films. While adopting various generic elements from them as well as the popular company dramas, the studio films incorporated these ingredients of attractions, and subsumed them under a large narrative structure shaped by the compulsions of the ‘aesthetic of contemporaneity’, emerging as dominant in the context of the coming of the modern nation state. To borrow Prasad’s (2011) observation about the socials of the 1950s, the creative strategies of fabrication, genre-mixing and the devices of bricolage enabled the early studios in Kerala to respond to the social-historical changes taking place during the time by redeploying existing resources.
During the first half of the 1950s, the genre of mythological was increasingly being sidelined in Malayalam cinema. While the studios showed a tendency of gradually moving towards family romances, this period also witnessed the emergence of social realism initiated by the Left-affiliated Progressive Writers Group. Deploying melodramatic pathos, the social-realistic films dealt with themes of social modernization based on rational thinking. However, mythologicals were to stage a come-back as one of the prominent genres in Malayalam cinema by the early 1960s, a development which needs to be analyzed in the context of the eruption of subjectivities and desires disillusioned with the secular, rationalist ideals propagated by the Left – the ‘protagonists’ of the modern Malayali nation. In Chapter II and Chapter IV, I discuss various aspects of the Left’s interventions in Malayalam cinema during the 1950s.