Chapter III

POLITICAL CINEMA IN KERALA, 1970s-90s

This study seeks to map the emergence of ‘Political Cinema’ across the world, in the specific context of Kerala and explore its present contours. Its Broad Objective is: To critically look at the status of the ‘political cinema’ and the transitions in the ‘politics of cinema’ in Malayalam from 1970s-90s. To examine how and to what extent Malayalam Cinema in the postmodern age is moving away from essentialist and reductionist perspectives to a redefinition of politics, in terms of broader understanding and acknowledgement of multiple and multi-layered constituencies of religion, caste, class, gender, sexual orientation and so on.

Research questions based on this broad objective were framed in such a way that it facilitated the sharing of the research participants’ ideas on political cinema in Malayalam, in the 1970s-80s period, also as a process of reconstructing that period in Kerala history. This period is generally identified as the socio-cultural context of the emergence of a typical ‘political cinema’ movement in Kerala. There were also certain questions intended to explore their perceptions on classifying some films as typically ‘political’ in contrast to some other films as ‘not so political’. The participants\(^\text{16}\) belonging to ‘Context A, 1970s’ (active in the 1970s and active/inactive in the present) were able to reconstruct the ‘1970s’ from their memories, from creative works, their own and/or by others, and also from discourses in the public sphere connected to the period. Other respondents representing the next two junctures, i.e. ‘Context B, 1970s-90s’ (not fully active in the 70s proper, but active in the 1980s-90s and later) and ‘Context C, 1990s and beyond’ (active only after the 1990s) reconstructed the 1970s in retrospect, from memory, from one’s own or others’ accounts, and through different texts that they have come across that refer to the 1970s and the political cinema of that period.

A few participants, irrespective of the junctures they represent, expressed reservations about positing 1970s as a ‘golden period’ in Kerala cultural politics and also in the

\(^{16}\) Please refer to Annexure for ‘Table of Participants’ classified under Context A, B and C
history of Malayalam Cinema. They hold that such qualifications amount to ‘mythification’ and ‘romanticisation’ of a period in history, giving the impression that certain forces consciously planned and moulded a period in history, which does not correspond to the evolution of cultural processes mostly as unpredictable coincidences. K. G. Sanakara Pillai (a.k.a KGS) poet, an ex-Naxalite sympathiser, does not support the idea of a ‘special 1970s, special for Kerala’:

1970s was special, but that ‘special’ was there all over the world, not India/Kerala in isolation. It was a time and space, which was integral part of the world in those days. But later, Malayalees created a myth that we had a ‘special seventies’, which neither Tamil Nadu nor Karnataka nor any place in the world had (or could claim to have had). There were some factors in that period in Kerala, which helped create/construct that myth (KGS, context A).

Janaki Sreedharan, University lecturer and media critic, holds similar reservations about idealising the 1970s as a golden period in Kerala political and cultural history:

There is a tendency even in today’s campuses (and in Kerala society in general) to look at the 1970s as the ‘ideal period of political consciousness’... it sounds a bit romanticised approach. This political consciousness was not anything special to Kerala, but was part of a movement all over the world, an oppositional movement, anti-imperialistic. But, that’s not the last word in political consciousness. After the 70s, politics got fragmented a lot, the political subjectivity fragmented and different groups are emerging after the 1970s (Janaki, context B)

V.K. Joseph, a long time film society activist and film critic, refers to the tumultuous 1960s-70s all over the world as the basis for the talk of a ‘special 70s’ and a ‘special political cinema movement’ in Kerala in the 1970s.

Across the world 1960s and 70s were an age of political struggle and liberation struggles. Those winds were blowing in Kerala too; and we were readily welcoming those changes, fresh air, in poetry, theatre, in cinema too.... I don’t think that in Kerala we had a political cinema’ movement. But along the lines of the politics of the 70s, there was a strong desire to have a change in the way we see (vision). Filmmakers and audiences (film society activists etc) have always expressed this desire. Apart from this desire we never had such a movement realised here. (V.K.Joseph, context A)

Definitely, there was a desire for a political cinema in Kerala, among the makers and many viewers of cinema in Kerala. Some filmmakers like P.A. Backer, Pavithran, John Abraham, Raveendran and others took steps to translate the desire into action and
into concrete film projects. The viewers who dreamt of a political cinema in Malayalam, most of them ardent lovers of world cinema, articulated their concept of a political cinema often in terms of how a Miguel Littin or a Fernando Solanes articulated the praxis of political cinemas that they found fitting to their Latin American Third world context. It was not any master filmmakers in the Indian peninsula, like Satyajit Ray, the creator of the Apu trilogies, or stalwarts of the ‘social realist’ cinemas that ignited the imagination of the ardent lovers and dreamers of a political cinema in Kerala in the 1970s; they were mainly looking to the West (Italy, France), to the East (Russia and the East Europe) and to the continent down there in the southern hemisphere, Latin America for inspiration and innovative ideas. They had a reason: in the 1950s-70s there were different concepts and practices of cinema emerging in Italy, France, Poland, Hungary, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba and elsewhere.

3.1 ‘Political Cinema’: the concept and practice in World Cinema

Analysing the concept of political cinema in the European and Latin American cinemas, Robert Kolker cites the famous Horatian dictum applying it to the art of filmmaking, ‘Art must teach and delight’ (cited in Kolker 1983: 277). Ever since the Lumiere Brothers invented the potential of the cinematographic technique to record as well as recreate reality, many pioneering minds experimented with those two functions of art: to teach and delight(entertain). Those short non-fictional presentations slowly evolved into documentary films and later into fiction films drawing inspiration from the ‘magician of the silver screen’, George Mellies, who had contributed early classics like A Trip to the Moon in the silent era. Eventually the entertaining function of cinematic arts got prominence with the techniques of narrative dramatic filmmaking that D.W. Griffith introduced, which became the foundation for the Hollywood style of filmmaking. It took time for alternative theories and models to evolve and confront the American style of filmmaking that emphasised the principle of ‘identification’ to ensure the specific function of art it had espoused: ‘art to delight’.

It was the Soviet Cinema, the new concepts and practices of filmmaking evolved in Russia after the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917 that questioned the American model of filmmaking and reinstated the hitherto ignored component in the Horatian
dictum, ‘art to teach’. Susan Hayward points out that the new Soviet cinema admirably suited the political exigencies of post-Revolutionary Russia, which needed the propagandizing effect of cinema to spread the message that all workers were pulling together to secure the national identity of the new Soviet republics. The earliest example of this propagandist move was during the civil war of 1918-21, when film shows were delivered all around the country on what were called ‘agit-trains’, a project in which many of the renowned Russian filmmakers like Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov started their career (Hayward 1996). Kuleshov presented a new aesthetics to world cinema with his principle of montage editing, which insisted on the potential of each shot to derive ‘meaning’ from its context, in contrast to the American insistence on the capacity of shots to evoke ‘feeling’ by clever placement of the camera and the character.

Sergei Eisenstein, who is regarded as the ‘Father of Soviet Cinema’ and whom many people consider as the pioneer of ‘political cinema’, modified the montage theory of Kuleshov into what he called the ‘intellectual montage’, which had the clear intention of making the spectator ‘think’. Eisenstein saw cinema as a modality for expressing and representing revolutionary struggle. He believed that a revolutionary country should be given a revolutionary culture (cinema in this case) in order for the masses to obtain a revolutionary consciousness. His most famous film, Battleship Potemkin (1925) is exemplary of his radical view of film as an assault on audiences to shock them into political awareness.

After the hey days of Soviet cinema and its fading out after it embraced extreme formalism (‘socialist realism’), the next major movement in world cinema to use cinema in order to raise political awareness surfaced in the Italian ‘Neo-Realism’ of 1940s-50s. It brought out masterly works of Vittorio De Sica, Rossellini, Pasolini and others. Neo-realism, as a theory of cinema and a political ideology had such an impact on many national cinemas in the so called Third world, including India, that it became the founding principle for imagining a national cultural and political identity in the post-colonial period, realised through ‘New Cinema’ movements in their respective
regions. Kolker charts the main characteristics of the neo-realist cinema that drew unique attention in world cinema:

An essential component of the neo-realist endeavour was its concern, really for the first time in film, to deal objectively with the working class. That it could not avoid sentimentalising its subject is ultimately unimportant. The fact is that by consciously choosing to concentrate upon a socially and economically defined entity, the neo-realisists politicized their images and narratives. They replaced the psychological inquiry with depictions of external struggle with the social environment, the government, the economic and political state of post-war Italy. (Kolker, 1983: 272)

Complementing the efforts of the neo-realisists who worked with the content and context of films, another set of filmmakers entered the scene whose attempt was to subvert the cinematic form in order to shock the audiences and question the dominant ideologies that control the cinematic apparatus. The experiments with form by these directors, Antonioni, Alain Resnais, Godard and others, soon came to be recognized as a new movement, the French New Wave. These filmmakers attacked the narrative cinematic form known to millions of people who had found it comfortable and undemanding.

Drawing inspiration and insights from Bertolt Brecht (who proposed ‘alienation’ as the aim of art in contrast to the Aristotelian ‘identification’) and the surrealists and Dadaists, who disturbed refined conventions of art in order to shock and surprise, the New Wave filmmakers attempted to remove the comfort and dislodge old conventions and viewer attitudes. This became a political process in the sense that it broke the authoritarian grasp of the old, closed forms and gave the viewer freedom to think and feel, to draw conclusions rather than only accept them (Kolker 1983). The radical experiments that Godard tried out in a series of films are an index to the political process that engages the cinematic content and the form as well. He thus put into practice his famous dictum that is often quoted in any discussions on political cinema: what is important is not making political films but to make films politically.

The group of filmmakers in the Third World, in Asia, Africa and especially those from Latin America, most of them trained in Europe, began to redefine their national cinemas in view of addressing the emergent challenges in the post-war and post-
colonial contexts. They had already been deeply influenced by the two ‘new’ movements in European cinema, Neo-realism and the *nouvelle vague*, the New Wave. The Latin American filmmakers either chose from these two European models of political filmmaking or combined all what they had learned from Europe with the indigenous/folk art forms and genres and let new and eclectic cinematic forms emerge. Films of Glauber Rocha, one of the pioneers of ‘Cineam Novo’ in Brazil, are typical examples of such experiments in film form that combined insights from European cinema with the indigenous richness.

### 3.1.1 The period of revolutions and the evolution of political cinema in the Third World, 1960-70s

Bill Nichols has included in his ‘Movies and Methods’ one of the most important ‘manifestos’ for a ‘Third World Cinema’. It is titled ‘Towards a Third Cinema’, co-authored by the Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, the duo who co-directed the political documentary *La Hora de los Hornos* (Hour of the Furnace) that had become very popular in the Third World in the 1970s-80s. Solanas and Getino explain the historical and political context that had demanded a Third World/Third Cinema, a new form of cinema as political praxis:

..the questions that were recently raised and appeared promising; they arose from a new historical situation to which the filmmaker, as is often the case with the educated strata of our countries, was rather a late comer: ten years of the Cuban revolution, the Vietnamese struggle, and the development of a world-wide liberation movement whose moving force is to be found in the Third World countries. *The existence of masses on the world wide revolutionary plane was the substantial fact without which those questions could not have been posted.* A new historical situation and a new man is born in the process of the anti-imperialist struggle demanded a new, revolutionary attitude from the filmmakers of the world. (cited in Nichols, 1976: 45)

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam try to map the emergence of the Third Worldist political cinema as a counter retelling of the stories of the colonised, confronting the versions of the colonisers and subverting or appropriating the conventional cinematic forms, which the author finds as a political strategy of the Third world people to counter the Eurocentric trends and tendencies ingrained in their confused or mixed cultural identities.
For the Third World, this cinematic counter-telling basically began with the post-war collapse of the European empires and the emergence of independent Third world nation-states. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnamese victory over the French, the Cuban revolution and Algerian independence (Shohat & Stam 1994: 248).

There were other ‘manifestos’ on Third World cinema, similar to that of Solanas and Getino, presented by filmmakers and ideologues from other Latin American countries. ‘Aesthetics of Hunger’ (1965) by Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha, and ‘For an Imperfect Cinema’ (1969) by Cuban filmmaker Julio Garcia Espinosa were two other important documents. The indigenous film industries in these nations were faced with the onslaught of cultural products from America (mainly Hollywood) and Europe and naturally they eagerly searched for strategies to evolve a cinema of their own that fits to their needs, their culture, history and also fits well within their limited resources, which they believed should be channelised to ensure active participation of the masses in filmmaking and viewing as political activities. Nichols summarises the main characteristics of Third cinema outlined in the manifesto of Solanes and Getino: “Third Cinema is essentially a guerrilla cinema in which questions about group production, distribution, and the screening event take precedence over aesthetic questions more narrowly conceived” (Nichols 1976: 45).

Kolker cites the example of Cuba, where the revolution succeeded, as one Latin American nation that could realize the dreams of an independent revolutionary or political cinema, with its own apparatus and distribution.

The Cubans dedicated their cinema to ideology, an ideology that would clarify history, correct the misinterpretations of American film, and propagate socialism. They have experimented in many forms—documentary, fiction, fictional documentary and documentary fiction. Like the French New Wave, the Cuban filmmakers practiced with various genres, posed questions about history; about the representation of history in film…the Cubans turned away from the cinema of psychological realism to the cinema of psychological and social materialism, where subjectivity and individual experience are examined in the context of a culture and its history, of human beings in relation to each other and to their world. Their inquiries, however, are always in a revolutionary context (Kolker 1983:277).

In India, our filmmakers did not encounter a revolutionary context to situate their works, in spite of the extreme situations of poverty, unemployment and oppression.
and exploitation from feudalist and casteist forces that large sections of populations in different parts of India faced especially in the period 1970s-80s. Such ground realities would have rendered India eligible to be considered under the ‘Third World’ label. However, when it comes to cinema and the film production and distribution apparatus and also in terms of any ‘external cultural invasion’ (say by Hollywood), one would honestly hesitate to slot the Indian cinema along with the Third world cinemas that we briefly discussed here. “It is something of a paradox to speak of Indian cinema as a Third World cinema. It produces more films than any other nation—around nine hundred a year—and in sixteen languages”, comments Susan Hayward (1996:385).

It seems that a wide range of Left-leaning and radical Leftist film lovers of Kerala in the 1970s-80s became ardent lovers of the East European political cinema, the Italian ‘neo-realism’, the French ‘new wave’ and the revolutionary Third World cinema, through the valuable exposure they had to these models of cinemas through screenings via foreign embassies and an amazingly wider network of film societies. It is this group that ‘imagined’ or visualised a ‘political/revolutionary’ cinema, custom-made for Kerala. Their main inspiration and ‘instigation’ were films like ‘Hour of the Furnace’ (Solanas and Getino), ‘Antonias das Mortes’ (Glauber Rocha), ‘Memories of Underdevelopment’ (Tomas Alea Gutierrez), ‘Jackal of Navrothoro’ (Miguel Littin) and films of other ‘firebrand’ directors. They wished that some of their own filmmakers, with the same Leftist/revolutionary bent of mind had made at least one such political film to celebrate the ‘70s as the time of liberation’ that they had dreamt of. “Young people were waiting for the spring!”, says K.A. Mohandas, looking back to his youthful days in the 1970s, when along with many others he too dreamt the ‘reddening’ of Kerala and whole of India (refer to P.A. Backer’s film, Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol (When the River Kabani turned Red, released in 1975) and left home and went in pursuit of a cultural revolution in the line of the Maoist ideology.

We can not judge those young people in Kerala who chose to live for their own illusions, mostly in reaction to the disillusionment they felt looking at the harsh realities in their surroundings and in India at large. They had felt that the so called ‘revolutionary’ political parties/movements in which they had kept their faith were not
ready or interested for a real revolution, if not for ‘revolutions per rule’. Naturally they
got charged by the ‘tri-continental’ revolution, urged by Franz Fanon, Ho Chi Minh
and others and the real incidents of revolutions led by guerrilla fighters in Vietnam or
by young people like them in Paris or in Prague or elsewhere. The whole world,
especially the Third World, was on fire in the 1960s-70s! It was very likely that the
young intellectuals in Kerala, well exposed to current realities around the world
through reading and peer group interactions and debates, let those whirlpool changes
across the world influence and ignite them.

3.2 Socio-Cultural context of Kerala of 1970s: Backdrop of ‘Cinema
of the 1970s’

The political turmoil of the 1960s-70s across the world had its repercussions in Kerala
and in India at large. The immediate jubilation in the post- independence period in
response to the Nehruvian romantic idealism (Rajadhyaksha 2000) and the ensuing
disillusionment at the failure of those modernist projects and plans in reaching the
masses resembled the situation in many third world nations, (colonies) in the post-war
context. Among those who attempt to reconstruct that period of time in Kerala in
retrospect, those who actually faced the ups and downs of the times and those who are
distant observers, some hold that 1970s witnessed a total rupture, whereas others
consider the period as a continuation of the preceding historical contexts and
circumstances.

K.P. Kumaran is someone who went through the pangs of the 1970s, who got involved
in the leftist trade union movement, and at the same time took keen interest in
literature and theatre. He collaborated with Adoor Gopalakrishnan in setting up the
Chitralekha Film Cooperative and the Film society network that Chitralekha initiated.
Along with Adoor he scripted *Swayamvaram*, the path breaker film of the ‘New
Malayalam Cinema’ movement of the 1970s. His own film *Athidhi* is considered as
one of the milestone films of the New Cinema movement and to this date he has been
active in making films, his very recent film being *Akasagopuram* released in 2009.
Kumaran’s views strike a balance.
We can say that till the 70s this ‘cultural identity’ movement launched at the time of renaissance went on without much interruption. The 70s was a very turbulent period. There was some reluctance to embrace the continuity, so there were very impulsive initiatives or experiments….on one side the modernity in Literature….modernism was in fact a continuity of the earlier movements, but on the exterior we had many imitations or borrowal from the West in the form of Existentialism etc (Kumaran, context A).

Rajiv Vijayaraghavan, the director of Maargam--one of the key film texts of this study--recollects his college days in the 1970s:

We were some idealists having great admiration for the anti-colonial struggles in Africa and elsewhere and ardent fans of the handsome, bearded youths who’d liberated Cuba from Spanish colonialism and American imperialism. We’re admirers of the peoples’ persistence in Vietnam and their ultimate ‘victory’. We’re not aware of the Paris students’ uprisings supported by writers, philosophers and film makers then, but that too might’ve been in the air (Rajiv Vijaraghavan, context A).

Two major trajectories seem to evolve from the accounts of the various stake holders of the period: a cultural awakening and a political awakening that set the tone for the different reactions and responses to the ‘turbulence’ that many refer to. The elements in both these trajectories could be seen as directly or indirectly contributing to the emergence of a politically and culturally different cinema that suited the spirit of the period.

3.2.1 ‘Cultural Awakening

Instead of assuming that there was a very special ‘political cinema’ movement in Kerala in the 1970s, we look into what the research participants associate with and what the literature supports in order to visualise the specific socio-cultural context and ambience of the time, which prepared the ground for an apparent ‘awakening’ in the fields of literature, theatre and cinema and others spheres of cultural politics. Taking cues from people’s accounts that club the various cinematic experiments of this period together, this study prefers to call these models and movements as ‘the cinema of the 70s’ for the sake of convenience though those different models of cinema should in fact be categorised under different categories. We locate the markings of ‘a special 70s’ in peoples’ accounts, as a period of political consciousness and artistic
experimentation and so this study intends to focus on the ‘political cinema of the 70s’, which had been grounded in the parallel movements in literature, theatre and so on.

3.2.1.1 Modernist movement in art and literature: Compared to the 1970s, the history of literature and art in Kerala around 1950s-70s may look apparently less eventful apart from the tensions between different schools of thoughts and different styles, such as ‘romanticism’ and ‘realism’. This is not to ignore the great debates over purogamana/sodeshya sahityam (progressive/purposive literature) promoted by the conventional Left and spearheaded by stalwarts like Thoppil Bhasi, O.N.V. Kurup, P.Bhaskaren and others and the kala kalakyu vendi (‘art for art’s sake’) stand, championed by M.P. Paul, C.J. Thomas, M. Govindan and others. The latter was not exactly proposing an ‘art for arts’ sake’, but was resisting the attempts of the conventional Left in Kerala to limit individual creative freedom and imposing a sort of formalism in the line of ‘Soviet realism’. The conventional Left had its cultural wings in different spheres of life for the promotion of their politics and the progressive arts, like ‘Pu. Ka. Sa’ (Purogamana Sahitya Sangam = Progressive Literary Association) and the KPAC (Kerala People’s Arts Club, patterned after the IPTA-Indian Peoples’ Theatre Association) theatre troupe that had toured throughout Kerala with their popular plays that attracted many to the Socialist mould of mind. Sara Joseph, writer and activist, who was a university lecturer of Malayalam literature in the 1970s, recalls the claim of the progressive writers about their writing as jeevithagandhi (smells of real life). She points out to another distinct signs of change by mid 1960s with the modernist experiments that took thinking and writing to totally different directions.

In Malayalam literature, with the advent of modernism, we see a clear departure from the period of ‘renaissance’. It put forward two visions or philosophies; one: a new way of seeing life and reality, two: new language and a new form (Sara Joseph, context A).

The advent of aadhunikatha (modernism) posed to bring about drastic changes in the contours of literature, visual arts, theatre and related spheres. It questioned tradition and orthodoxy in society and in the content and form of art. Apart from the ‘explosions’ in literature, significant contributions to formalist experiments were offered by the visual artists like KCS Panicker and others trained at Chozhamandalam
or elsewhere. Eventually, the modernists in Kerala readily embraced the Existentialist trends then rampant in Europe, and the associated ‘search for meaning’ and the nihilistic pursuit of ‘meaninglessness’, and this climate exerted strong influence on many filmmakers and viewers (especially the members of the film society movement) who pioneered the ‘New Malayalam Cinema’ movement of the 1970s. The awakening in visual arts and literature spread over to other spheres and in general gave the impression of a second ‘cultural awakening’.

Sara Joseph notes that modernism in Malayalam is seen as marked by the poem ‘Kurukshetram’ by Ayyappa Panicker. In prose, the celebration of modernism combined with existentialism is celebrated in the novels and short stories of O.V.Vijayan (his ‘Khasakinte Ithihasam’ a landmark), M.Mukundan, Kakkanadan and others. Rajiv Vijayaraghavan feels that most of the works that we happened to read as European modernist literature were weak transliterations of French existentialist philosophy. Basheer Mechary, writer and a gulf-returnee, was in college in the 1970s and he marks the general mood among the youth of that period as ‘drunk with existentialism, long hair, bell-bottom pants and drugs’. Rosy Thampy, writer and women activist, who teaches Malayalam literature since the 1990s could look at the ‘70s period’ only as a time of ‘irreverent search for self-realization’.

Balachandran Chullikkad, the most vibrant young poet in the 1970s could be said as the embodiment of the ‘angry young men’ of the 1970s, whose poetry and life style was a mixture of the existential and radical streams that represented the cultural as well as the political awakening of the period. Muhammed Arackal, film society activist, remembers his student days in late 1970s at U.C. College, Aluva, where Chullikkad also was a student, but most of the time he would be lying down on the stage, reciting his own or other poems out aloud. One could easily recognize in Chullikkad of the 1970s an image of the restless, anarchic youth of those days, but we should not ignore the very many complex layers beneath that restlessness and externally anarchic life style. Images from the film Aswathatmav by K.R.Mohanan are very much representative of the 1970s period. Mohanan shares his ideas on the characterization of the young, anarchic protagonist:
I portrayed Kunjunni as helpless, trapped by the tradition, rituals etc. There is a dialectics in it, between tradition and modernity. Kunjunny belonged to the priestly class. He had strong urge to move away from tradition, but at the same time the tradition had a pull on him. He was not a typical revolutionary, who totally denied tradition, but neither was he a conformist (Mohanan, context A, 1970s).

Behind the anarchic and irreverent attitudes of the 1970s, K.G. Sankara Pillai (KGS) identifies traces of the general characteristics of the leftist, progressive movements that tend to be critical of the past and its decay, which is usually hidden under the protective garb of orthodoxy, which upholds the vision, epistemology and logic of the past as sacrosanct traditions that no one could challenge or change.

Social is the reality, not supernatural, not super-social; so it is basically a common sense that the progressive movement of the 1970s tried to promote. It was close to the Marxian logic. This vision or ideology had quarrelled against the orthodox sensibility. It argued to do away with the stale models of art and writing, it quarrelled with stale and redundant forms and models and sensibilities (KGS, context A).

Investigating the external influences on many creative minds in Kerala in the 1970s apart from that of European modernist and existentialist art and literature, KGS acknowledges the inspirations they imbibed from the Third World avant-garde modernism, especially from the revolutionary literature, art and cinemas of Latin America of the 1960s-70s.

…. People started taking sides, writers and readers, for example opting for Pablo Neruda than T.S. Eliot or siding with Brecht in a choice between Brecht and Ezra pound. These category of people, though modernists, paved way to categories like avant-garde and resistance movements. We can call this stream ’Third Wold modernism’….so we can’t romanticise the ’1970s Kerala’ as something isolated; it was part of that era around the world, especially the Third World….For example the ’little magazine’ movement in Kerala: people felt that with the new sensibility in politics and aesthetic thought, the form and format of publication should change, language should change, visualisation (letter type, colour etc) should change….No need of long political/literary statement; with suggestive format, the reader/spectator could be led to think more on his own, which comes from the Brechtian thought or model (KGS, context A).

One would wonder if any other states in India except Kerala (if not possibly Bengal), would have had such a great number and variety of ’Little Magazines’ published in the 1970s-80s that carried translations of so many Latin American poems by Pablo
Neruda, Octavio Paz and others and had become part of peoples’ lore. Poet and critic K. Sachidanandanan was at the forefront of introducing the Third World literature to the Malayalee readers. Muhammed Arackal reminiscences his college days, saying Neruda, Octavio Paz and other Latin American poets and writers were familiar names in campuses those days. A verse from Neruda’s collection of poems that energized many young people those days was, `Varoo, ee theruvikalile raktam kaanu’ (Behold the blood on this street!)

I. Shanmuga Das, film critic, film society activist and retired professor of English literature, recollecting his student days as well as his interactions with different groups of students, prefers to look at the existential and the radical political trends prevalent in the socio-cultural fabric of Kerala as continuities and not as compartmental or oppositional, though there had been polarised positions regarding these two streams between the ideologues of the conventional left and the liberal thinkers and artists. We shall take this up again when we discuss the elements of the ‘political awakening’ in the 1970s. For the time being we move on to another major component that played a catalytic role in the cultural awakening in the 1970s.

3.2.1.2 Film society movement: Though there had been some scattered initiatives in a few towns in Kerala since late 1950s to form film clubs and screen films provided by foreign embassies it is interesting to note that the first major impetus to spread the film society movement across the state came from some stalwarts in the field of literature, like M. Govindan and C.N. Sreekantan Nair. Adoor Gopalakrishnan is the one who carried this mandate on his shoulders with the support of the ‘Chithralekha Film Cooperative’ that he, along with Kulathur Bhaskaran Nair and K.P. Kumaran had established after his graduation from Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune. The ‘All India Writers’ Conference’ in Aluva, January 1966, coordinated by M. Govindan, C.N. Sreekantan Nair and others entrusted Adoor with the task of conducting state wide film festivals, but Adoor and friends used that opportunity also to establish a state-wide network of film societies/ clubs. Adoor recalls those days:

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17 The Indo-Soviet cultural Society-ISCUS had its branches across the State and regular film screenings
Those days there were only nine districts in Kerala; and that modest plan in 1966 to have one film society each in each district soon blossomed into a full-fledged movement and by the end of 1970s there were some 110 Film societies/clubs in total across the State. Those days many writers and others (many of them were members of CPM party or fellow travellers) used to complain that the film society movement was showing excessively East European and Russian embassy films. Those days the East European cinema, predominantly in the Czechoslovakian, Polish and Hungarian cinemas, was witnessing a great revolution and naturally we got plenty of films from them (Adoor, context A).

Adoor also notes how they coordinated a campus film movement under the leadership of the Kerala university students’ union:

That period was very special, when literature had lots of influence on collegeyouth; literary camps were fashionable. We thought we could utilize the avenues of university union activities to promote a new film culture along with their enthusiasm for literature. The first venture in this line was the Film Camp at Neyyar dam at the beginning of 1970s under the chairmanship of Thalekunnal Basheer (Adoor, context A).

Cherian Joseph, who came to student politics in 1967 and presently is coordinating the `International Film Festival of Thrissur’ (IFFT) recollects those days when Suresh Kurup, as chairman of Kerala University union launched a Students’ film festival and a month long Film appreciation camp. The novel idea of the succeeding college union was to organize a Campus Touring film festival, from Ernakulum to Trivandrum that reached almost all colleges under the university. There were only two universities in Kerala then; Calicut University took inspiration from the Kerala University model and organized a Campus Touring festival in Northern Kerala from Thrissur to Kasergod.

Realizing the potential of the Film societies, the conventional Left started taking interest in the movement and helped networking between film societies across the state. Sunny Joseph, cinematographer found most of the film societies left-leaning, when he first entered the film movement, participating in and organizing film camps and circulating film prints among various film societies. K.R. Mohanan acknowledges the support of the film society movement in strengthening the New Malayalam Cinema movement. When his films came out, they were widely shown by various film societies. The movement got stronger all over Kerala by the end of the 1970s. By then
these two were going hand-in-hand, the Parallel/New cinema and the film society movement.

The picture in Northern Kerala was a little different. The ‘Kannada New Wave Cinema’ movement, promoted by the Socialists in Karnataka, played an important role in linking the film societies across the North, from Kasergode to Eranakulam. ‘Angamali Film society’ under the leadership of Jose Thettayil, had a pivotal coordination role in this process. The films that were in circulation in Northern to Central Kerala included Samskara and Vamsavruksha (Pattabi Rama Reddy), Kaadu (Girish Karnad), Chomana Dudi (B.V. Karanth) and Pallavi (Lankesh). The thrust of these films and the socialist movement in Karnataka that promoted them was the fight against caste system.

Film society members did everything for cinema, carrying heavy film cans and mobilising audiences’, remembers Muhammed Arackal, himself being instrumental in spearheading the ‘Koratty Film Society’ in the 70s. Films screened were politically charged, preference was for such films than ‘Ray films’ and the classicals’. He clearly can locate how films like Chommana Dudi, Mrigaya and Pavithran’s Yaro Oral got imprinted in his mind. ‘Hour of the Furnace’ from Argentina was a very strong influence on a majority of the film society audiences. There were discussions after the screening and also occasional interactions with the filmmakers of the ‘New Cinema’ movement. Raveendran (‘Chintha Ravi’), the director of Ore Thooval Pakshikal, used to attend the screenings of the Koratty Film society.

Cherian Joseph relates the second wave of Film society activism in Kerala to the special political climate and consciousness during the Emergency. When all political activities had been banned, the Film societies’ network was activated by the conventional left as an alternative cultural activity. They effectively used film societies as a cover for political activity, which was a strategy that was experimented during and after the Emergency. Such groups were functioning in disguise in Thrissur, Malappuram and elsewhere in Kerala. Emergency thus became the motivating factor behind launching the film movement as a political vehicle and also attention was given to political filmmaking. The government somehow failed to identify the political
activity under the disguise of film societies. Civic Chandran admits that the Film society movement was not directly connected to the `radical/Naxalite movement, but there were many Naxalite fellow travellers in the film movement, including filmmakers like Pavithran, P.A. Backer and others.

The `after 70s generation’ looks at the Film society movement and the New/Political Cinema with mixed feelings. Sruthy Namboodiri of the post-1990s group remembers incidents from her childhood days, when her father and some radical friends used to arrange film screenings and ensuing discussions (mostly secretive). Then and even later when she looks at some of those films she feels that New/ Political cinema appealed to a `different’, `intellectual’ audience, who read and thought differently. Though she has admiration for those films and film activists, she used to notice that those films did not appeal to ordinary audiences.

Anvar Ali, young poet who actively started attending film screenings at Trivandrum in the mid-1980s has a different note to add to the usual story. `Films usually came from the USSR and the East European countries, but once could assume that many films from East Europe were made under controlled circumstances. These included films of Zoltan Fabri, Andrzej Wajda, Istvan Szabo, Martha Meszaros and others that discussed politics through allegories. Such films had already started to voice the value of individual freedom in the context of Stanlisnism imposed by USSR in their countries. Many of these films had already foretold the degeneration of the Soviet system, but through suggestions, symbols and allegories.

3.2.1.3 Film Institute (FTII) graduates and a New Film language: Talking about the elements that helped imagining and experimenting with a `New Malayalam Cinema’ movement, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, one of its pioneers, comments:

1950s-60s was a period in world cinema, with the ‘New Wave’, that saw many changes and influences on different national cinemas. So the ‘new cinema’ in Malayalam in the 70s was not just something new only in Kerala, but was everywhere. This change was evident in the films of those studied cinema at FTII and elsewhere. There were also others who didn’t systematically study cinema but were very active in the New Cinema movement (Adoor, context A).
Yves Thoraval (2000) calls Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) the ‘capital of Cinema Studies’. FTII, set up in Pune in 1961 in the former studios of the legendary Prabhat Company and devoted to training future filmmakers attracted the best young talent in all spheres of filmmaking from the country and as well as from the rest of Asia. Professionals graduating from FTII were looking for work and opportunities and the ‘New Cinema’ was in many ways their handiwork—director, cinematographers, editors, sound engineers—from all over the country who had studied at FTII. Apart from the practical facilities to study professional filmmaking, perhaps another rich resource centre that moulded the budding filmmakers at FTII was the enormous collection of film prints and reference material on world cinema at the National Film Archives of India (NFAI) established in 1964 under the aegis of P.K. Nair. Many FTII graduates would talk about skipping classes and gaining knowledge under the legendary ‘Wisdom Tree’ in the campus, not only at the time of the legendary filmmaker and teacher Ritwik Ghatak, but also in very recent times. But an `inevitable guru’ that all FTII students would not fail to acknowledge is the film screenings at the MT (Main Theatre) and the Film archives (National Film Archives of India, NFAI) Theatre (in recent years). Mr. P.K. Nair, who painstakingly curated a great deal of films in the collection of the Archives, thus became another legendary figure in the formation of the future filmmakers at FTII.

K.R.Mohanan brings down the major factors that were instrumental in the evolution of a ‘New Cinema Movement’ in Kerala into three: the Film society movement, the entry of a group of filmmakers trained at FTII or Adayar (Madras) and the exposure through the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) launched in1952. About the training at FTII and its significance he says:

One factor was our training at FTII and acquaintance with world cinema. Parallel cinema projects resulted from a team work, the director and almost all technicians of a film project were people trained at FTII. Adoor (direction), Devadas (sound), K.G.George (direction), myself (direction), Ramachandra Babu (camera), Madhu Ambatt (camera), Shaji. N. Karun (camera), Krishnaunni (sound), G.S.Panicker (direction) and others (Mohanan, context A, 1970s).
Ramachandra Babu, specialised Cinematography at FTII (1968-71) still relishes the first independent camera project he was assigned even while he was a student; the rare opportunity of cranking camera for the Malayalam feature film *Vidyarthikale Ithile Ithile*. There had been doubts and loose talk among the conventional professionals of Malayalam film industry operated from ‘Kodambakam’, Madras, in those days: ‘do these FTII people have practical knowledge?’ That film had almost a full FTII crew: John Abraham as director, Azad with the screenplay, Ramachandra Babu at camera, Devadas as sound engineer and Ravi as editor. They revolutionised film shooting practices; brought the shoot to on-location from the erstwhile practice of studio floor shooting, used bounce lighting instead of direct spot lighting\(^\text{18}\), used less make up. In essence, they could give the film a more realistic look and feel. Then the conventional technicians followed suit. This could be seen as the effective employment of the art and technique of filmmaking they had learned at FTII into the shaping of a new idiom of filmmaking in Malayalam, focusing on the character, the story and the set up instead of projecting the hero, the heroine and others by creating a glamorous feel.

K.P. Kumaran feels that sometime we only talk about FTII and forget the contribution of some finest talents from the Adayar film institute (Madras), like Mankada Ravi Varma, who played a decisive role as catalyst in the radical change in Malayalam cinema and its form. Varma once said, ‘we have let the ball rolling; now it will keep going’. *Aval* of Aziz was the first feature film by a FTII graduate director in Malayalam and it was shot by Ravi Varma, who also filmed the forerunners of the New Cinema movement, *Swayamvaram* (Adoor) *Uttarayanam* (Aravindan) and many later films of Adoor and other directors.

Though the training at FTII is given its due credit by critics and film activists for the daring freshness and exposure it brought in to Malayalam cinema, the same ‘FTII gang’ is also taking some blame for their ‘Eurocentric’ attitudes and other

\(^{18}\) Ramachandra Babu recollects the incident of not using direct spotlights in scenes where the then heroine Jayabharathi was acting. She felt the ‘new’ lighting method of the FTIIans did not throw enough light on her face and it might affect her glamorous looks. But she and the producer and everyone was pleased when the rushes were screened. Senior cameramen in the industry noted this new style and eventually it became the standard.
'hangovers'. Bina Paul, who graduated from FTII in the early 1980s, does an honest introspection:

In our times the FTII life was sort of cut off from the outer world. We were very much involved with the European cinema, but we hadn’t seen much of African cinema, hardly any Latin American Cinema….FTII those days was an extension of the French/European cinema and its experiments. Incidentally, many of the directors who were behind the New Cinema in Malayalam were not from the FTII, they were the people who stayed behind and had seen the reality of Kerala and its people and also things elsewhere. These directors (T.V. Chandran, K.P. Kumaren and others), brought out films very different in content and concern, especially women politics, unemployment, and youth aspirations (Bina Paul, context B).

K.P. Kumaran, whose cinematic contribution and rootedness in the concrete socio-political context that Bina Paul appreciates, also shares some disappointments with the FTII team and their contribution to cinema.

Not only that the movement didn’t stand together but many in the movement paved way to disunity and thus eventual fading out of the movement. There was no solidarity even among the FTII graduates. Many of those FTII people didn’t have a background of literature and other arts (Kumaran, context A).

3.2.1.4 A Collective dream: Some critics of the 'Cinema of the 70s' tend to focus their analysis on certain elements singled out of the films that could be loosely classified as 'New/Parallel Cinema’ or 'Political Cinema’, instead of locating those films and those film movements in the ‘collective conscience’ of that period that we call ‘the 1970s’, which is a labyrinth of very many different socio-cultural and political contexts, connotations and ambiences. It may not be fair to approach any component of the cultural awakening that we have discussed so far in isolation; say to pin point or project the role of the FTII graduates as those who ‘masterminded’ the New Cinema movement does not do justice to history.

Many participants in this research, especially people who lived the ‘1970s’ period, emphasise the fact that they all felt only as sharing a ‘collective dream’, as part of a ‘collective/communion’, which did not have very clear definitions and demarcations in spite of the sense of ‘working for an imminent goal’ that many in this ‘70s collective’ felt being part of. The sense of sharing a collective dream prompted people to come together, from all streams of life, poets, writers, painters, theatre personalities,
filmmakers, film society activists, political activists and even ordinary people who were either ‘friends’ or ‘rasikas’ who simply enjoyed artistic and socio-cultural bonding. The ‘cultural awakening’ of the 1970s that many talk about had a solid ground in this collective dream and it was on this solid foundation that many creative works whether in theatre, in cinema and even in literature (the ‘Little Magazine’ movement would suffice for an example) took shape, refined, discussed, debated and made available for different forms of distribution/circulation.

K.P Kumaran describes how ‘Chitralekha film cooperative and film society movement became a space for ‘new cinema’, where artists of all hues without any reservation came together and worked together on a common dream.

A big group of artists like Devan, Namboodiri, CN. Sreekantan Nair was involved in the ground work/publicity for Swayamvaram. Aravindan was there.....he was involved at the time of the shoot of ‘Kamuki’ (an earlier film scripted by C.N). We had networks or friendships at Kottayam and in places where Chitralekha had formed film societies....the group of people connected to Aravindan...to John Abraham, all will come to Chitralekha; a company of friends of Chandran and Pavithran would join in Madras.....these links were not part of a conscious movement. There weren’t any discussions or articulations about a common ‘movement’. It was there (Kumaran, context A).

K.G. Jayan, cinematographer and media teacher, who joined Shaji N. Karun as assistant cameraman after graduating from FTII talks about the ‘social gatherings’ in 1970s-80s and film production process as a ‘social gathering’.

When Aravindan was alive, every evening there would be a ‘get-together’ in Trivandrum....In Calicut similar get-togethers used to be coordinated by Theekodiyan and Pattathuvila Karunakaran...Aravindan always enjoyed that ‘communion’ during the filmmaking process. There will be always a big group of ‘friends’ in all his projects. When shooting Oridathu he called me and asked, ‘why are you not coming?’ Then I went with an old radio to use it there as a property. I went there under the pretext of giving the radio, but then I didn’t return till the full shoot was over .... In the evenings during the shoot there would be singing (Nedumudi Venu, Shivaji, artist Namboodiri and all) and all types of ‘mela’, which was very unique to Aravindan’s film Unit (Jayan, context A).

C. F. George master who used to a friend and host of many filmmakers of the 1970s’ film movement, writers and artists, shares the memories of that period:
Discussions and enjoyable evenings were the spirit of our get-togethers. The group consisted of K.R. Mohanan, Pavithran, P.T. Kunjumuhammed, Raveendran, P. A. Backer, M. P. Narayana Pillai, Artist Devan, C.V. Sreeraman, V.K.Sreeraman and others (George master, Context A).

He also mentions the meetings at Kalapeedom, Ernakulam:

C.N.Karunakaran, Devan, Kanayi Kunjiraman, C.N Sreekantan Nair, Kaladharan (very young), ACK Raja, T.R. Ramachandran and others used to gather. Many of them were connected to experimental theatre and parallel cinema...there was an inner stream that connected all these. I was an 'outsider', I was not a creative artist, but in all their creative ventures I was involved in the 'final creative resolution'. We used to discuss from the idea level to script, shooting etc.

It seems that though the conventional leftist party leaders and cadres did not easily mingle with the members of the radical left for ideological and practical reasons, the leftist fellow travellers connected with people on both sides; many of them, especially the filmmakers of New Cinema and other artists. Perhaps the way the artistic process was conceived those days necessitated this collaboration across boundaries, as hinted in the account of K.R.Mohanan.

After I graduated from FTII and did an internship in Madras, I had to sit idle for some time....it was in this period that my friendship in the circle of artists broadened and deepened, Pavithran, P.T. Kunjumuhammed, Georgemaster, Lenin Rajendran and others....most of us were left leaning; a few of us like me were very close to the Leftists. Many others, though were deemed as ‘fellow travellers’, actually they were more close the radical cultural movements of the Naxalites....there were ripples of friendships, relating to one another on different issues, sharing ideas etc (Mohanan, context A).

Bina Paul’s understanding of this conscious or unconscious networking of filmmakers, critics and film society members summarises the spirit of this collective dream in Kerala in the 1970s. She finds it as a reflection of the political climate across the world in those days, especially in The Third World. Bina feels disappointed that this ‘collective dream’ did not grow into a full-fledged film movement in Kerala as they all had hoped for, after initial spirited responses to ventures like the ‘Odessa People’s Filmmaking project. It would have become a Movement and would still be alive, she holds, if there were some kind of formalisation of production, exhibition and distribution network and some solid Government support to it.
3.2.2 Political Awakening in the 1970s

Cultural and political awakening were nothing new to Kerala; this southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula had been seasoned through renewal and reformation movements during the renaissance spearheaded by Sree Narayana Guru and other political and cultural leaders, many uprisings and resistance movements, the nationalist movement for independence, the communist uprising that combined political and cultural protest strategies and campaigns. But the political awakening in Kerala in the 1960s-70s was different in that it was born out of shattered dreams, from disillusionment and disenchantment with broken promises than any inspired call for renewal and reformation. As we already discussed this political uprising in Kerala that reached its zenith in the 1970s had drawn inspiration from and had been modelled after the resistance movements across the world and more from the ‘tumultuous Third World of the 1960s’.

Those who encountered the challenges of the 1960s-70s period and even tried to become part of the solution locate the specific immediate context of the unrest and uprising in the disillusionment after the failure of the Nehruvian romantic socialist projects and its aftermath and also in the youth disenchantment with the ‘reformist’ and ‘conformist’ model politics of the conventional left. Karunakaran in the preface to his interview with K.Venu locates a distinct shift in the 1970s from ‘trade union activism’ to ‘political activism’ taken up by the radical or ‘new’ left (Venu 2010).

K.A. Mohandas, a leftist thinker and writer, who had slowly moved over to the radical politics in the 1970s recollects the specific socio-political context of the 1970s. He says, ‘Once the post-independence jubilation was over, the Nehruvian modernist dreams and development plans remained mostly unrealised, with two wars, political debacles (the split in the congress party etc) and the transition of leadership to weak successors including his daughter Indira Gandhi who resembled a despot than a leader of world’s largest democracy’. Though Nehru, with his socialist model of development patterned after the Russian soviet model of five year plans and so on, was considered as the ‘architect of modern India’, somehow his designs did not fit to the needs of predominantly agrarian populations of India based in villages. Neither did
the ideal India he had ‘discovered and dreamt about’ fulfil the hopes of urban India especially its under-educated and unemployed youth. Mohandas comments on the upheavals and the sense of desperation that followed the term of Nehru and aggravated under the rule of Indira Gandhi, especially at the beginning of the 70s as an immediate aftermath of the Indo-Pak war for the liberation of Bangladesh.

After the face loss in 1967-69, Congress had a face-lift with Indira Gandhi’s intervention in the Bangladesh war….a glitter of the successful war. But the economy went down…there were food riots across the country. For the first time Malayalees began to eat wheat….also there was free distribution of rice and tapioca by civil supplies department and by charitable organizations ….one could witness long lines throughout. Unemployment was so rampant in Kerala and elsewhere (Mohandas, context A).

‘Radicalism was everywhere’, comments Civic Chandran looking back to the 1970s. Even the young people in the congress party talked very radical politics those days, they say. No wonder why the members of the conventional Leftist parties and the youth appeared as ‘angry young men’ that Amitab Bachchan epitomised on the silver screen. But ‘there was another section of the society, young and old, highly educated and employed and unemployed’ says K.G.Sankara Pillai, ‘who sensed a decay in the system, no matter whether it was a Communist or Congress government that ruled.’ So they wanted to organize the masses and strike at the root of the oppressive and corrupt system and bring about a structural change.

One could read the signs of the general disillusionment after the shattering of the Nehruvian dreams in many of the ‘New/Parallel/Art’ cinemas of India that took deep roots in Bengal, Kerala, Karnataka and elsewhere. Films like Ardh Satya (Govind Nihalani) Akrosh (Nihalani), Calcutta-71 (Mrinal Sen) and Uttarayanam (Aravindan) are some typical examples. But the so called ‘political cinema’ that a group of filmmakers imagined and attempted to materialise in Kerala, Bengal and other centres of filmmaking, had more deep-going roots; they were supposedly more ‘radical’ in the content, if not in form. Seeking to identify the elements of the political awakening in Kerala in the 1970s, may take us more to that radical line of politics, which was only an intense expression of the general sense of unrest, angst and anger that we find reflected in a god number of films of that period, of all streams of cinema.
3.2.2.1 Youth disillusioned and disenchanted: 'In the 70s, everything was on fire’, says C.F. George master; and his remark has a grain of truth when we examine the socio-economic conditions of Kerala society in the 1970s. Leenus. L.K. a graduate from FTII (1993) identifies the high contrasts and contradictions existed in Kerala society of the 1970s as the cause of provocation for many young people to hit the streets in protest and also to fall in to despair if their protests did not find any immediate results.

There were lots of disparities those days to be questioned and confronted. The class contradiction was so stark that situation was ripe for a revolution. There was visible contrast of social inequality those days; so when the comrades pointed out these disparities as injustice, people readily listened to them, because they were talking about the concrete reality people were experiencing. We see this high contrast reflected in Swayamvaram, Uttarayanam and a few other films of the 1970s (Leenus. L.K, context B).

Muraleedharan identifies the unrest and anger over the rampant unemployment, poverty and starvation as the collective unconscious of Kerala in the 1970s. But such disillusionment and loss of faith in all systems were not anything particular to Kerala, but was widespread in India those days and had been addressed mostly by the urban intellectuals across the country. Just two films from Bengal, ‘Calcutta 71’ and ‘Interview’ directed by Mrinal Sen would reveal the similarities with the situations portrayed in Swayamvaram and Uttarayanam, observes Muraleedharan.

Sanakrapillai, Mohandas and a few other participants expressed their disillusionment with the conventional Left towards early 1970s, which they recall as a common sentiment shared by a good number of young intellectuals and ordinary people. Those who had placed their faith in the conventional Left for answers and solutions got further disappointed by the distractions in the party resulting from the manoeuvring and manipulations aimed at gains in the parliamentary politics. The end result of the ongoing internal divisions and conflicts was the split of the Communist Party of India in 1964, into the ‘Left’ Communist Part of India-Marxist (CPM) and the ‘Right’ Communist Party of India (CPI). Many young people, who wanted the party to seek solutions for the immediate issues of people in front of them got disenchanted with the conventional Left politics and its ‘stale’ revolutionary ideologies as they saw them.
Those high ideals had earlier given them hopes of working for a ‘better tomorrow’. Naturally more radical minded people looked around, to similar contexts in other parts of the world in hope of answers and inspiration.

In the Preface to a series of conversations with K.Venu (who commanded much respect among the Kerala youth in the 1970s-80s), Karunakaran presents a chronology of some important episodes in the 1960s-70s period that apparently ignited the Indian minds and inspired them to redraw their dreams. Two milestone events were in the same year, 1968: the capturing of the American embassy in Saigon by the Vietnamese guerrilla fighters in February 1968 and the students uprising at the Nanterre University, France challenging the government under President De Gaulle in March 1968. The adventurous spirit behind both incidents was hitherto unheard of and unimaginable. Very soon this spirit of revolt and resistance with the sheer force of people’s will power spread like wild fire across the world (Venu 2010).

The inspiration from these new models of revolution got translated into the Indian soil mainly as a clear diversion from the conventional leftist party line and embracing the Marxist Leninist line that Charu Majumdar had proposed in 1967 in the ‘Naxalbari’ village of West Bengal, declaring armed revolution as the solution to liberate the oppressed masses. This line was pursuing the Maoist ideology of villages encircling the cities and taking over power and lead to a decentralised or village centered model of development. Thus the hopes of a new beginning aiming at structural changes in the society to end oppression and bring about justice were enkindled by the new ‘radical left’ movement, which as K. G. Sankarappillai holds, began to be called as the ‘New Left’ in the 1970s.

From the day of division of the Communist Party of India in to the ‘Right’ and ‘Left’ factions, eventually even the so called ‘left’ moved more towards ‘right’, with feudalist, capitalist interests….The ‘left’ which should have been with the proletariat, the oppressed, was now with the upper class elite, protecting their interests….thus the Leftist was in reality a ‘rightist’ party. So a movement that opposed the traditional Left should be called the ‘New Left’. We can say the representation/identity of the 1970s is the sensibility/ideology of a new Left (KGS, context A)
KGS considers the ‘total liberation’ proposed by Jaya Prakash Narayan in the 1970s known as the ‘JP Movement’ coming close to the ideals enshrined in the Maoist vision espoused by the Naxalites. But JP was calling for a Socialist model of revolution in order to fight against corruption and abuse of power and denial of freedom of expression that became rampant during the ‘triumphant’ rule of Indira Gandhi after the ‘glorious’ victory in the Bangladesh war. There were many takers for the JP movement, those who believed in non-violent means for social change and also others who had imagined that ‘the use of weapons may show us a way’ like the character of ‘Mash’ in Uttarayanam (G.Aravindan).

Parallel to these ‘revolutionary dreams’ fostered by the radicals, the Left-Communists or Marxists, supposedly more ‘firebrands’ compared to their right counterpart, had been continuing with their own campaigns for revolution, but ‘revolution as per rule or as per the book’. As part of the compromises and political adjustment the party was forced to make in view of successful involvement in parliamentary politics, they could not shape their ideology so as to effectively address the structural injustice in the system nor could they challenge the failure of the Congress government at the centre in tackling the concrete problems facing the country, like unemployment, poverty and starvation. They continued to raise worn out slogans and offer stock solutions. ‘More disturbing was the degeneration that had crept into their intelligentsia’, says P. Baburaj, coming from an ardent CPI family. ‘In the 1950s and 1960s they had ignited the youth and poor masses as well with their progressive and revolutionary songs, poetry, plays and so on.’ The pull of the mainstream that allures individuals might be one major reason.

Unfortunately this ‘absorption into main stream’ didn’t stop with just political leaders, but got spread to the ‘fire brand’ cultural leaders, poets and writers like ONV Kurup19, P. Bhaskaran and others, who as part of promoting ideology and the ‘revolutionary’ interests of the party got absorbed into the mainstream cultural politics and mainstream ‘cinema of Kodambakam’. (Baburaj, context B, 1970s-90s).

19 A very popular song penned by ONV. Kurupu ‘Nammal koyyum vayalellam nammudetahkum painkiliyen’ (all that paddy fields that we sow and reap will be ours, o my beloved!) had charged the peasants in the 1950s-60s and attracted them en masse to the Communist party. Recently during the ‘Chengara agitation’ of Dalits and landless people in 2008-09, many criticized the CPM stand against the agitators referring to the old song with a counter, ‘who will reap what we sow, oh my beloved?’.
Devarajan, Theatre/Film director and a professed Hindu rightwing activist, shares his experience of the authoritarian attitudes and standardization that the Marxists in Kerala and their student wing, Student Federation of India (SFI) had been trying to impose. He argues that they fail to acknowledge individual creativity and diversity.

Those days leftism was celebrated and glorified in art, poetry, cinema everywhere. But I always have felt that the left celebration was not going to stay; was not going to be permanent. The most dangerous thing Marxism did was to destroy diversity; they didn’t allow any other party to grow in campuses (Devarajan, context B).

Basheer Mechary notes that many young people in the 1970s, including himself, who wanted to question and protest against the social situation tended to join the Leftist fold out of a fascination for the left. A good number of them soon realised that they were in the wrong place, where they had landed up as part of the ‘catch them young’ strategy of the Leftists. Many such young people later joined the radical line.

3.2.2.2 The Naxalite Movement: Many people in Kerala often repeat one common observation about life in their state; a few of my research participants also share the same view. They say that Kerala, the tiny state at the southern tip of India, has not encountered any severe natural catastrophe that shook the whole region or faced any war or bloodshed or famine or any massive tragedies that changed the course of this otherwise calm and quite region. But people do associate two rather overlapping phenomena located in the 1970s with a rupture in the collective conscience of the Kerala society. They are the Naxalite Movement and the Internal Emergency declared all over India in 1975. These two historic milestones have influenced the imagination of many young people in the 1970s-80s period. That period somehow continues to exert some kind of ‘nostalgic longing’ among certain sections of the society for a bygone ‘ideal epoch’ in Kerala cultural and political history. Interestingly if at all there has been a ‘political cinema movement’ in Kerala and if such ‘political films’ still continue to be made in Malayalam, the political leit motif of such works of arts has its foundation in the Naxalite movement, the Emergency and its aftermath. And at times people refer to a ‘Naxalite Cinema’ model in Kerala, a genre that films like Gulmohar, Thalappavu and others revisit even in the 2000s.
The Naxalite movement in Kerala, which some participants insist to be identified as two distinct waves (the first wave of the 1967-70s and the second wave in the post-Emergency period), was practically short-lived. But the impact of the movement is long standing; that is what one observes and also gathers from those brave hearts that went through its ordeal at some point of their life. K.A. Mohandas does not hesitate to assert this:

Naxalite movement shined those days like it was ‘The answer’ that the young, radical minds were seeking. It had the spark of a tragedy in offing… In comparison to the ‘Punnapra Vayalar’ struggle, the Naxalite movement was something very small. But the impact of the movement in Kerala was unimaginable. Beyond its quantitative impact, the Naxalite movement presented ideological possibilities, such as ‘revisionism can be confronted politically’. That’s why CPM branded the Naxalites as ‘our enemy’ than the Congress or other parties (Mohandas, context A).

Time was ripe for confronting the centrist model of governance, be it the Nehruvian socialism or the Soviet socialism and 1960s-70s became a period where alternative models were sought. K.P.Kumaran recollects the spirit of that period when he was first involved in trade union activism and agitations against unemployment, a scenario that he incorporated in the script work for *Swayamavaram*. The word was standing in need of change:

The Third World was ready to embrace the ‘cultural revolution’ of Mao, who said ‘in fifteen years, the whole world will be engulfed in revolution’. We can also look at the ‘Naxalite or Maoist movement in India as the anti-thesis of the Nehruvian model of ‘romantic idealism (Kumaran, context A).

Rajiv Vijayaraghavan finds in the Naxalite movement the coming of age of an experiment at a decentralised model ideology. He cites the Brechtian poem being quoted in the ‘revolutionary’ circles in profusion those days: *Ningal nagarangale valayuka* (You encircle the cities). He believes, that the Naxalites quarrelled against the Nehruvian urban-centred model and also against the weakness of the conventional Left in working for the poor masses. In Venukumara Menon, the protagonist of his film *Maargam*, Rajiv identifies that group of individuals who, frustrated with the parliamentary tactics of the conventional Left, split away from the party and hoped for an armed revolution.
M.P. Parameswaran, who in the 1990s became unpopular among the CPM party circles by allegedly proposing a *Nalam Loka Siddhantham* (Fourth World theory)\(^{20}\) remembers the bravery of angry young men in the Communist party, like K. Venu, who once challenged EMS to hand over leadership to young people. And, EMS’ response was: ‘you need to win it over’. Despondency on the part of the young people soon led them to move away and formulate another model, a ‘new Left’.

Civic Chandran, writer and activist, who had been active in the Naxalite movement since the 1970s till the mid-1980s, talks about the ‘urgency of revolution’ they had felt in those days, the urge to change the whole exploitative system and to overthrow the government.

There was an urgency in that period…‘the red army has arrived marching, revolution is around the corner!’. This urgency was not something that the middle class intellectual (from ‘decent’ families) of Kerala was prepared to embrace easily….one good thing the film, *Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol* (when the river Kabni turned red) did was that it prepared young people for the ‘sacrifice’ the movement demanded; it was not easy for anyone to jump into the fray….I am also included, my destiny changed drastically (Civic Chandran, context A).

Civic Chandran gives an account of the evolution of the Naxalite movement in different phases. The first wave of the Naxalite movement surfaced in 1967 during the second ministry of EMS Namboodiripad and it only prolonged till the end of the Emergency in 1977. The first contingent of radicals was a very small group, all members of the Kunnikkal Narayanan family, including Narayanan’s wife Mandakini, daughter Ajitha, Philip M. Prasad, the legendary comrade Varghese (who was killed by police but was portrayed as ‘killed in an encounter’) and a few others. Their main area of activity was Wayanad and other parts of Northern Kerala. Compared to the conventional left, the Naxalites did not focus on the size of the organization, membership and so on. For them the priority was the spirit of the movement. Many others wanted to join the movement, but an increase in number made the core group suspicious of some conspiracies by the ‘imperialist forces’. Many intellectuals with a

\(^{20}\) Parameswareden clarifies that it was some party officials who tried to nick name his initiative as ‘*nalam loka vadam/siddhantham*’ and he never labelled it so.
socialist bend of mind and free thinking, who had been in fact moulded after the Nehruvian dreams found some hope in the ‘New Left’ and travelled with the Naxalite movement, a trend that P. Baburaj identifies as the ‘romantic phase’ of the Naxalite movement. Most ‘Naxalite’ films are in some way or other linked to this first phase of Naxalite movement in Kerala.

Deedi Damodaran, who scripted the film Gulmohar, based on the Naxalite movement in the 1980s, insists that Naxalite movement in Kerala in the 1970s and in the 1980s should be seen as two distinct movements. 1970s’ movement was ‘out of sight’ (in hiding), whereas the 1980s’ movement, right in the midst of people, was brought into college campuses and public places, where people ‘owned’ it up made it their own. Deedi feels that the set of films made as ‘Naxalite cinema’ and newer ones that hit the screen (Thalappavu for example), repeatedly go back to just one theme, ‘the assassination of Varghese’. The period of Emergency has not yet been properly addressed in our films. Even the films that portray the ‘Varghese episode’ is ‘escapist’ too for they are not bold enough to address the truth and say it openly on the screen. Instead of naming the minister involved in the assassination of Varghese, those films only put the blame on the police officers.

‘Naxalism was not a centralised movement; it sprouted out from different directions; the movement had divisions and inner contradictions’ says Premchand, who got involved with the second wave of Naxalism right after the Emergency. P. Baburaj, who hails from a conventional leftist family, calls our attention to the fact that there was a kind of bonding among many leftist and Naxalite activists on an individual level, though the public perception is on the contrary.

In Bengal and Kerala, the official stand of the government led by the conventional left was to deal harshly with the radicals. But in practice, many conventional left members empathised with the radical movement, were even re-charged by their commitment, and it was quite natural that when many radicals went in hiding many conventional left activists including P. Govinda Pillai (a prominent Leftist ideologue) sheltered them in their houses….That way one could observe a continuity and a rupture between the conventional left and the radical left (Baburaj, context B)
There had been difference of opinion and still there is, regarding the path of violence adopted by the Naxalites, especially about their 'theory of annihilation'. Deedi Damodaran talks about how at least during the first wave of Naxalism the comrades were taking recourse to violence almost like a ritual ('Maoist ritual'), mandated by the ideology. Robin, activist and the editor of the *Jagruthayude Keraleeyam* magazine, was a Naxalite fellow traveller for a while. Now he is a staunch promoter of non-violent agitation, but he condones the violence of the Naxalites in most cases looking at the contexts:

In the 70s and after, Bengal and Kerala had the highest number of young radicals, who were ready to sacrifice their lives. If we count it might be just a thousand; if we count those who went to jail it might be just three hundred, but the number of those who subscribed to the radical politics was much bigger. Though many people in Kerala and elsewhere connect Naxalism to senseless bloodshed, I look at them differently. None of them were blood-thirsting killers; they first of all were ready to die, only then they were ready to kill others whom they found as violators of justice (Robin, context B).

3.2.2.3 Emergency and thereafter: Very recently, on March 2, 2011, there was a get-together of some ex-Naxalites and sympathisers at a place called 'Kakkayam' in Kozhikode district in Kerala. People may forget the exact date and year of very important incidents in history. People in Kerala, especially the upcoming generations may not remember the date and year of the declaration of internal Emergency in India by the then prime minister Indira Gandhi, but a name like 'Kakkayam' is not easily forgotten. Only some of the research participants of this study who come under the 'category A, 1970s' have very personal memories about the police camp at Kakkayam. But all participants in 'Context A' and 'Context B would recall the name Kakkayam for the police brutalities at 'Kakkayam camp where many Naxalites and others were tortured who had been detained there as part of the Emergency and its special MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act).

Even if people in Kerala may forget the names of very significant personalities who faced torture at Kakkayam, they will not easily forget a young man's name; he is 'Rajan', the engineering student at Regional Engineering College (REC), Kozhikode, who was brutally tortured (and supposedly murdered) at the Kakkayam camp. His whereabouts have never been revealed to the public, till date. At least two films came
out based on Rajan’s story: *Piravi* by Shaji N.Karun that assumed the status of a classic in Malayalam film history and the *Rajan Paranaja Katha*, a film from the mainstream and screened successfully across Kerala.

June 26, 1975 was that ‘black day’, as many would want to consider it, when the Internal Emergency was declared that led to the torture of Rajan, many Naxalites, many writers and free thinkers and members of the opposition parties, especially those who had any leaning towards the JP Movement. What saddened even those did not go to jail or to police torture camp was the attack on democracy, human dignity and the denial of freedom of expression in the name of ‘internal security’ of the nation. K.A. Mohandas recollects those days, when even a public protest against Emergency became impossible or was brutally silenced. Some of them tried to do campaign across the state wearing black badges, but they were arrested and removed or put behind bars. There was night curfew in many centres in Kerala and people were afraid to come out in public and move around freely. ‘It was test of democracy’, says Mohandas.

Interestingly one public activity that was not stopped by police was movies. Baburaj, who was a degree student at University College Trivandrum remembers:

> Perhaps the only political activity during Emergency was watching ‘Kabani Nadi’ at Central Theatre. It was a truncated version, cut down to one hour. Police at the level of IG etc, will come during screening, and order the projectionist to cut off certain ‘objectionable’ scenes…this was a usual scene (Baburaj, context B)

Civic Chandran has reservations about the ‘politics’ of *Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol*, but he admits that that film was widely screened during Emergency in different parts of the State. Since the censors had not banned the film it was not removed from the theatres, but was subjected to on-the-spot censoring by the police. This was a unique case where the screening of a film acted as a pretext for people belonging to the same political thinking to come together and to use such informal meetings to further the growth of the movement when it was at the lowest ebb, with most of the leaders being behind the bars or in hiding.

Muhammed Koratty was a college student during the Emergency and was a member of SFI, the Leftist student union, which had been banned. But they managed to
function under the disguise of some other banner. He remembers that many leaders of the Leftist organizations had to go into hiding during the Emergency. Devarajan, who was an activist of the Akhila Bharathiya Vidyarthi Parishat (ABVP), the student wing of the Jan Sangh, narrates his protest during the Emergency:

I felt that Emergency denied our freedom...when they banned organisations, ABVP was also included. I marched in Thrissur town publicly challenging the ban; and I was arrested...I was in jail for two months....it was the Emergency that convinced us who were the real revolutionaries and what was real revolution. Those who had glorified revolution, many poets, members of left parties and all got scared of Emergency and they went in hiding....but the true fighters for freedom, in the spirit of our ancestors, fought against the Emergency and went to jails (Devarajan, context B).

Many radicals who were in jails or in the police camps remember the curious coming together of the Hindu right activists and the Naxalites during Emergency. Rajiv Vijayaragavan who was a Naxalite sympathiser has great respect to those who braved death and torture during Emergency though he said he did not completely agree with their political positions.

I got in to custody several times due to the verbal opposition to such a regime in Indian democracy. But never had to undergo torture... I’ve to bow to my contemporaries who’d risked their physical well beings for their beliefs—whether they’re extreme leftists like ‘Naxalites’ or extreme rightists, who later found their abode in BJP (Rajiv Vijayaraghavan, context A).

A few participants who look back to their radical past and the ordeals they went through confess that the Emergency did shatter their illusions of an imminent revolution and liberation of the oppressed masses. K. A. Mohandas admits that the 1970s did not turn up as a ‘time of liberation’ as they had dreamt of.

In fact history went overhead; it was such a rude awakening. It overpowered our romantic ideas, beliefs and expectations from history; the blow from the government was so strong and unexpected. Comrades who had shown unusual courage outside were shattered by the brutal experience inside jail. They came out of jail as different persons, whereas people who were not ‘heroes’ and were just ordinary comrades, showed unusual courage and strength in jail (Mohandas, context A).

The 1970s in reality presented a double disillusionment to the radicals, first with the conventional Left and then with themselves for the failure of the radical movement. Until the Emergency they all lived under the illusion that people in Kerala had
understood the noble causes and ideals that the Naxalites had stood for and that the revolution was imminent, because the `red army’ was all set to march in soon and liberate Kerala! KGS, who had been locked up in jail during the Emergency and was subjected to mental torture, recalls their fantasised versions of revolution.

Today we feel like crying….when we look back, we realize how much illusion we had nurtured those days; illusion of Marxist Leninists about their movement, about their schemes and strategies and about themselves. That’s the reason the movement crumbled down. Outside, outside the ML circles, there wasn’t any revolution (KGS, context A).

It is interesting to note that most people in Kerala, in spite of their left legacy and the high literacy status that they boast of, got cold feet during Emergency. In the election that Indira Gandhi had to conduct under international pressures, encouraged by intelligence reports that she would win, one of the few states where her party got a majority was in Kerala. But once the Emergency was withdrawn, the intelligentsia and the media in the Sate came back to their feet and began the biggest ever campaign of ’revelations of Emergency’. Then protests, poems and other creative works filled the streets and entered the minds of the next young generation and their campus life. Muraleedharan remembers Naxalites being invited to colleges and `adored’ as heroes. The stories of torture that the media unleashed and the heroic spirit of the Naxalites and of all those who opposed Emergency instilled in the youth a new sense that `questioning is our right’. This was something that percolated down because the radical movement.

The spontaneous reception to and accommodation of the Naxalites within to the society recharged the movement and a second wave of Naxalite movement sprouted out under the leadership of many Naxalites who came out of the jail and tried to give a `cultural’ face lift to the movement (instead of the earlier `politics in command’ strategy). Under their initiative the second wave of radicalism evolved into novel forms of fight for justice and forms of public protest like the `Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi’ (People’s Cultural Front) and `Peoples’ Tribunal’. This new move combined art, poetry, street theatre, film screenings and publication of a plethora of `little magazines’ and this attracted many young people. They readily joined the fold and owned up the movement as their own, since there were no formal procedures for
membership. But this sudden exposition of the radical movement out into the public had some opposition from inside the movement, especially from the pioneers of the first wave of the Naxaite movement. Some of them considered their own comrades, who were leading the cultural front and opening up to newer possibilities as `traitors’, who were falling prey to the `liberal bourgeoisie’ interests. However hard they tried the Naxalites could not patch up their inner conflicts and contradictions in the name of ideology and praxis. Many insiders and `outsiders’, who had admired or supported the movement from a distance, conclude that it was the never ending disputes over the `theory of annihilation’ and concrete instances of its implementation in spite of severe opposition to it, in the ‘Somarajan episode’\(^{21}\) and the `Kenichira Mathai episode’ that brought the second wave of Naxalism and practically the movement itself to an abrupt ending in the mid-1980s.

How did the radical political movement influence `the cinema of the 70s’ and continue to influence Malayalam cinema in future? It did work on the imaginations of a few generations and had immediate influence on the film movement of the 1980s. Only in the second wave of Naxalism, the radicals paid close attention to film as a `revolutionary medium’ with immense possibilities. They got involved in screenings and discussions at the film societies, formed new societies even in remote villages. But the high point of this `politically charged’ film movement was the formation of `Odessa’ people’s film collective that first ventured into a very significant political cinema project based on the `saga of Kayyur’, but later dropped the project and moved on to a unique `politically made’ film (in content, form, making, distribution in all), under the leadership of the legendary John Abraham; that film is *Amma Ariyan* (Report to the Mother). After that Odessa did not get into any major film production project; it continues with its film screenings and discussions. Perhaps more politically made films, inspired by the different waves of the Naxalite movement and the impact of the Emergency are yet to hit the Malayalam cinema screen. But the movement has

\(^{21}\) These two assassinations were the last collective operations that the ML movement undertook before the organization dissolved into many factions. These episodes at once spoiled all goodwill that the ML movement had enjoyed among Malayalee young intellectuals.
marked its place in the history of Malayalam Cinema with the genre `Naxalite cinema, a model that gets revisited even in the 2000s.

3.3 `Cinema of the 1970s’: Models and Variants

The so called `Political Cinema’, under the scrutiny of this study, should be considered as only one of the various forms of `New Cinema/ Parallel Cinema’ in Malayalam that sprouted out in the 1970s. For the sake of convenience, this study prefers to call all such films that demonstrate some common features as different from the mainstream popular cinema of that period as `the Cinema of the 70s’. A few derogatory names or labels that either the media or audiences had given to `the cinema of the 70s’ are `Award padam’ (with the connotation that `common man’ may not understand or appreciate these `high-brow’ films), `Uchapadam’ (only meant for noon show) and `Pareekshana Chitram’ (experimental film).

One could identify some clear markers of a definitely different cinematic movement in Malayalam, different in content and form, which at a later point, also functioned parallel to the mainstream commercial cinema, adopting different modes of film production, exhibition, distribution and promotion or marketing. This `parallel’ or alternative’ mode of cinema was not anything exclusively new to Kerala, but was part of the `New Cinema Movement’ across the world and across India. This movement that evolved at different parts of the world since 1950s-60s hit the screens in Kerala only in the 1970s and the specific socio-cultural and political contexts in the state in that period that we have already discussed, do justify the coming of age of such a distinct cinematic movement in Kerala in the 1970s. Films that show similar characteristics of those films that we identify as `the cinema of the 70s’, occasionally appear even in the 2000s. But critics generally do not classify them under any specific category, maybe because a clear foundation for such a categorical classification of films into art/parallel/political that existed in peoples’ minds and promoted by media in the 1970s do not exist here anymore.

Regarding that distinct film movement in the 1970s, Bina Paul has the following remarks:
In the 1970s, I think ‘resistance’ played a big role in how cinema was being formed. For example you can refer to Argentina in the 90s, it was a period of political turbulence for them and some of their best films emerged out of this period. The same with us in the 1970s with the Emergency and the aftermath; it produced some good films. The resistance in the 70s pushed the artists to reassess in terms of what are our values. Suddenly you realise that freedom is not a given and any moment the Government can take it away….I see the Naxal movement and the Emergency as two important milestones of the 1970s that have affected the nature of filmmaking, not only in Kerala, but in Bengal, Maharashtra, in Delhi everywhere you see the coming of age of a new type of cinema as a result of something to fight against (Bina Paul, context B).

K.P. Kumaran, who began his career in theatre in the 1960s, then moved on to the New Cinema in the 1970s and is still very active in all streams of cinema and also in television, comments on the socio-political context in the 1970s that prepared the path for the evolution of a New Malayalam Cinema:

In the cinema of the pioneers of the ‘New Cinema’ we can see the fragments of the 1970s’s thought process, an attitude of ‘total negativity to life’ or ‘meaninglessness of life’ etc. They can’t perhaps take any claim of a unique cinematic form typical of that period, but their films showed characteristics (in content) of that socio-political milieu; there was no precision in thought nor in cinematic form. Their only (perhaps) merit was their political consciousness (Kumaran, context A).

With the implications outlined above, this study looks at two aspects of the Cinema of the 1970s; one: Films that came to be known typically as ‘Political cinema’, two: ‘Art Cinema and the Variants’. The Cinema of the 70s was not a unified movement and some films that interest this study escape or go beyond strict classifications.

**3.3.1 Political Cinema**

There is a tendency among many film buffs and critics to consider some films of the 1970s-80s as ‘political cinema’ and use their arbitrary definition of political cinema as a yard stick to judge today’s films as political or not political. Such an attitude has some discernible foundation in certain common characteristics of a particular set of films that came in the 1970s-80s. We will look at those characteristics eventually, but first we shall simply identify that set of films from the 1970s-80s, vaguely categorised under political cinema. Then let us look at the different possible rationale that people employ in considering those and similar films as ‘political’.
The set of films that are usually classified by certain sections of ‘serious’ film viewers and critics as ‘strictly’ political cinema includes: Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol (When River Kabani turned Red), Ore Thooval Pakshikal (Birds of the same Feather), Chuvanna Vithukal (Red Seeds) Sanghaganam (Song of the Gang), Agraharathile Kazhuthai (An Ass in the Brahmin’s Enclave) Amma ariyan (Report to Mother) Meenamasathile sooryan (Midsummer Sun), Marmaram (Whisperings) Ithiri poove chuvanna poove (Oh, Little Red Flower), Panchangni (Five Fires). People who classify films with this frame of mind would consider some later films that came in the 1990s-2000s also as political. Films of Priyanandanan –Neythukaren (The Weaver) Pulijanmam (Incarnation of Tiger) and Sufi paranja katha (The story that the Sufi Told)—and most films of T.V.Chandran (though his films are more often debated over their politics) are what we refer here. Very recent films from the 2000s like Gulmohar (Flower Gulmohar) and Thalappavu (Head Gear), which easily got the ‘Naxalite Cinema’ label are also considered as political cinema. Incidentally, films by Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Padmarajan, K. P. Kumaran. K.G. George, K.R. Mohanan, P.T. Kunjumuhammed and, more strikingly, most films of Pavithran, who closely travelled with the so called ‘political cinema’ movement, have not been included in this strict classification of ‘political films’.

There seem to be certain common characteristics of such strictly ‘political cinema’ that some critics, sections of audiences and even some filmmakers identify with. Those features could be: films that promote radical or Leftist, or socialist ideologies, films that stand for social (structural) change, films that confronts the system, films that portray altruistic protagonists who become martyrs for a ‘selfless’ noble cause and so on and so forth. The understanding of a political film in the popular/mainstream is not much different; in addition to the elements mentioned above, they will also include a claim of ‘exposing the real truth’ or exposing and punishing ‘politicians as the real culprits’ and thus presenting the hero as the ‘saviour’ of people.

How does one define political cinema? The very premise of a fixed category called ‘political cinema’ sounds problematic. Though such positions have been debated at length in World cinema, many people in Kerala still prefer to locate a certain model of
‘political cinema’ in the 1970s and are concerned about the continuation of the same or similar models. Bina Paul has a rather broad approach to the whole issue:

It depends on how you define ‘politics’ and ‘political cinema’. One way is content as political, which is very common in Malayalam Cinema; we had lots of films with political content, like ‘Meena masathile sooryan’, ‘Panchagni’ etc. But I think that political cinema has to be defined in a different way: it is not only the content, but the politics of the making of the film, the distribution system, how it is received, what it does to the audiences, what is the involvement etc. I think that is what could be more broadly defined as ‘political cinema’, rather than just political content. Political content in cinema was very common in Kerala, given the history of the socio-political movements in Kerala. And when you specifically look for ‘political cinema’ (not just in content), we have very few in Malayalam cinema. To name those rare breed, I would say Backer, Pavithran, for example Pavithran’s last film ‘Kuttappan Sakshi’. How that film was made (the engagement) and of course ‘Amma Ariyan’ (how it was made, how it was used)…. how these films either alienate or engage the audiences…those are the main questions. So I don’t see a strong political cinema movement as such in Malayalam (Bina Paul, context B).

It is possible that in the absence of a strong political cinema movement, some filmmakers and viewers, especially those exposed to the Neo-Realist Italian cinema, the French New Wave, East European political films and the Latin American Third world revolutionary cinema constructed an ‘imagined political cinema’ for Kerala. I. Shanmugadas, from his exposure to many experiments in world cinema as a film critic and from his contacts with many Film society activists in the 1970s-80s confirms the intense admiration that many progressive intellectuals and film buffs of Kerala had for Godard’s famous dictum in the 1970s, ‘Camera is a gun’. Many people seemed to have believed in a revolution through celluloid.

Louis Mathew, who was in school at the time of Emergency and became a film curator and teacher in the late 1990s, tries to read the mind of those Malayalee audiences, who always have dreamt of a political cinema movement in Kerala.

I assume that the audience of political cinema are like people who ‘read and think’ a book, and not just ‘read’. Their common traits were social commitment, the dream of ‘we can change the society’, and enlightenment (we can change the society with knowledge). They embrace this as one’s mandate: to ‘bring about change’, to bring the marginalised to the mainstream etc. Filmmakers who believed in those principles used the medium in order to promote those ideals (Louis Mathew, context B).
We shall examine the opinions of different stake holders, who construct or deconstruct the idea of a political cinema in Malayalam. Our attempt is to identify some common patterns, if any, among people, who hold similar or different views:

3.3.1.1 Social(ist) realist to Radical political cinema: Instead of celebrating a `golden 1970s’ of Kerala, there are people who suggest to see the shift in the 1970s to a more radical political consciousness and its reflection in our cinema as rather a continuity than a rupture. Also there might be reluctance on the part of the conventional Leftists to give credit to the radicals for the 1970s remembered as an ‘ideal epoch’, which was short lived but long cherished in the minds of many. V.K. Joseph, film critic and the present editor of the ’Chintha weekly’, prefers to see the political cinema movement in Malayalam not in isolation, but as continuity:

What happened in the 70s is a natural evolution of our Leftist bend of mind in politics/consciousness through the renaissance etc., through different agitations like that of Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Vaikkom satyagriha…and other numerous struggles; then the English education and the new/modernist thinking as a result; the Land Reform struggle etc. Our process was attacking and overthrowing unjust establishments and the celebration of those revolutions (Joseph, context A).

M.P. Parameswaran expressed admiration for the political zeal of the radicals but has doubts if they realised any goals at all. He traces the progression from the Left-leaning social realist films to the more radical films in Malayalam (Neelakuyil to Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol):

The social realist cinema was very popular till the 1970s. Public’s faith in the left had reached its peak in 1969 during the second term of EMS ministry. Films based on Land reform struggle, ceiling of land etc were incorporated into the themes. But the left started losing direction after the 70s because of compromises, and corruptions. Many felt frustrated towards the Left, as seen in some of Adoor films …The Naxalites became active in that phase where more people got frustrated with the conventional Left. Backer and others belong to that group among filmmakers, who shared the frustration with the Left (Parameswaran, context A).

P.P. Govindan, filmmaker, who graduated from FTII and have made many feature films and documentaries, feels that our filmmakers have made good ‘social(ist) realist’ films, but somehow the motivation to make intense political films was absent among
our filmmakers. He puts the blame the `calm and quietness’ of Kerala as a region, which is devoid of any natural calamities or war or any major tragedies.

3.3.1.2 Political in the popular: Film scholars and critics have pointed out the bias of the so called `serious’ filmmakers and viewers (mainly film society activists and regular participants at film festivals) towards Malayalam popular cinema, when it comes to discussing political cinema and politics of cinema. The `cinema of the 1970s’ that we specifically focus in our study is also is also criticised for its posturing as the ‘ideal’ Malayalam Cinema’ in contrast to the ‘glamorous’ popular cinema.

Film scholars on Malayalam cinema, like T. Muraleedharan, argues that the so called New Cinema movement in Malayalam was a convenient conscious response by the upper class and upper caste intellectuals to mark their presence, the section of society that had lost its lustre after the Land reform and the anti-Caste movements. They considered themselves as progressive and naturally Leftists or radical Leftists. They tried to posit an ‘ideal Malayalee’ in the films projected as ‘alternative’ to the mainstream popular/commercial cinema in Kerala (which was then based in ‘Kodambakam’, Madras) and elsewhere.

In the left-leaning Kerala politics, the `altruistic, self-sacrificing, simple’ men or women were projected as the ‘ideal hero’ and so in modern theatre and cinema, Malayalee sensibility was tuned to look for such imagery and anything else, the opposite, glamorous, commercial main stream theatre or cinema were seen as ‘pax nation’. Clear example would be the shift from Prem Nazir to Sukumaran as hero. Nazirspoke typically literary language, while Sukumaran gave the impression that his was the ‘naadan’ (typically country-side) Malayalam (Muraleedharan, context B).

Because of similar attitudes, those who prefer to talk about the ‘serious’ or ‘strictly’ political cinema in Malayalam often tend to forget to talk about the politics in Malayalam popular cinema and ignore the attempts at ‘political cinema’ in the mainstream. P. Baburaj cherishes the contributions of I.V. Sasi, who with his prolific screenplay writer T. Damodaran, made many commercially successful political films.

Sasi came from Kannur, from the SFI politics. With Jayan a shero, Sasi made many films focusing on the working class. Take ‘Angadi’ or ‘Karimbana’ or ‘Meen’ (deals with the trawling issue): it was Sasi who packaged
confrontational politics in ways appealing to the mainstream cinema (Baburaj, context B).

Deedi Damodaran, the daughter of T. Damodaran says that she helped her father in copying scripts etc. But when she wrote her first film script for an evidently political film, *Gulmohar*, based on the second wave of the Naxalite movement, she wanted to move forward from where her father and I.V.Sasi had left the political cinema.

‘Political cinema’ in Malayalam hitherto was mostly I.V.Sasi films, which idealised the conventional left comrades…the only discussion/critique was that ‘the Left is in decay’. From the leftists, people expected them to practice the ‘idea of simplicity’ (Deedi Damodaran, context B).

3.3.1.3 Art or Politics? As the tendency of assigning the ‘political cinema’ status only to certain films of the 1970s and of later periods at the expense of the popular cinema and its politics becomes problematic. Equally questionable is the tendency of drawing a line between art and politics in the case of a film like *Uttarayanam* by Aravindan or *Swayamvaram* by Adoor. *Swayamvaram* and *Uttarayanam* have been given the status of the first ‘art cinema’ in Malayalam by many. So should we ignore or not address the ‘politics’ of these films? Can we include them also among the so called ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s apart from considering them as ‘art cinema’?

Both *Swayamvaram* (1972) and *Uttarayanam* (1974) definitely reflect the political zeal and concerns of the 1970s. Though *Uttarayanam* ends in a metaphysical or spiritual pursuit, throughout the film we see the protagonist Ravi confronted by disillusionments and loss of faith in any political systems, which is typical of the 1970s’ youth. Ravi wavering in front of a choice of arms to overthrow the ailing social system and Gopi, the radical hero of *Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol*, who ‘bravely’ chooses arms are not very far from each other. Main difference between these two films perhaps is that the protagonist of ‘*Kabani Nadi*’ embraces martyrdom at the end whereas in *Uttarayanam* the director leaves the fate of his hero very open-ended, which does not appeal to those who prefer a ‘teleological’ political model.

K.A. Mohandas, an ex-Naxalite chooses *Uttarayanam* as the best of Aravindan’s films, because he feels that the context is very concrete in this film compared to his other films, a context with which Mohandas personally could identify with.
The milieu of the film can be seen as an extension of the ‘aspirations of the independent struggle movement’; the character of mash (master) represents the militant movement in Congress in the 40s. Mash tells Ravi: ‘use of weapons may show us a way’... Ravi is an extension of ‘Mash’ (continuity of the struggle, though the enemy is different), but his path is different or not as definite as that of Mash (Mohandas, context A).

In this crucial segment, Mohandas sees an element of strong influence of Pattathuvila Karunakaran (one of the script writers), who had radical-left leanings. Aravindan chose to end the film within a metaphysical dimension, without offering any concrete solutions to the problems faced by Ravi and people like him in that period. Mohandas considers this film as ‘standing tall as artistic and philosophical’. He likes the open ending of the film in contrast to the categorical ending of similar films in Bengali and other languages at that time; Mohandas cited ‘Calcutta-71’ by Mrinal Sen as example. Uttarayanam was promoted in the media, creating an ‘intellectual hype’, remembers Muraleedharan. It was in consonance with the collective consciousness of that period, unemployment, disillusionment and so on, so people received it well. Muraleedharan and his friends in the 1970s considered the film as ‘the ideal Malayalam film’. Sunny Joseph still proudly remembers the article he wrote after watching Uttarayanam, titled ‘The first Malayalam cinema I saw’!

K.P.Kumaran shares his experience of working with Adoor on the script of Swayamvaram. He frankly admits that his life in the 1960s, the trade unionism that he was involved and the unconventional mode of marriage that he and his wife had chosen turned out to be raw materials for that film. So this is not any ‘art for art sake’ film imagined and scripted sitting in an ivory tower, but is definitely an attempt to address the socio-political issues of that period and to present the existential predicament of individual human beings who braved the challenges of those situations of despair and disillusionment in the post-Nehruvian romantic era. Kumaran gives us a glimpse to the story and how the back bone of it is personal to a great extent.

The main track of the film is an artist/writer’s struggle in a city (Trivandrum) with his lover/wife, both have left their families behind. Parallel to this the social milieu of that period is juxtaposed: unemployment, workers’ strikes etc...this track didn’t get registered effectively. The film is very much connected to my own experiences.....as influences, in the background you can see my Leftist, trade union activities since 1964, exposure to the East European
cinema, Czechoslovakian, Polish, Hungarian and rarely Bulgarian cinemas (Kumaran, context A).

Adoor Gopalakrishnan has more or less kept this track of a clear political consciousness in most of his films that succeeded Swayamavaram, but he prefers to keep the socio-political in the background and bring the `personal-political’ to the foreground. But there is an Adoor film that did bring the socio-political to the foreground: Mukhamukham (1984), which is a post-mortem of the Leftist movement and of the Leftist collective conscience. But again what interested him more was to explore the mind of the individual (protagonist), who had to face and deal with different ordeals, shattering ideologies and the different layers of perceptions that people, different stake holders, tried to create on the ordeal of the individual. The film obviously drew severe criticism from the official Left party circles and Left-leaning film buffs, who read in it Adoor’s intentional maligning of the communist ideology and party. The very personal observations that M.P. Parameswaran makes about Adoor films are interesting:

I know that Adoor is a left-sympathiser; but the party hasn’t shown any sympathy to him and so he becomes critical of the left. What Adoor films are trying to express is the frustration of not seeing at the Left what one wishes/expects to see from them; that way Adoor films are political films (Parameswaran, context A).

3.3.1.4 Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol: a second look at a ‘political cinema’: Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol (When the River Kabani Turned Red) directed by P.A. Backer and produced by another filmmaker Pavithran is still considered in certain quarters as ‘the political film’ of the 1970s. Yet another filmmaker, T.V. Chandran appears in role of the protagonist, ‘Gopi’. Let us examine what some of our participants have to say about this landmark film. Before we examine the various views on this film let us look at the story in brief.

Plot Summary: The film has only two important characters, a young woman, Shalini and her friend/lover Gopi, who is an ‘abscording’ a radical political activist. He has been declared as ‘wanted’ by police since he is a Naxalite, involved in some operations of ‘assassination of the class enemy’. Gopi has escaped from Kerala

22 Short synopsis of all important films (both Key texts and Secondary reference as well) used in the study is given as an Annexure. A minimum of two film stills each from most of these films are also given as another annexure.
(Wayanad?), where the Naxalite activities and operations are concentrated. Once he reaches the city outside Kerala, where Shalini works, he and she are faced with personal, emotional dilemmas also. But finally he refuses all comforts of the hide out of his lover’s house and sets forth for his next encounter (which is not shown in the film). The film ends with the news of the police killing him in an encounter and the woman learning about his death through the newspaper. His ‘martyred’ body is shown in close up accompanied by a ‘collective humn’ in the sound track indicating a big group/mass of people who are joining the revolutionary movement, drawing inspiration from martyrs like Gopi.

K.A. Mohandas recalls that ‘Kabani Nadi’ was considered as the ‘soul of the society’ in those days because the story and characters in the film resembled the society those days. He includes himself among the ‘angry youth’ of those days, who identified with Gopi, the protagonist, the radical who has chosen a life of sacrifice and martyrdom. Like Gopi, they too believed that the 1970s was a time of liberation and the ‘political spring’ that they had been waiting for. P. Baburaj shares some interesting information about the making of ‘Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol’ that he gathered from friends associated with this film project.

It was based on the book ‘Kabani Nadi Chuvannathengane?’ by Babu Bharadwaj. The shooting had been fixed for June 27, 1975. Emergency was declared on June 26. They were all worried about the shoot, then came Pavithran (he was the producer) and after thinking for a while he laughed and said, ‘Would we get an opportunity better than this to shoot such a cinema? Let’s start the shoot’. Local police was bribed, to conceal the subject of the cinema; shoot was done around Wayanad near Baveli (Baburaj, context B, 1970s-90s).

Baburaj, who had watched many screenings of this film during the Emergency, feels that the film romanticised the Naxalite movement. Civic Chandran, who was put in jail very close to the declaration of the Emergency, does not consider Kabani Nadi Chuvanapol and other so called ‘Naxalite films’ as ‘insider’ accounts of the radical movement, but contributions of ‘sympathisers’ who mostly stood outside.

The cinema of the 70s comes from an ‘admiration’ to the politics of the 1970s but without first-hand experience of it. There is a soft corner for ‘extremism’, of all types in the society, it is there from the time of Prometheus….when the prodigal sons return we always kill the fat calf. ‘They are our brilliant sons’; that’s how we always look at them. This is the same attitude we see in the films of Backer, Theekodiyan (Uttarayanam), and Bharathan. Sometimes these films were even against the revolution, against what actual radical politics was
etc. Good example is `Kabani Nadi Chuvannapal’. K. Karunakaran, the then chief minister, gave award for that film (purposely), because that film creates a wrong image about the Naxalite (‘someone not fit to be welcomed into your house’, ‘violent’, ‘inhuman’ etc). That way it was an ‘anti-Naxalite’ film (Civic Chandran, context A).

Louis Mathew, who was very young during the Emergency and got chance to watch most films of the 1970s only in the early 1990s, is sharp in his feedback on films like ‘Kabani Nadi’.

When I look at Kabani Nadi’, I find it boring and pretentious. Its language is boring, now we know that they were trying hard to get it labelled as ‘art film’. It has revolution and everything, but it is less cinematic….. I can imagine that young people in the 1970s with a radical bend of mind would have thought about a ‘political cinema’ like ‘Kabani Nadi’ as ‘this is the right thing we wanted’ (Louis Mathew, context B).

In retrospect, T.V. Chandran, who acted as ‘Gopi’, the protagonist of Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol, is critical of the film:

What ruined ‘Kabani Nadi’ of Baker is the love story ingrained in it. The ‘problem’ of the film became the love affair of the revolutionary and not the revolution per say….that way ‘Kabani Nadi’ became a very ordinary film, which could have told the love story between any other two young people. In Kerala film history ‘Kabani Nadi’ is glorified as the ‘political film’; but Pavithran and I had doubts but we didn’t dare to express it to Backer because we were not sure of how to articulate our doubt and if it were a valid doubt. We still like ‘Kabani Nadi’, marvelling at how Backer overcame the weakness of the film (content/story) by the form.

3.3.1.4.1 A Brief Review of the film Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol (Researcher’s comments): I do not remember watching the movie in theatres in the 1970s or later in some film festivals. I got a DVD copy of the film for the purpose of this study and watched it for the first time in 2010. I had the expectations of watching an ‘explosive’ film. The film is explosive neither in its content nor in the form. The main service it renders to radical politics is that it marks the mood of that period and its ambience of terror and also how the young people who took arms against exploitation and injustice were seen in the eyes of the public and also of law.

They experiment with a new face for the protagonist (T.V. Chandran), which does justice to the movement as well as for the kind of radical cinema they wanted to make…radical in their refusal to succumb to the pressures of the film industry letting
only stars to do roles. The film is more positive in its politics than I had imagined, not
totally taking the point of view of the male, who 'leads the revolution', but also telling
the story from the angle of the woman (lover), who is left behind by the revolutionary
who goes ahead to embrace martyrdom. She has to carry forward with the memories
of the beloved, and her own predicament that has denied all 'dreams of a normal life
like anyone else'.

But the film chose a wrong format or narrative to tell this story of revolution....this
story should have been told in a drastically different format. Instead, 'Kabani Nadi'
has chosen a narrative in the mould of the typical 'art cinema' of the 1970s, which
could be termed as an 'existential angst' genre'. In doing so, they lost the focus; it
became a sentimental melodrama on the predicament of the individual revolutionary,
the 'hero', with predictable ending. If this film was supposed to motivate collective
revolutionary dreams and action, it needed a different type of storytelling,
characterisation, pacing and sound track, especially a different background score. The
end product has become an amateurish treatment of a 'revolutionary film' in usual
sentimental melodramatic style and very poorly executed visual and sound design. I do
not underestimate the effort that the camera man Vipin Das has done with limited
lighting sources. but there even elements borrowed from the style of commercial films
of those days clash with the raw and direct treatment a story like 'Kabani Nadi' would
have demanded.

The question is if this film gained much as a work of art or as a triggering tool for
revolution. I do not feel the form of the film distracts you to a great extent that it ends
up as counterproductive. In choosing to present the story an individual revolutionary
as a 'hero', the film hides many young lives spent for the Naxalite movement in the
1960s and 70s. The present format does not allow how those 'collective heroes' (as in
the case of Battleship Potemkin by Eisenstein, for example) operated their secretive
strategy and what price they paid for their revolutionary ideology and praxis. 'Kabani
Nadi' is reduced to a very small world and diminishes the whole broader perspectives
of a very vibrant movement in the 1970s, which this film was supposed to highlight
and use that vibrancy to ignite more minds to join the movement. I suppose that this
was the intention of the director, producer and their team but they somehow did not succeed in accomplishing their goal.

This film from the collection of the so-called ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s prompts me to imagine that the concept and practice of political filmmaking in Kerala had not matured enough with exposure and experience in those days. When some groups of film lovers or political activists in Kerala extol this or similar films as ‘political’ and compare it to other ‘less political’ films, it shows that still there exists a typical ‘wishful thinking’ or ‘longing’ for a certain kind of ‘political cinema’.

We sum up this brief discussion on the ‘political cinema’ movement in the 1970s and hope for its possible continuation in our times with refinement in content and form. Any such discussion on continuity (which this study would take up in the following chapters) should take into consideration how the concept and practice of ‘politics’ in art and life has been experimented and redefined across the world, as a movement from static and essentialist standpoints to broader and diverse perspectives.

3.3.2 ‘Art Cinema’ and the Variants

This study tries to stay away from attempts to assign a particular status to certain films of a specific period in history, say the ‘political film’ status to a certain set of films in the 1970s. Equally problematic would be the tendency to connect all films in particular period (say 1970s) to the predominant stream of political consciousness in that period. We often see different artists moving in divergent directions, asserting their individuality and creativity that create an inherent defence in them against conforming to the mainstream. On the other hand, we also observe an ongoing, dynamic interface of individuality and collectivism in a given society in a given period. This accounts for why films in the ‘parallel’ cinema stream in the 1970s—the so-called ‘political films’, ‘art films’ and the variants—display elements of similarity/commonality and difference. Since these films in the ‘parallel’ stream were all born in the same period and drew inspiration and energy from the same socio-cultural and political ambiance of the 1970s, a study of ‘political cinema’ would not be complete unless we briefly examine the other models/trends of filmmaking within the ‘parallel’ cinema stream of the 1970s. K.R. Mohanan, a filmmaker from the ‘parallel
cinema’ movement in the 1970s, refers to the rich diversity of films in that period, in genre, narrative form and in other aspects:

Our films were not strictly seen as ‘political’ but as ‘art cinema’. Political cinema in the period were `Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol’, `Chuvanna Vithukal’ etc. `Yaaro Oral’ came in 1978, which totally questioned the film form that we were so used to until then. I did `Aswathatmav’, Adoor did `Swayamvaram’ and K.G.George `Swapnadanam’; these films hadn’t questioned or upset the narrative dramatic form/structure. We conformed to the conventional narrative form (Mohanan, context A).

Muraleedharan prefers a group label, ‘Art Cinema’, to classify the bunch of films that came as alternative to the main stream Malayalam cinema and also as alternative to the ‘glamorous’ cinematic styles in Bollywood or Hollywood:

My reason to call all these varied styles of films as ‘art cinema’ is the element of influence of the ‘European auteur cinema’ movement, films ranging from neo-realism to Bergman. Art cinema in Malayalam was very much a product of the Film-Institute-inspired band of filmmakers and filmmaking styles plus the influence of the Film society movement. So I don’t include `News Paper Boy’ or films like `Olavum Theeravum’ in this category. Those films belonged to an earlier period, whereas the films that I classify as ‘art cinema’ belonged to an organized movement, which people identified as a movement. People who worked in such movies also identified themselves as part of a movement, starting with `Swayamvaram’ and `Uttarayanam’ (Muraleedharan, context B).

Had the ‘Art Cinema’ movement, with its typical cinematic form/s, production values and the kind of tastes it generated, been launched in the 2000s, it is very unlikely that it would have received the same reception it did in the 1970s. It becomes evident that there was a context in the 1970s, created by many factors and elements, including a very benevolent media, that made it easy for the audiences and the people ‘behind’ the Art Cinema to identify it as a ‘new’ and ‘special’ movement and promote it that way. K.R. Mohanan, whose début `Aswathatmav’, a land mark film of the ‘Art Cinema’ movement, was released in 1979, confirms this conducive context or ambiance that helped the movement establish and survive (for a short period) as an alternative stream of cinema.

There was a conducive ambiance in Kerala those days, which made it easy for the ‘new Malayalam Cinema’ to be received well by the audiences. Adoor’s `Kodiyyettam’ had been released before `Aswathatmav’ and it was running in theatres full house. The film didn’t have any elements of popular appeal in
today’s terms….later I saw Kumaran’s *Athithi* at Ramdas theatre Thrissur; it was running full house. It shows that there was a sensibility in the 1970s for appreciating serious, deep, aesthetic and socio-political questions and experiences (K.R.Mohanan, context A).

Anwar Jhan, who was completing senior high school in the late 1980s, relishes the experience of being an ardent lover of art cinema those days:

> Whenever there was a new release of an art film, we religiously watched it in the theatres; watching those movies was as important as having three meals a day. We also regularly watched film society screenings (Jhan, context A).

The ‘art cinema’ products were well received also because they had the blessings of the media. It was almost exclusively the print media (television reached India only in the 1980s), that in those days had a more prominent gate-keeper role in the Kerala society, with the higher percentage of literacy here. Muraleedharan remembers the media hype created over Aravindan’s *Kanchana Sita*, where tribal actors from Andhra were cast as Rama and Lakshmana; the small pox marks on their face without any gaudy make up or costume typical of mythological films those days became big news. There was almost a ‘taught criteria’ on what was a ‘great’ art cinema; the list included ‘manda thalam’ (slow pace of the film and of the characters), not so glossy visual feel, ‘typical’ signs and symbols of the rural culture of Kerala and so on. Many young people found their representation in the character of ‘Balu’ (Balachandran Chullikad, the poet), who goes through bouts of mental disturbances in the film *Pokaveil* by Aravindan; in college campuses young men used to ‘walk like Chullikkad’. They took over his ‘existential angst’ and made it their own.

K.R. Mohanan looks back to the 1970s-80s and retraces the stylistic innovations the filmmakers attempted those days:

> What we did was pruning of the melodramatic tendencies of the earlier cinema, to make it more realistic and credible to the culture and practices…but in some films this experiment went to the extremes with deliberate ‘manda thalam’ (slow pace), so that people started to call all art films as ‘award films’. Some filmmakers deliberately cut short dialogues and attempted a minimalist form (K.R. Mohanan, context A).

Muraleedharan points out the economic factor as the rationale for the ‘austerity’ in filmic design and treatment of many art films of the 1970s since only limited resources
were available those days for such projects. The ‘low-cost’ feel fitted well with the spirit and politics of the period and that style got glorified thereafter. The researcher wishes to endorse the argument of Muraleedharan that those who glorify the ‘cinema of the 1970s’ for many of its positive aspects, fail to question the major disparities in that movement in terms of ignoring gender, caste and other realities and their proper representation. This argument highlights one of the major concerns/thruths of the present study in terms of what aspects and which constituencies are included in the discussions of ‘political cinema’ and ‘politics of cinema’ and what aspects/constituencies are discarded or excluded.

3.3.2.1 Art Cinema and the Variants: When we take stock of the cinema of the 1970s, where do we include a film like *Peruvazhiyambalam* (Way Side Temple) by Padmarajan? How do we look at *Namukku Parkkan Munthiri Thoppukal*, (Vineyards for us our Abode), another film by Padmarajan, which engaged with the patriarchal morality in a very different way? Similar films by directors like Bharathan, Siby Malayayil and others lie somewhere ‘in between’ the Art cinema and the Political cinema. Nandy (1998) considers such films as ‘middle-brow’ films. These films addressed the same questions that the parallel stream and the main stream cinemas addressed, but in a different ‘in between’ way. Thus such films are still called in cinema parlance as ‘middle stream’ or ‘middle of the road’ films. Their production values are a combination of art, politics and entertainment.

In the parallel cinema movement of the 1970s also, there were filmmakers whose films escaped strict classification as ‘art’ or ‘political’. They too combined art and politics but offered quite different dimensions of reality. Most films of Aravindan looked like a ‘variant’ of the ‘cinema of the 70s’. Bina Paul believes that Aravindan was beyond classification. Janaki also shares similar views on Aravindan’s films:

"There is a non-conventional seeking in Aravindan’s films. He goes beyond or away from the trend of the 70s on a different path. The critics unfortunately talk about Aravindan clubbing him to the filmmakers of the 70s and his films belonging to the ‘period’. I always experience a different communication in his films which is beyond the material or physical realms. It is a communication between humans and Nature, especially in the film ‘Esthapan’, which conveys a cosmic vision. That vision is not man-centred and his films..."
do not come from the human society alone, they also belong to the `non-human world’ (Janakai, context B).

Aravindan still fascinates many others for some distinct qualities in his films that made it difficult for the critics to slot his films under a specific category. Anvar Ali particularly discusses the case of an Aravindan film, *Esthappan*.

*Esthappan* is a ‘personal film’ that doesn’t discuss politics directly. In Kerala’s specific political context such ‘personal cinema’ is not very much entertained. Aravindan’s all other films has political tones, but not *Esthappan*, because it is told as a fairy tale, the story of a ‘avadoothan’, a messenger from God. In Aravindan’s films ‘authorship is less (Anvar Ali, context B).

Krishnanunni, a sound engineer, who graduated from FTII and has won National and State Film awards for best sound design, shares his experience of working with Aravindan:

Working with Aravindan was a great experience, we feel like becoming integral part of the creative process. He had his unique philosophy, but it got spread to others, to many in that time. If someone gives a suggestion, he would never say ‘no’, but would say ‘let’s try it out’. At the time of sound mixing, he would experiment with different feels; this experimentation and consultation and incorporation of suggestions was integral part of Aravindan’s life. He had a big group of friends who got involved in his creative process; in life too he always moved in a big circle of friends (Krishnanunni, context A).

Krishnanunni also points out to the ‘mixing and mingling’ that he had observed among filmmakers of all different cinema streams ‘transgressing’ the boundaries of `Art’, `Political’, `Middle Stream’ and `Main Stream’, which do not count much in practical filmmaking if not religiously perpetuated by critics and many ‘ardent lovers’ of respective streams. Chitranajali the studio complex owned by the state government became such a meeting point for give and take from the early 1980s onwards.

The establishment of Chitranjali studio (began in 1979, all work completed in 1980) under government ownership was a mile-stone in Malayalam filmmaking. For us technicians who graduated from FTII, we got opportunity to work with all streams of cinema at Chitranjali. We could see in front of us filmmakers from art cinema, middle cinema and mainstream mixing and mingling and mutually enriching one another (Krishnanunni, context A).

Though the films included in the ‘cinema of the 1970s’ shared a common context and many common features, all those films can not be slotted under a unified movement. Those films from the different streams apparently shared the distinct political
character of 1970s period. We need to place the `politics of cinema of the 1970s’ in the larger context of the Malayalam cinematic apparatus of the 1970s and look at the similarities/commonalities and differences that films from each stream carried with it. The inquiries in to the foundations of a ‘political cinema movement’ in Kerala are better pursued within this larger frmae of cinematic apparatus, instead of assigning the ‘political’ label only to some films arbitrarily classified as political.

3.4 Critique of the ‘Political Cinema’ movement in Malayalam

When we set out to critique an entity like ‘Malayalam Political Cinema’, we may have to first face the question whether we had a political cinema movement at all in Malayalam. There are film critics and others who hold that in Malayalam cinema we did not have a ‘political cinema’ movement; and there are others who argue that we did have earnest attempts towards a political cinema movement, even though it did not evolve into a full-fledged movement, style and tradition like in some Latin American or other Third World cinemas. There is yet another section of critics and audiences, who ask more basic questions, very similar to one of the line of inquiries that this study has undertaken. In brief: ‘whose political cinema’? and ‘what politics’ talking nd `whose politics’ are we talkin about?

We revisit the remarks of V.K. Joseph, who holds that the `political cinema of the 1970s’ was only part of a nostalgic indulgence of a population in an `idealised’ period in their history and as the aspirations of a particular generation, than a dream fulfilled:

I don’t think we had a political cinema movement in Kerala. Along the lines of the politics of the 1970s, there was a strong desire to have a change in the way we see things. Filmmakers and Film society members have always expressed this desire. Apart from this desire we never had such a movement realised here. Keralites indulge in a fake, nostalgic public consciousness posited in the past. It is difficult for the Malayalee intellectuals to live in the present. This happens when we talk about the Film society movement, good films, good literature etc….there is some people whose life is still set in the 1970s. They were active then; after that they don’t write, don’t get involved in cultural activism or anything else….they also argue that those who came after are ‘nothing’ and all have lost directions etc (Joseph, context A).

What people talk about as `political cinema’ movement in Kerala to a great extent appears to be an ‘imagined political cinema’ in the context of an ‘imagined revolution’
dreamt by a group of intellectuals. Under external and internal influences, they lived in an illusion that the ‘1970s is a time of liberation’ for Kerala and whole India. This spell of imagined political cinema is not limited only to people leaning to the radical Left, but any ‘progressive’, middle class intellectuals in the 1970s and even in the 2000s. They seem to believe in the potential of cinematic arts to bring about revolution or at least instil a revolutionary political consciousness in large masses of audiences. Shohat and Stam comment on such militant mandate that the Argentinean documentary *Hour of the Furnaces* had taken upon itself.

Fusing political radicalism with artistic innovation, *`Hour of the Furnaces`* revives the historical sense of term ‘avant-garde’ as connoting political as well as cultural militancy, teasing to the surface the military metaphor submerged in the term—the image of an advanced contingent reconnoitering unexplored and dangerous territory. The film resuscitates the venerable analogy of camera and gun, charging it with a precise revolutionary signification. (Shohat and Stam, 1994)

This study assumes that politically charged film buffs, makers as well as viewers, in Kerala in the 1970s, with vast reading and exposure to world cinema, possibly identified with those socio-cultural contexts found in books and films and perhaps transposed those situations to the concrete context of Kerala. Unfortunately, most Malayalee filmmakers who got into action hoping to deliver some militant political cinema ended up serving ‘old wine in new bottles’. In the context of Malayalam cinema, a major difference we find between the ‘political cinema’ that emerged in the 1970s and the ‘social realist cinema’ which became highly popular and successful in the 1960s-70s is that the latter had been grounded on the strong socio-political foundation in the hearts of their audiences, laid through mass movements like the cultural renaissance under Narayana Guru and others, the Punnapra Vayalar agitation, Land reform struggle and also through the progressive literature and arts movement like ‘Progressive Literary Association’, ‘Kerala Peoples’ Arts Club(KPAC) and so on. Many successful ‘social realist’ films in Malayalam were the screen adaptations of the literary masterpieces by accomplished authors, whereas the ‘political cinema’ that we usually place in the 1970s and in later periods, does not seem to have had a deeper and long term grounding in the socio-cultural context of Kerala. Kerala also had shared the unrest and political turmoil, which were part of the 1960s-70s milieu. But we cannot
conclude that the situation in the state warranted a mass, militant movement, warfare, bloodshed and all, as it happened in Cuba and some other Latin/Central American nations, where along with such militant movements a militant cinema also thrived with huge support from local people.

Many Keralites often say that their region has not so far faced any catastrophes or massive tragedies or longstanding communal riots. What they do not say is that there are problems in our society, not perhaps on massive, macro levels, but at various micro levels. Such micropolitical issues and concerns of the larger Malayalee population and small, distinct communities and constituencies within this larger population appear to have escaped the attention of the 'grand theories' and political movements in the 1970s influenced by the Leftist-Socialist ideologies. In order to address such deeper issues, we may need to club the socio-political thrust of the 1970s with the 'personal is political' approach of the 1990s-2000s. Those who dreamed of fighting structural injustice and violence by sabotaging institutions and governments, apparently failed to recognise and acknowledge deeper violence in the personal realm, in terms of gender and caste discriminations in the Kerla society, perpetuated by an upper caste, patriarchal hegemony.

Sara Joseph links the weaknesses of the 'political cinema’ movement of the 1970s to the weakness of the socio-political system in Kerala of that period. ‘Political cinema’, says Sara Joseph, ‘was grounded on the same unjust system, in which the Rightist and the Leftists, including the radical Left suppressed and silenced women. The Left treated women’s issues only as ‘class’ issue, thus ignoring the women’s identity politics and its unique implications.

We raised the question of ‘women’s liberation’. Are our women really free? 'Liberation’, that word was very important. It was ‘Manushi’, the organization we formed at Pattambi College that raised this question first. We said that what women needed was not ‘parishkaranam’ (welfare) but ‘mattam’ (change) and vinochananam (liberation) one hundred percentage. We visualised such a change for our women that they would attain equality in socio-political, economic and cultural spheres. We knew that such a total change was not possible because the system that was prevalent in our society was controlled by patriarchy, which kept women in the restricted spaces it had 'granted’ for them (Sara Joseph, context A).
Yamini completed her education in the early 1990s and is now teaching in a technical school and also is a film activist/critic. She had long term experience of working with different organizations of the conventional Left and of the radicals. She shares her experience of always being deeply concerned about women’s true identity, but never being able to express it in the so called ‘progressive’ organizations:

Then I went to the Naxalite movement; I discussed with some top leaders of that movement the same issues concerning women activists. They told me that the Naxalites would form a women’s front where inequalities that existed among the Marxists could be resolved. This perhaps was to console us…and when they really formed a women’s front, the president of that women’s section was a man! I went for a few meetings, got disappointed again, so I withdrew to my cocoon of silence (Yamini, context C, 1990s and beyond).

It is interesting to note that the question of identity and individuality had been felt not just by women working with the ‘progressive’ political organizations in Kerala; there are some men, who felt ‘excluded’ and even ‘silenced’ during the hey days of the Leftist and the radical Leftist politics in the 1970s-80s. V.G. Thampy, poet and filmmaker recalls:

Let me talk about my ‘silence’ in the 1970s, this was a very personal experience, which the ‘tumultuous’ political climate of radicalism couldn’t have addressed at all. There were other individuals too who went through similar crises. When the ‘volatile’ politics of the 1970s got diffused (failure/branching out etc), we were able to seek our cultural roots and felt comfortable in doing so (Thampy, context A).

The so called ‘political films’ in Malayalam that hit the screens in Kerala in the 1970-80s were mainly concerned about political movements based on class struggle, structural change and so on. Those films somehow failed to address the disparities in the social system of Kerala that discriminates against women, the Adivasis, the Dalits, sexual minorities and so on and push such sections of the society to the margins. This study wishes to consider all those sections that the male-centred, upper caste, upper class society pushed into oblivion as the ‘Hidden Half’\(^{23}\), an expression that usually signifies the under representation of women in socio-cultural and political arena. The critique of the ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s-80s brings into foreground those questions representing the ‘Hidden Half’ along with other pertinent issues.

\(^{23}\) *Hidden Half* is the title of a film by the Iranian feminist and filmmaker Ms. Tahmineh Milani
### 3.4.1 ‘Whose’ political cinema?’ An Audience’s questions:

The ‘political cinema’ in Malayalam in the 1970-80s, following the pattern of the New Wave Auteur cinemas and the Revolutionary/Militant cinemas in different traditions, promoted the ‘political stand’ /ideology of the filmmaker/text as the politics of a film. This was usually the Marxist/Socialist ideology that analysed the socio-political situation only on the basis of a singular category, ‘class’, which was understandable in the 1970s-80s, in a world that worked on grand narratives, conceiving the world in a categorical divide into the socialist and the capitalist blocs. Anivar Ali, pot and screenplay writer locates the author-centred politics in the context of the grand narratives of modernity, where a central speaking subject overshadowed the stakes of audiences/viewers/readers with regard to a cultural product and the cultural process connected to its consumption and appropriation.

In majority of our creations pertaining to modernism and are socially sensitive (committed), there is this ‘god-like’ character, the author right in the centre; an author, who philosophises, prophesies things etc. But, with the fall of modernity and socialism, this ‘authorship’ was shattered. It’s the hangover of the ‘humanist’ philosophy that they were trained in since the 20th century (Anvar Ali, context B).

Take the case of the film *Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol*. It only presents a single track/layer of the heroic act of the protagonist, Gopi, bravely facing the ‘do or die’ situation, leading to a glorified martyrdom at the end. The film does not offer the viewers any other information, no other perspectives, of the government or the exploitative system that the radicals like Gopi, are trying to overthrow. At least a picture of other militant leaders fighting in other places, the oppositions they face, the schemes of their enemies etc could have been shown using cinematic devices like parallel action. Ultimately, a film that was supposed to charge the audiences with the energizing presence of militant leaders and masses who take up the path of revolution, ‘*Kabani Nadi*’ limits its narrative to a very small world. The martyrdom of the protagonist is presented as a clarion call for the masses to join the revolution. The only way the viewer could recognise the sea of masses behind is from the sound track with a ‘chorus’ song/humming at the beginning and the end. The film appears almost like an ‘autobiography’ of the filmmaker whose ‘solitary’ pursuit of the path of militancy
is shown on the screen, without leaving diverse elements and perspectives that would have allowed other possible readings.

Janaki points to the changing understanding of `politics’ of cinema, not as restricted to a `privileged’ set of `political films’ but politics of cinema as a process of reading and re-reading (interpreting) the text of any cinema--of any stream, `art’ or `mainstream’--by multiple viewers in diverse contexts:

It is in reading that we discover the fact there is much nuanced politics even in an apparently non-political `family drama’ film. It was many socio-political movements that triggered and propelled the possibilities of a political reading of literature, cinema etc. These movements emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Take the example of the film `Veruthe Oru Bharya’ (Simply a Wife like This): there is no apparent macro politics in it, but there is a deep rooted micro politics in terms of power relations in a family being analysed. So we should consider it as a strong political film. The `author-centred politics’ has now changed to a `viewer-centred politics’ (Janaki, context B).

What Janaki refers as changes, we should note, are part of an on-going process of re-examining and redefining existing theories and also proposing new ones in the field of literature, art, film studies proper and other fields, enriching the understanding of cinema as a multi-layered experience involving multiple agencies situated in diverse contexts with diverse understandings of reality. In this multi-layered understanding of a work of art, the `author’ is only one contributor to the intertextuality, the orbit of multiple readings that a text forms part of. Graham Allen acknowledges the contribution of the post-structuralists like Roland Barthes, in shifting the undue emphasis on `authorship’ of a `work’ to the `text’ itself.

Barthes demonstrates that the figure of the author is a modern one, in fact a capitalist one, which serves to commodify works by attaching them to a name…In the modern market system, the name of an author allows the work to be an item of exchange value, but it also, Barthes argues, promotes a view of interpretation, and of the relationship between author, work and the reader-critic, in which reading is a form of consumption. The author places meaning in the work, so traditional accounts argue, and the reader-critic consumes that meaning….this process of interpretation as it is normally understood fosters the capitalist market system because it encourages us to view works as disposable, or at least finite, commodities (Graham 2007: 71)

In the light of Barthes’ arguments, we can infer that the `author-centrality’ in a political cinema that intends to resist/attack all hegemonies, would be counter-
productive. No political cinema can treat its audiences as passive consumers of commodities loaded with ‘ideologies’. Charting the evolution of the ‘auteur theory’ in cinema, Susan Hayward holds that the auteur theory could now be placed within a broad web of textuality. Since there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ text, the intertextuality (effects of different texts upon another text) of any film text must be a major consideration, including auterial intertextuality. That is, the auteur is a figure constructed out of her or his film (Hayward 1996).

K.R. Mohanan, who graduated from FTII in 1971, admits that those days studying film was more focused on film form, structure and so on. We should bear in mind that when we look at the ‘Art cinema’ or ‘Political cinema’ of the 1970s-80s through the lens of the 2000s, that lens has been coated with multiple layers of all exposure we have had till date and influences all ‘explosions’ in film theory that happened mainly around or after the 1970s, for example employing psychoanalytical theory of Lacan into film studies. But today filmmakers too cannot turn their backs to the advancement in theory and their contribution to the nuanced ways that the people in our times are approaching realities in life and on the screen, admits Mohanan:

In Kerala film criticism was a weak area for a long time. Film analysis and film theories connected to gender, semiotics, psycho analysis etc began in world cinema only in the 70s’. When I studied at FTII, we didn’t have exposure to film theories in depth….only now I am taking personal interest in such discussions and writing; at FTII the emphasis was on the film form….even now, when we watch a film, our training takes our attention to good framing, good editing, sound etc. I find the present generation looking at today’s films from a political and sociological point of view; it is a bit different from our approach, where we give importance to the totality of a film’ (K.R.Mohanan, context A).

3.4.2 ‘Whose political cinema?’ A woman’s question

Here, a ‘woman’s question’ is not treated only as a ‘feminist’ question, but it presupposes that the questions posed by women do represent the ‘Hidden Half’ of social reality, which include all marginalised sections of the society discriminated in the name of gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, sexuality et al. What did the ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s included and excluded, or what did those films chose to bring into foreground and push to the background? While a group of upper class, upper
caste, male intellectuals celebrates a certain ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s, there are other groups of people who could only lament their ‘absence’ in such political cinemas.

Janaki shares the feelings of many women of her age, of ‘being excluded’ from the ‘serious’ viewership of the ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s, ‘serious viewer’ referring to middle class, male intellectuals:

In the 1970s, in its politics, there was an ‘exclusive’ viewer: an ‘educated’ (visual literacy and politically conscious), invariably a male viewer. Look at the film society movement: the participation of women in them was negligible. When our male writers write on cinema, they would refer to watching films (world classics etc) in certain film society screenings. Those days I too was a college student; but I never went to any such screenings in Kerala. Only when I went outside Kerala for studies I started watching films in film society. This disparity should be traced to the wrong politicisation process in Kerala that one gender was kept away. So as a politically conscious woman, I feel I’m living in a more meaningful situation now in the 90s (Janaki, context B).

We revisit the comments of Muraleedharan critiquing the subjects and intentions of the ‘cinema of the 1970s’:

The so called New Cinema/Parallel in Malayalam was a convenient conscious response by the upper class and upper caste intellectuals to mark their presence, the section of society that had lost its lustre after the Land reform and the anti-Caste movements. Those intellectuals were trying to regain their legitimacy through the modernity movements in literature, ‘Art cinema movement’ etc. Because what basically we found in the art/new Malayalam movies was the angst of an upper middle class, upper caste young (angry) man. Examples: Bhrashtu, Aswthatmavu, Uttarayanam…. There were exceptions like ‘Manimuzhakkam’. (Muraleedharan, context B)

Sara Joseph, has seen the evolution from the socialist realist films to the ‘cinema of the 1970s’ with the experiments the ‘New Cinema’ movement attempted; then some of those experiments were taken over by the ‘middle of the road’ and mainstream cinemas. She does recognize some attempts on the part of some male filmmakers to look at the female reality as different and from a different perspective:

In Aravindan’s Kanchana Sita, he uses the language of cinema to express the cry and laughter of Sita, through the wind etc. The film shows how Rama ‘felt’ or ‘experienced’ Sita. Her presence is felt in the whole universe/Nature, through the change of moods in the Nature. When I saw Padmarajan’s Namukku Parkan Munthirithoppukal, I felt very proud as a woman. When the
hero takes with him the heroine, who had been raped, without making any
decisions, that film was elevated to some heights, with a clear political stand.
This is very close to women’s politics. Before this we had a film called Aa
Rathri, in which the heroine was raped and had to commit suicide for no fault
of hers, but to safe guard the ‘dignity’ of her husband. The K.G. George film,
Adaminte variyellu has a tone of ‘sloganeering’, look at the end of the film;
such an end is unrealistic (Sara Joseph, context A)

Deedi Damodaran does not find the Malayalam film letting any gender balance and
sensitivity enter into the way stories are told; women’s realities portrayed on the
screen is a concession, as we only have male filmmakers telling women’s stories from
men’s point of view:

Malayalam film industry is a sole male business; a producer may show a
production in his wife’s name in order to avoid tax. But we haven’t allowed
any woman to have her say in our film industry. A woman film technician/singer/actor has to sing to someone else’s tune. A woman character
in our movies is orchestrated by a male; it is written and designed by a male.
So that one-sidedness can’t be avoided. Imagine all film critics too are male?
How do you imagine that gender will be duly discussed in Malayalam cinema
within these parameters? (Deedi Damodaran, context B).

The so called ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s did not question the politics of the very
acts of seeing and showing, the subject and object of seeing and showing and who
controls the game. The incorporation of feminist theories into studying Malayalam
cinema may help to challenge the present politics and viewing habits. It was the
contribution of concepts like ‘male gaze’ of Laura Mulvey that boldly confronted the
practices in cinema in the West. Patricia White throws light to how the gaze operates
in cinema according to Mulvey24:

Centred around the spectator’s and the camera’s look, cinema offers
identificatory pleasure with one’s on-screen likeness, or ego ideal (understood
in terms of the Lacanian mirror stage), and libidinal gratification from the
object of the gaze. The male spectator is doubly supported by these
mechanisms of visual gratification as the gaze is relayed from the male
surrogate within the diegesis to the male spectator in the audience. The
woman, on the other hand, is defined in terms of spectacle, or what Mulvey
described as ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’. As Mulvey observed, ‘In a world ordered

24 Mulvey’s views cannot be taken as the last word on feminist film criticism. The ‘male gaze’ theory
has been critiqued from the stand point of masculine theories, subaltern feminists and other circles. But
to go into those discussions is beyond the scope of this study.
by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female’ (White 1998: 119).

In Malayalam cinema it is not just the politics of gender that go unquestioned, but there are other constituencies like religion, ethnicity, and sexuality and so on, realities that Malayalam cinema has tended to approach `cautiously’, with a clear preference to `standard’ versions of Kerala society. P.T.Kunjumuhammed, who began as a producer in the Cinema of the 1970s and then carved out his own mode of filmmaking, strongly feels that even the `political cinema’ has not challenged the pitfalls in our cinematic representations, where the politics of cinema becomes an extension of the hegemonic politics that `divide and rule’ the society:

Even the film I produced, `Aswathamavu’, portrays the existential misery or predicament of the high caste. The 1970s `existential angst’ became almost exclusively of the high caste. When I made `Magrib’, some were shocked to see that I was doing this and they called it a ‘Muslim cinema’. There is a stamped impression that in Kerala only films with ‘Nair stories’ run well. This has to do with `high culture’ and ‘low culture’ gradations that we keep in Kerala and its connections to religious/ethnic groups (Kunjumuhammed, context A).

Dr. Biju, who perhaps is the first Dalit filmmaker (fiction features) in Malayalam, believes that there is a misconception among the makers and ardent lovers of `Art cinema’ that art means showcasing the past, stories of feudal aristocracy, ‘typical Malayalee’ culture etc. Such trends refuse to change the track and portray the diversity of life in Kerala society (Biju 2008). Deedi Damodaran has an interesting observation that the concepts of ‘hero’ in Malayalam cinema are coming close to the age old Greek tragedies, where the hero should be high born, blue-blooded and his tragedy is the real tragedy:

In Malayalam cinema the tragedy of a Dalit is still not a tragedy. In Neelakuyil, the films finds its `justifiable’ end by handing over the orphan he created, to his barren life and so `poetic justice’ is done?! The hero is clearly mentioned as ‘Sankaran Nair’, the heroine, cheated by him is a Pulaya. Instead of charging a case on the Nair for the death of his Pulaya lover, the film/society awards him with a son, to continue his `posterity’ . Why didn’t our critics question it? Why don’t we discuss the Dalit politics in Malayalam cinema? Why don’t we have heroines who are black skinned? (Deedi Damodaran, context B).
Representation and misrepresentation of not only women but all the marginalised that we describe as the ‘Hidden Half’ is an on-going discussion in Malayalam cinema. But a change from within the system would necessitate the entry of filmmakers from such marginalised sections of the society and counter the hegemonic practices and modes of filmmaking at present. Such attempts would also initiate innovate experiments in the form and content of cinema; a combination without which the politics of a film is not fully conceived and realised.

3.4.3 Political in Content and Form?

The two ‘new’ cinema movements in Europe in the 1950s-60s, `Neo-Realism’ and the `New Wave’ and the `Third World Cinema’ movement in Latin America and elsewhere had clear political stances and they cleverly employed a combination of the content and form of their cinemas in such a way as to reinforce their political priorities. Unfortunately, the `political cinema’ movement in Malayalam in the 1970s that claims to have taken inspiration from the three sources mentioned above, does not seem to have made such innovative use of content and form so as to ensure maximum political impact from the product and the processes. There was also a lack of engagement with ongoing political processes and a disconnect with various indigenous cultures of protests. Here we refer back to the media hype around the `cinema of the 1970s’ found in the accounts of some of our research participants and argue that as an impact of the hype and the `taught criteria of an art film’, the audiences perhaps ‘saw what they did not see’, because they were tuned to view those films through the ‘rosy glasses’ that the media had provided them with even before the release of the movies. The audience saw them as ‘political cinema’ not because their content and form of those films were politically conceived and executed, but because they had been made to believe that they were `the political’ cinema that Kerala was looking for.

T. V. Chandran, who had worked with many stalwarts of `political cinema in Malayalam in the 1970s-80s, like P.A. Backer, John Abraham and others and eventually has evolved his own style of political filmmaking. He holds that the `what’ and ‘how’ of cinema should be seen together and not as separate as it happened in the
case of a Malayalam ‘political cinema’ like *Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol*; that is why many such films lost their edge.

I take what Godard said: it is not important to make political cinema but make cinema politically. Many typical ‘political cinemas’ depicted the conflict between good and evil but they did it in a way that the film almost lost all its political edge and became an entertainer. For a true political film, the content, form and style all are equally important....For me I work with content and form with the same importance. I see them both together, the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of my films….I can’t separate them. The weakness of many so called political films is the separation of form and content or say, the lack of the inevitable connection between both (Chandran, context A).

Adoor Gopalakrishnan also emphasises the importance of all elements in the filmmaking process in determining and pushing forward the politics of a film:

We don’t have a clear political cinema movement in Malayalam. When you make a political film, say on revolution, mere superficial idea on revolution is not enough. The making process itself has to be revolutionary, for example ‘*Hour of the Furnace*’; it is a political film, talks about the political situation in Argentina. So also are the films of Rocha. I don’t find any such political films in Malayalam. Activist documentary filmmakers make films, which could be strictly called ‘political cinema’, where the filmmaker has a clear political view point and also he or she even after making the film might continue with the same social issues that formed the basis of the film’s rationale. The filmmaker works with a clear idea on the possible impact of the film on the audiences (Adoor, context A).

Adoor’s observations on ‘filmmaker working with clear idea and impact of the film’ supports more of an ‘author-centred’ politics, but the comparison he makes between the so called ‘political films’ in Malayalam and the Latin American political films like ‘*Hour of the Furnace*’ is significant. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam throw light to the experiments in content and form that ‘*Hour of the Furnace*’ attempted:

‘*Hour of the Furnace*’ is open in its very structure as a text. At key points the film raises questions—“Why did Peron fall without a struggle? Should he have armed the people?”—and proposes that the audience debate them, interrupting the projection to allow for discussion. Elsewhere the authors appeal for supplementary material, soliciting collaboration in the film’s writing. The ‘end’ of the film refuses closure by inviting the audience to respond to and extend the text: “Now it is up to you to draw conclusions, to continue the film. You have the floor.” (Shohat & Stam, 1994)
Perhaps the only example in Malayalam cinema that did any radical experiments with cinematic form is the film *Amma Ariyan* that John Abraham `co-directed; with the ‘Odessa peoples’ collective; it experimented with multiple layering in its content and form. John was unique in playing with the content and form in subversive ways, as he did in *Agraharathile Kazhuthai*; may be it was the ‘anarchist’ in him with his prolific interests in music, theatre, literature, folk arts etc that made it easy for John to think in unorthodox ways.

Sanju Surendran, a young filmmaker who graduated from FTII in 2005, says he is inspired by the filmmakers of the 1970s for the daring spirit of experimentation they had. He also adds that he and other young filmmakers in the 2000s are finding filmmaking in Malayalam as difficult proposition within the constraints of the film industry that has become more centred and less accommodative than in the 1970s.

I call Aravindan an extremely radical filmmaker in the sense that he adopted very non-narrative style of filmmaking. When I saw his films on the big screen it was an awesome experience, we get the full force of the film, a real cinematic experience… John was another radical filmmaker, but in a different way….There were some filmmakers who were not given that much recognition: example Pavithran; I was so impressed when I saw his film `Uppu’ at a film festival; its craftsmanship, I find it a ‘classical’ sort of film (Surendran, context C).

K.P. Kumaran, a filmmaker from the 1970s-80s period that Sanju Surendran admires for the plurality of cinematic models, however does not have the same admiration for that ‘golden 1970s period’, when himself and many others boldly tried to break away from the conventional modes of cinema and tried out new modes and models. He doesn’t think that the filmmakers of the ‘New cinema’ that he was also part of could really master the cinematic art and offer really new and masterly works:

I consider cinema as ‘the art of the impossible’. Its finance, technology, management everything; so it is not easy to do what one could do/achieve in literature, theatre etc. The set of filmmakers I’m talking about (of the 1970s) were all educated, intelligent, talented young men. They can’t perhaps take any claim of a unique cinematic form typical of that period, but their films showed characteristics (content) of that socio-political milieu; there was no precision in thought or in cinematic form. Their only (perhaps) merit was the political
Though we may not find any masterpieces in the 1970s-80s political cinema (also criteria of a masterpiece also are arbitrary) `Amma Ariyan' stands out as a bold experiment of political filmmaking in content, form, participatory authorship, exhibition and distribution methods and so on. This film opens up discussions on many possible ways of re-imagining political filmmaking.

3.4.5 Political Cinema: Economics and Politics

The political or revolutionary cinema movement in Europe and Latin America came out as counter cinemas, as alternatives to the conventional cinemas and their production paraphernalia controlled by big investors and mega studio systems. Even before the full force of globalisation, the reach of the big production and distribution companies crossed over continents and flooded national markets, especially in the Third World. The advocates of national/regional cinemas and alternative political cinema movements within national cinemas consciously tried to counter the threats they perceived from dominant ideologies of the cinematic apparatus, which scholars argued, was not a neutral mechanism but conscious meaning-production system (Hayward 1996).

To analyse how political the `political cinema' movement in Malayalam in the 1970s-80s was, a host of factors affecting the politics of film production, exhibition, distribution, reception and so on need to be discussed. To revisit the important observation of Bina Paul helps frame our inquiry:

I think that political cinema has to be defined in a different way: it is not only the content, but he politics of the making of the film, the distribution system, how is it received, what it does to the audiences, what is the involvement: I think that is what could be more broadly defined as `political cinema', rather than just political content. Political content in cinema was very common in Kerala, given the history of the socio-political movements in Kerala (Bina Paul, context B).

25 `Uroob' is the pen name of P.C.Kuttikrishnan, a prolific writer of Malayalam literature, who wrote such classic novels such as `Ummachu'.
These aspects become important more than ever in the Malayalam cinema of the 2000s when many recent elements of the global capitalist market, like the economic equations of the star system, satellite and other distributional rights, parallel chains of markets like DVD, online etc are exerting great amount of pressure and influence on the process of filmmaking, its politics and so on. K.G. Jayan, cinematographer, who joined the Malayalam industry in 1984, says those days the industry was simpler, informal and with much lesser investment.

Then, Malayalam cinema was happening in a very small set-up, not like today. Today songs have a separate market value and so a marketing system via TV, satellite etc. TV marketing groups will ask `how many songs are there in your film?’. Today a unit may go to special locations abroad to shoot just a song or two. Those days we operated with limited resources (Jayan, context A).

That was also a period when there were producers, who were sensitive to the medium, like `General Pictures Ravi’, who produced most films by Adoor, Aravindan and others. Jayan compares the attitudes of the 1970s with that of the 2000s.

Another difference is today we don’t have producers who know the medium and have passion for it, like Shobhana Parameswaran Nair or Manjilas or General Pictures Ravi. Today’s Producer is someone who has acquired a `date’ from the superstar; so everything else is done afterwards. The equations have changed completely and that is affecting our cinema badly….Ravi told us when we met him at his residence recently: ‘People don’t want the kind of films I produced; and if it is a film that `everyone’ wants, then I don’t want that film’ (Jayan, context A)

Definitely there were producers like Ravi in the 1970s, who were film buffs, knowledgeable in the art and technique of cinema, with some distinct taste for a new `breed’ of cinema; if not for such discerning support, the concept of a `New Cinema’ would not have never been proposed and tried out in Malayalam. Apart from such sensible individuals, then there was a `film community’ with a `collective dream’, which we discussed earlier. It made the `politics of the film industry’ a matter of less or no botheration, because many paid technical and production jobs in a film production unit today were done by volunteers I the 1970s. In the case of Adoor, Aravindan and others the `volunteers’ included stalwarts in respective fields like Kavalam Narayana Panicker (theatre), Artist Namboodiri (visual arts), C.N. Sreekantan Nair (theatre), Kadamanitta (poetry) and others. The star system was not in
place in Malayalam then and in many New/Political cinema projects, actors like Gopi, Nedumudi Venu and others worked as part of a ‘village theatre club’ that presented their stage shows, not for remuneration but as part of the ‘communion’ of artists that many refers to have existed in the 1970s-80s. Ramachandra Babu, cinematographer, who entered the industry in 1970 and is still a busy cameraman, looks at the contrast between the 1970s and the 2000s:

Those days the whole team was committed for good cinema; there were no hotel rooms to stay; in a rented house all will sleep on floor (on simple mats); the core team will be involved in the project from the beginning to end: scripting, location hunt, shoot, edit. There was a fraternity/collectivism all throughout the work. We used to meet and spend time even when there was no shoot; in Madras most days we will have such evening gatherings and discussions. If there were film screenings at Embassies or film societies we will go together. Then there will be discussions on those films. So it was a very lively period. Now things are compartmentalised: people have become ‘departmental’, will stay in their own room and no discussions, no feeling of ‘working together on a common project’ (Ramachandra Babu, context A).

Production, Distribution and Exhibition of the ‘Political/Art Cinema’ in the 1970s did not involve a paraphernalia of mechanism their power politics. Today there are associations for film producers, distributors, exhibitors, technicians and even actors. K.R.Mohanan shared his experience of bringing out his first fiction feature, Aswathatmav, in 1979 and having it screened in theatres across Kerala, through simple mechanisms that involved less investment, competition and control.

For Aswathatmav, P.T.Kunjumuhammed bore the major share of the production cost, so his name is given as the ‘producer’. The production cost was only Rs. 1.65 lakhs; we could have easily completed the film for 1.30 lakhs if not for the loss caused by the popular actor Sukumaran, who had agreed to do the role of ‘Kunjunny’, somehow it didn’t work out and Madambu Kunjukuttan, the writer of the original story, himself was cast in the main role….the film completed two weeks, house full as noon show; it was these ‘new cinema’ genre films that introduced the format of ‘uchapadam’ (noon show)…. they were all low-budget films with usually some 4 release prints in total, so couldn’t compete with mainstream films in regular show with sufficient prints. Media gave the name ‘art films’ (Mohanan, context A).

The ‘New Cinema’ and ‘Political Cinema’ in the 1970s was also known as ‘parallel’, not only because of its alternative cinematic styles and practices, but also because of the parallel style of modest production, distribution and exhibition systems such
cinemas developed. But apart from such modest modes which were well within the structures of the film industry, there were attempts to establish parallel/alternative networks for production, distribution and exhibition of such a distinct branch of cinema that they dreamt of developing into a big movement eventually.

Chitraleka Film Cooperative, instituted by Adoor Gopalakrishnan with the support of Kulathur Bhaskaran Nair and K.P. Kumaran had initial success stories starting with the production and distribution of their first feature fiction, *Swayamvaram*. Chitralekha also networked with more than 100 film societies in Kerala, some of which arranged parallel screenings of the films from the `Art/Political Cinema’ category. Then came `Odessa Peoples’ Movie Collective’ in the mid-1980s, which was born out of a desire for a radical model of political filmmaking, which was proposed by a group of Naxalites or sympathisers, who entrusted John Abraham to provide the movement with its vision and action plan. It was literally a `peoples’ collective’ a real counter political infrastructure against the film industry establishment. Odessa was built up from scratche, collecting donations from very ordinary people.

The parallel film production, distribution and exhibition (as regular/noon shows and through film societies) that supported the `Art/Political Cinema’ movement in the 1970s indicate that there were conscious and unconscious efforts and support systems that the filmmakers, film lovers, a group of artists from all spheres and another set of sensible producers had built up, which tried to evolve its own vision, politics and practices. This alternative network helped the film movement not to succumb to the pressures and politics of the industry.

**Summary**

The `cinema of the 1970s’ may not come back to hit the screens and appeal to the audiences today. With the flooding of satellite TV channels, DVD market, online movie streaming, downloading and so on, there have been drastic changes in sensibilities on all sides— of filmmakers, viewers, film society members, film festival crowds, film producers/exhibitors and all. Today’s audiences are well exposed to a
more dynamic visual culture and their attention span is very short. We are talking about the fast pace of the post-MTV generation.

One could understand the aesthetics and politics of the `cinema of the 1970s’ better, when we position that cinema within the socio-cultural mosaic of that period. More important than assessing what a static concept of `political cinema’ could realise in a particular period like the 1970s, is to look at the process through which such static and centrist concepts of politics and politics of a work of art are being constantly redefined today. It is possible that when a set of static concepts of politics is being challenged and rearticulated, some other sets of static concepts and models are ushered in, consciously by interested groups or unconsciously through the interplay of various factors and actors.

When we sum up our inquiry in this chapter into the `political cinema’ movement in the 1970s and its present contours, a very harsh reality stares at us: that the full view of Malayalam cinema is marred by the fact that half of the `Malayalee reality’ is still `hidden’ or blocked from our full view or is deliberately left in the dark. Women, Dalits, Adivasis, sexual minorities and all people at the margins, who are underrepresented or misrepresented in our cinema forms the `Hidden Half’ referred to here. Deedi Damodaran holds our faces to the bare truth that women are still `outsiders’ in Malayalam cinema; that applies to other sections of people too.

When we talk of politics and election we always had to speak of `reserved seats’ for women; so open quota is for men always. When it comes to Malayalam filmmaking scenario, we should ask `why didn’t we have any women technician in the 80 year history of cinema?’ Women write poems, novels etc; then why not a screenplay? I have helped my father copy some 30 screen plays. I haven’t felt it as a special strenuous task that only men can do…then why didn’t we recognize it as a lack that we didn’t have any women screenplay writers in 80s years’ time? It shows that Malayalam cinema so far had such a one sided story-telling (Deedi Damodaran, context B).

The 1990s and beyond may open up new outlets and more overlapping spaces and incorporate multiple voices. If the hegemonic forces try to hold on to and maintain the closed system as it is today, the `Hidden Half’ could refuse to lie hidden anymore and could refuse to cooperate with the system. They could mount creative forms of disobedience and protest ‘from within’ the system. Conceiving the politics of cinema
or any other work of art for tomorrow depends on such creative forms of disobedience, resistance, re-articulation and re-creation. Such new articulations and re-creations may bring to light those aspects of life that have been ignored under the over dose of the dominant political models of today and their dogmas.

As Andrei Tarkovski creatively protested against the excess of Stalinism and its imposition of ‘Soviet realism’ on art and cinema, today we may find many individuals and small groups in our own land, rising to uphold individual freedom, dignity and identity. The new political movement of tomorrow may focus more on the personal and trans-personal dimensions of life, the aspects that the politics of the 1970s ignored or side-lined in its preoccupation with the collective identity, the ‘politics of commonality’ and ‘liberation of the masses’. Today, ‘Personal is political’ no more remains a slogan, but has slowly become part of people’s belief, conviction and praxis. We shall discuss such different directions in which the very concept of ‘politics’ and ‘politics of cinema’ is being redefined in Kerala in the period 1970s-90s and beyond.