Chapter IV

POLITICS REDEFINED:

IMPLICATIONS TO MALAYALAM CINEMA, 1970s-90s

With the fall of socialism and the emergent postmodernity and globalization, the foundations of the ‘political cinema’ movement originated in the spirit of Soviet realism and reinforced by the Italian Neo-Realist movement, the French New Wave and the Third Word avant-garde modernism were shaken and collapsed or subjected to redefinition and re-articulation. The interpretation of politics in different contexts and locations and the negotiation of political spaces and processes by different agencies have changed and become complex. The new concepts and praxis of politics have complicated the approach to and interpretation of politics of an artistic product, politics of a film, for example. A monolithic idea of politics, purported by the Marxist model based solely on the category of class realised in and through the dynamics of class struggle can no longer exhaust the definition of politics, nor do an ‘author-centred’ politics could completely explain the politics of a film. Today, author, audiences, the cinematic apparatus, changing technologies and other factors contribute to the weaving of a film’s textuality, leading to immense possibilities of multiple readings of a film and hence multiple perspectives to consider its politics.

Well ahead of the eclipse of communism in Soviet Russia and East Europe, Andrei Tarkovski, the Russian filmmaker, who had to sail through life and career as a ‘rebel’ or ‘deviant’, had written about the deepening and diversification of cinema and its politics in contrast to the homogeneous model that Soviet realism sought to promote:

Cinema is (therefore) evolving, its form becoming more complex, its arguments deeper, it is exploring questions which bring together widely divergent people with different histories, contrasting characters and dissimilar temperaments….The collective consciousness propagated by new socialist ideology has been forced by the pressures of real life to give way to personal self-awareness. The opportunity is now there for filmmaker and audience to engage in constructive and purposeful dialogue of the kind that both sides desire and need (Tarkovski 1987: 84).
Studying the movement from ‘political cinema’ to ‘politics of cinema’ in the context of the ‘Third World’ and its concrete realisations in Malayalam cinema from 1970s-90s forms part of The Broad Objective of this study: To critically look at the status of the ‘political cinema’ and the transitions in ‘politics of cinema’ in Malayalam from 1970s-90s. To examine how and to what extent Malayalam Cinema in the postmodern era 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 etc.

In its hey days, the ‘Third Cinema’ theory, outlined in the different ‘manifestos of revolution’ by Solanes and Getino, Rocha, Garcia Espinosa and others made overarching, even messianic claims and purported to speak for a vast socio-geographical region that in the 1970s and even now produced the majority of world’s films (take the track record of India for instance). The theory and praxis of Third Cinema, envisaged as an ‘imperfect cinema’ or an ‘aesthetic of hunger’ not only justified the socio-political conditions in the Third World then, but ignited revolutionary imaginations of a ‘guerrilla cinema’ capable of confronting and transforming those conditions at the ‘base’ (Chanan 2004).

Though the models of Third Cinema were neither homogeneous nor static, the national cinemas formulated in each country or region (Kerala for example) after the Third Cinema variations, put the metaphor of nation at the pedestal, attempting a ‘unification’ of all difference and divergence under its hegemonic discourses. Guneratne criticises Third Cinema’s double marginalization of women both as filmmakers and as political actants in that without access to as much power and as many resources as their male counterparts, they have historically been less capable of “living up” to the political demands of Third World political cinema (Guneratne 2003). Ella Shohat calls attention to the predicament of Third World feminist cinema operating within the constraints of ‘national’ cinemas. Feminist films in the Third World, engaging the question of the ‘national’, are produced within the legal codes of
the nation-state, often in hegemonic national languages, recycling national intertexts, projecting national imaginaries (Shohat 1996).

In India, working within the constraints of the film industry and mechanisms of the state such as film production subsidy, promotion through government outlets, and censorship regulations with double standards results in bringing out politically ‘compromised’ films; this is not unique to feminist films, but is applicable to all ‘political cinema’, patterned after Third Cinema, generally known as ‘Parallel Cinema’. Guneratne (2003: 23) identifies these limitations imposed by bureaucracy as the major reason behind the staggering political interest and commitment among Indian Parallel/New cinema filmmakers: “Any project undertaken by one of the directors of the New Indian cinema is a labour of many years spent most often negotiating labyrinthine government bureaucracies, and so the films themselves are seldom topical”. Such issues of state-sponsored and controlled film production and exhibition should not be botheration in international co-productions and other exhibition and marketing avenues that globalisation has unleashed. But another set of seen or unseen restrictions and agendas are imposed in this case and ‘making films politically’ (Godard) becomes a daunting task. On another level, the new digital technologies that have remoulded the conventional ways of making, showing and viewing films act upon the language of film, the economics of film (production-distribution relationship) and the reception of the film and influence the redefinition of politics of cinema.

This study examines the global and local socio-cultural movements and events and theoretical developments that have informed and influenced the redefinition of ‘politics of cinema’ in contemporary times. Its scope is limited to Malayalam ‘political cinema’ in the 1970s that attempted to model after the ‘Third World political cinema’ launched in Latin America, Africa and Asia. This study looks at the present contours of the ‘political cinema’ movement and the process of redefinition of the very concept of ‘politics’ in Malayalam ‘political/parallel’ cinema and Kerala cultural politics in general, in the postmodernist and post-Marxist/post-Coldwar contexts. This treatise therefore does not claim to be an exhaustive study of all political and film theories that
have had possible influences on all different streams of contemporary Malayalam cinema.

Many theories valid in the European and in general Western situations may not necessarily tally with the postcolonial context and particularities of a ‘Third World’ country like India. It is true that the geographical and economic borders have been rendered irrelevant by globalisation, economic liberalisation and international migration and so on. But the hangover of colonization and the experiences of inequalities, injustice and oppressions typical to a postcolonial nation continue to influence the imagination of our artists and filmmakers in particular, in ways quite different from their European or Western counterparts. Different groups and sections of our people who have been pushed to the margins so far in the name of gender, sexuality, caste, religion and other factors are playing significant roles in the redefinition of ‘politics’ today. Such attempts of our subaltern populations to assert their subjectivities and identities may not easily yield to analysis by theoretical frameworks proved relevant to the ‘majority’ of the so called ‘first world’.

The ‘new politics’ in the 1980s-90s and beyond in Kerala and India at large, though partially influenced by theories and movements in the West, is apparently drawing its energy from the local new social movements focused on ‘single issues’ than universal/macro political concerns. Through such unique struggles for identity, women, sexual minorities, religious minorities, Dalits, Adivasis and all such marginalised people, many new actors, have come on the ‘centre stage’ in recent times. In such a scenario, theories like the effacing of the subject/author proposed in the post-structural debates of the West will be still a case of ‘text book’ theory.

Writing on the Third worldlist context, Stam and Shohat clarifies this contrast:

At a time when the grand recits of the West have been told and retold ad infinitum, when a certain postmodernism (Lyotard) speaks of an “end” to metanarratives and when Fukuyama speaks of an “end of History”, we must ask: precisely whose narrative and whose history is being declared at an “end”? Dominant Europe may clearly have begun to deplete its strategic repertoire of stories, but Third World people, First World “minorities”, women and gays and lesbians, have only begun to tell, and deconstruct, theirs (Shohat & Stam 1994: 248).
Bearing in mind the specific contexts and locations we discussed, we attempt to look at the process of redefinition of the ‘politics’ of cinema; politics understood in relation to power structures and discourses on power, rewriting the concept of power as emanating from one centre, state or party or church or any other vertical power establishments.

4.1 From ‘Political Cinema’ to ‘Politics of Cinema: Redefinition of politics, global-local

A sea change has been happening since 1990s in the discourses on ‘political cinema’, by shifting the discussion of political cinema as a static genre linked to restricted geographical and militant contexts (like Third World neo-colonial insurgency) to considering all forms of cinema within a national (Cuban) or regional (Malayalam) film industry and looking at how and in what ways those films and their processes (production-distribution etc) could engage the filmmakers with the audiences and other stake holders in the process. In the ‘Third Cinema’ of the Third World, this process of redefinition started with the interrogation of the very concept of ‘Third World cinema’ and its ‘totalizing project’ based on Marxist-socialist and revolutionary ideology (Guneratne 2003). The questioning of the foundations of Marxism (Valentine 2009) in general and its applied theories in aesthetics has occurred as a movement from within and also as ‘attacks’ from other philosophical schools of thought such as postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, feminist theory and so on. Post-Marxism, as a critical materialist approach differentiates itself from the earlier dogmatic approaches, which tends to regard Marxism as canonical.

In the context of Kerala where, unlike the East European and similar situations, Communism or Marxism has not faded out and is still in ‘command’ to certain extent in the political and cultural spheres, the Post-Marxist critique from within is more relevant in rethinking and reformulating the politics of cinema. It is an act of ‘going beyond Marx’ and opening up to newer possibilities as V.K. Joseph, the Leftist political activist and film critic comments:

There is a beautiful saying: people after Marx saw the world standing on his shoulders. Those who come afterwards should stand in the shoulders of their
predecessors who had Marx to guide them. So it is a constant process of climbing on the shoulders of new people and new thinking. If you don’t do this, you can’t see the world. If a Marxist today says that she/he is standing under the shoulders of Marx, he/she is not a true Marxist. You have to see beyond what Marx saw, because the world has changed much from the time of Marx. (V.K. Joseph, context A, 1970s).

Marxist thought had a prolonged and fecund engagement with filmmaking practice even before it served as a unifying force in the revolutionary struggles against Neocolonialism that inspired Third Cinema (Guneratne 2003). Observing the impact of Marxist social analysis in the success of two important film movements, Neo-realism and New Wave, a collective of filmmakers, technicians and critics, the ‘Estates General of Cinema’ was formed in Paris in 1968, to provide an institutional basis for taking up the questions of political filmmaking and political analysis of the mainstream cinema, which always exert great influence on the public. Two questions they raised were firstly, how does mainstream cinema contribute to maintaining the existing social structure and secondly, what is the appropriate form of oppositional cinema that will break the ideological hold of the mainstream and transform film from commodity to instrument of social change (Lapsley & Westlake 1988). Both the issues were taken up and developed further by the Cahiers du Cinema (journal) group in France, that had spearheaded the ‘New Wave’ film movement; Jean Luc Godard, their ‘torch bearer’, converted all his further films into ‘essays’ on political filmmaking. Along with Cahiers and other film journals in France, the British journal Screen actively contributed to the promotion of film theorization wedded to politics.

For the Latin American filmmakers and critics--many of them trained in Europe and linked to Neo-realism and New Wave—when they launched the Third Cinema (known as ‘Cinema Novo’ in Brazil and ‘Cinema Nuevo’ in rest of Latin America), the second question raised by Estates General of Cinema became most pertinent: what is the appropriate form of oppositional cinema that will break the ideological hold of the mainstream and transform film from commodity to instrument of social change? In contrast to ideological concerns of their European counterparts, the ideologues and practitioners of the Third Cinema had the oppressive neo-colonial political establishments and its hegemonic institutions as concrete realities before their eyes,
which imposed the ‘dominant ideology’ in real that the Europeans only had ‘imagined and projected’ as real. The Third World people and filmmakers had in common that same tri-continental call to arms against social injustice exploitation as those of the inspirational activist-theorists of the preceding generation, Ho Chi Minh, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara and Amilcar Cabral (Guneratne 2003). But when the Marxist-socialist ideologies, the backbone of the Third World political cinema, had huge setback and the Soviet and East European block collapsed, the ‘Third World’ nations and their ‘new cinema’ movements faced severe crisis as reflected in Shohat’s remarks:

The early period of Third Worldist euphoria has given way to the collapse of Communism, the indefinite postponement of the devoutly wished for “tri-continental revolution”, the realization that the “wretched of the earth” are not unanimously revolutionary (not necessarily allies to one another), the appearance of an array of Third World despots, and the recognition that international geopolitics and the global economic system have forced even the “Second World” to be incorporated into transnational capitalism (Shohat 1996: 55).

Anvar Ali, poet and communist fellow traveller, says that their small group of film enthusiasts at Trivandrum who regularly watched film society screenings or attended festivals, had already sensed the winds of change by mid 1980s in some films that came from the East European block:

In spite of all restrictions and even persecutions, great filmmakers like Zoltan Fabri, Andrej Wadja and others, Istvan Szabo from Hungary, these East European filmmakers discussed politics mostly through allegories; they reacted against the repressive ways of the autocratic state machinery. Their films spoke of other concerns different from material outlook of the socio-political reality; they started to voice the value of individual freedom. We could read between the lines the dissenting voices even in the so called ‘socialist projects’; perhaps it was not very clear in the socialist euphoria of those days. (Anvar Ali, context. B, 1970-90s)

With the collapse of Communism, the Third World people in general and filmmakers in particular have lost faith in revolution and cultural activism connected to social change. Theoreticians across the globe have begun to question the validity of an all-embracing project like the ‘Third Worldist cinema’. Eventually ‘politics’ of Third Cinema is turning less political with a focus on the importance of individuals and
private realities taking the place of revolutionary filmmaking; films have stopped advocating mass mobilization of the people to overthrow the government, or, in the case of Cuba, to support the revolutionary state (Shaw 2003). We shall look at these changing trends in the politics of the ‘post-Third Worldist cinema’ in the globalised world, from post-Marxist and postmodern viewpoints and also look at how the shift to ‘personal as political’ gets translated into the political appropriation of a film by small divergent groups or communities, who constitute its situated audiences.

4.1.1 Post-Third Worldist Political Cinema in the Globalised world

‘Third World’ was a term first used at the 1955 Bandung Conference of the Non-aligned Nations by the then President Sukarno of Indonesia as a linguistic designation for the collective plight of those countries which had until very recent memory had suffered through the dying spasms of the imperial projects of Europe (Guneratne 2003). The proponents of ‘Third world cinema’ envisaged their project as capable of encompassing all films made by political/militant collectives across the ‘Third World’ in the full sense of the term (geographical and political) in that phase of immediate experience of neo-colonialism. Accordingly, ‘First world cinema’ meant big budget commercial films produced in the mainstream film industry in their countries or the films of the mega production companies/studios like Hollywood. ‘Second world cinema’ stood for independent auteur cinemas in Europe/North America or again in their own regions.

4.1.1.1 Politics beyond Marx: As globalisation and the transnational permeation of politics, economics and commerce have blurred the conventional concepts of geographic boundaries between nation-states, today such divisions of the world into ‘first/second/third’ would only appear arbitrary and would not have any correspondence to the way things are and the way people imagine their living and acting. Today reality—for that matter the concrete realities of film production, distribution etc—is perceived as global and local at the same time (or ‘glocal’). In such a context an all-embracing international political ideology and an ‘inter-national’ cinema may not make such sense and as such is not possible today if not in the form of
a ‘globally produced and distributed’ film; K.G. Sankara Pillai (KGS)’s criticism of communism underscores this point:

The ‘teleological’ ideology of the communists is unrealistic and to some extent ‘hypocritical’, because it is removed from ordinary people’s reality. International communism presented itself as international, capable of solving the whole world’s problems. But in real life situations, communism is not international, it is local. ‘Internationalism’ that the communists brought into people’s struggles and dreams was very deceptive, it amounted to cheating people. It is an old form of globalization: ‘workers of the world unite!’ The history of communism, though it claimed to be international, was always ‘local’ (K.G. Sankara Pillai, context A)

Looking at the process of redefinition of politics in Latin American cinema in the 1990s, Debora Shaw (2003: 4) observes remarkable changes in the way politics is conceived and approached: “What is striking is the way in which most of the films reject the path of revolution and look to groups and individuals for solutions to national problems. It is as if faith in political classes and political processes has been lost.” ‘In the changed contexts’, notes KGS, ‘there is a recognition or realization that politics is not a static concept but is a process that undergoes continuous redefinition and re-articulation. So no ideology could be taken as static’.

Newer social formations are happening, which goes out of the grip of the conventional leaders and takes new forms/expressions. It has thus many centres; decentralization is not anyone’s design but a need rising in the society and the society responds to the need in different ways leading to decentralization. Today in the context of globalization, neo-liberalization and neo-colonization, local politics are getting stronger and they should. (KGS, context A)

Anvar Ali recollects that period when the Leftist-Marxist ideology was getting static and stagnating after its outrageous implementations in the Stalinist and other totalitarian models, cinemas from the same quarters, Russia and the East Europe, urged young people in Kerala to interrogate the leftist ideology stronghold.

Some critics say that this questioning started in the 70s through the writings of Sachindandan, KGS and others; I have some difference of opinion about this argument. When I grew up in the 80s, for my generation cinema gave us the courage and perspective to look at the world through a different angle than pro-left. ‘Leftism’ was almost a religion and now through cinema we got a sense that there could be and there is another world to be imagined/re-imagined (Anvar Ali, context B).
V. K. Joseph, being formed in the Communist-Marxist ideology, is convinced that he should continue in the same track, but is aware that in the changed circumstances, one should use any ideology organically so as to address the new issues as new:

The structure of the world is changing; new laws, new problems and all this become the reason for changing/remoulding your politics. You have to analyse and address the new situation with the strength of your ideology (Marxist/non-Marxist) that you have assimilated. With this you are cutting across a new path: the tool you would use is the same, but you can’t use it mechanically, but should be organically/spontaneously. As per the changing context you would use the thought process and its scientific approach. But you can’t see new issues as old (V.K. Joseph, context. A).

Joseph says that such efforts of redefinition are already happening across the world and in Kerala too, with its ups and downs or degrees of differences. There will be debates/disputes about what different people are seeing and thinking today, between Marxists and non-Marxists. But ideally what we need today is more of dialogue between people who hold different political views so that our politics will be always vibrant and never static. But not many pleasant stories are coming from different parts of Kerala about how democratically the Leftist ideology is implemented inside the party and in the public sphere; they are mostly instances of audacity and intolerance towards difference and diversity, to the extent that one may wonder if many left activists are still living in that age of cold war, fight against imperialism and all that go along with a world divided by static ideologies. Stories from the state of West Bengal and from Cuba, ‘the paradise of socialism’²⁶, where the Left has been in power for such long, do not appear very different.

If cinema can be taken as a ‘reflection’ of each society, couple of films from Cuba made in the 1990s show some process of review and rethinking regarding their model of politics happening there at least among artists and intellectuals. A comparison between two landmark films made by Cuba’s most celebrated director Tomas Gutierrez Alea (whom Castro and others dearly called ‘Titon’) ’Memories of

²⁶ The reference here is to ‘Cuba Mukundan’, the protagonist in the recent Malayalam film Arabikada; Mukundan is a CPM activist from Kannur (North Kerala), who thinks that Cuba is the ‘Socialist paradise’, where everything that Marx had dreamt is realized. While working in Dubai he falls in love with a Chinese girl and to whom he confesses that perhaps he did not fall in love with her, but ‘with China’!
Underdevelopment’ (1968) and ‘Strawberry and Chocolate’ (1993) reveals the contrast or growth in the political standpoint of Alea within the span of twenty five years, and gives us a glimpse of those bold initiatives for change `from within’ surfacing even in a monolithic system like that of Cuba. These two films show how the position of a major cultural figure of Cuban revolution shifted as evident from the change of direction that Alea took in his representation of the masculine individual in his relationship with the revolutionary society as well as in the film’s attitudes toward ‘popular’ and ‘high art’ or revolutionary and bourgeoisie culture (Shaw 2003).

A little more detailed attention to the film Strawberry and Chocolate may give us a concrete picture of and a model for the process of redefinition of politics happening in Third World political/revolutionary cinema. Alea uses the title ‘strawberry’ and ‘chocolate’ to denote two available choices and to underscore that sexual orientation (to be a gay or straight etc) is also a matter of choice and it has nothing in it `for or against’ the Leftist/revolutionary ideology. Diego, the protagonist, is gay, who meets David, a young, straight and ‘obedient’ revolutionary at an Ice cream parlour and this initial contact develops into a deep friendship, which eventually creates enough problems for both. David’s movement in the company of Diego, an `enemy’ of the revolution prompt his friends the authorities to doubt David’s loyalty to the party, but David boldly takes a chance to understand the experience of difference; he learns his lessons in the spirit of tolerance and a spirit of interrogation of revolution itself, on how open and inclusive it is. Diego also challenges revolution by choosing not to flee to the United States and to live his difference amidst the homophobic majority. Diego mentors David to become a writer and also initiates him to broad perspectives and experiences of life that an ordinary young revolutionary in a `closed’ political system would not bother to experiment with.

By the time Alea made ‘Straberry’, it had become clear that revolution was not open to everybody, certainly not to people like Diego, a non-conformist, bourgeois Catholic homosexual. Shaw holds that this focus on a discriminated minority shifts the object of criticism from the individual (as it was in `Memories of Underdevelopment’) to the collective (the state), which has been unable to integrate him to the body politic.
Because of the change in circumstances, the Gramscian model of bourgeois intellectual was no longer relevant in the 1990s to Alea and his team. Diego, unlike Sergio (‘Memories’), is no longer seen as part of a hegemonic system, but part of a counterculture. He is one of the voices of opposition speaking against censorship and in favour of cultural inclusiveness. In addition he actively promotes culture, mentoring David in his quest to become a writer and initially taking charge of the planning of an art exhibition by German. Another Gramscian notion is questioned as David, the organic intellectual produced by a revolutionary society as lacking because of the cultural isolationism and censorship of Cuban society in the late 1970s (Shaw 2003).

What is the picture from Russia, the mother of all revolutions? How did the ‘Soviet’ bloc address the collapse of communism that re-wrote their histories? One thing was obvious that the Leftist governments and party in the Third World, especially in Cuba and in Kerala were not prepared in any way to accept the fall of the Soviet bloc that had supported them in ideology, in technological development and in an area very important to this study: inspirational ideas on political filmmaking and a steady supply of film software. Most Film societies in Kerala depended on the Russian embassy and the East European consulates for a film prints, to be specific ‘political films’, and all that came to an abrupt ending by the end of 1980s. Premchand, journalist from Kozhikode, who had actively participated in the ‘second wave’ of the Naxalite movement and the ‘Janakeeya Samskarika vedi’ (Peoples’ Cultural Front) recollects the indebtedness of Kerala left intellectuals and film buffs to Russia and the East Europe and their cinemas:

After the setbacks in Samskarika Vedi, Sethu brought John Abraham to Kozhikode and proposed the idea of ‘Odessa’. Films were mainly from East Europe and the Soviet Bloc. It was as if our intellectuals were living in Kerala only ‘physically’, all other ‘existence’ was in the Soviet Block/East Europe. More than Kerala reality we knew the Soviet/East European reality; people even knew small pocket roads in Russia! (Premchand, context. B)

Anvar Ali remembers the big propaganda prior to the announcement of glasnost and perestroika by Gorbachev who opened the flood gates of change. The campaign, ‘Soviet Russia opening up before the world’ had been conducted at the Gorky Bhavan, the Soviet cultural centre in Trivandrum; it included discussions on glasnost,
perestroika etc, with the blessing of the Soviet government. The team also had brought Russian films that had never been shown in India. Anvar cannot forget one particular film, which particularly brought to light another face of the Soviet bloc that the world had not known before:

There was this film called ‘Commissar’ made by a woman, a film against Brezhnev; so the film had been confiscated and destroyed, even negative was not spared. But she somehow had managed to take a print of ‘Commissar’ and sneak it to the world at large. Later the Communist Government as part of Glasnost and Perestroika got one copy of that film and they even brought it to Kerala. This black and white film is female centred, on the life of a female commissar, the frictions that she faces at the war front and the film also portrays the gap between the government and the common people (Anvar Ali, context B).

The gap between people and the governments, between ideology and praxis and between the centre and the periphery led to the fall of communism and socialism. By the middle of 1980s the Soviet political systems had shown signs of decay, says Anvar, which became evident in some films that reached Kerala through the film society/festival circuits:

It was in this context the first International film festival came to Trivandrum in 1988. There was a film from Russia, which its director himself had brought his film, in which he discussed something similar to ‘glasnost’; a character in that film representing Bolshevik Stalin. We had heated discussions with Velappan about this film and some other films. We didn’t want to speak against the socialist system, since we were all leftist-leaning; but on the other hand, many of these films clearly showed that the Soviet socialist system in itself was degenerating (Anvar Ali, context B).

P.K. Rajashekaran (2011:8) finds similarities between the waves of change that shook Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe and the storms of change that have erupted in the circle of Arabian nations in 2011, starting with Tunisia and reaching its peak in Egypt27, “The winds of change that shattered the communist totalitarian governments began in Hungary in 1989 and it calmed down with the effacing of the Soviet Union in

27 Experts call the new modes of revolutions in the digital age coordinated through ‘Face Book; communities and other social network sites as “soft power revolution”. The latest case of this model towards the end of the year 2011 (when this Thesis is being submitted) is the protest against Putin in Russia in the recent elections and his tampering with the results and the heavy-handed style of dealing with the protestors.
Common people who led the revolutions against those oppressive communist regimes did so hoping to witness a change in political concepts and conditions that would address their concrete local issues and struggles for survival. Push for a change in the very definition of politics came from schools of new philosophy, such as post-structuralism and postmodernism, which attacked all essentialist political ideologies like Marxism that proposed ‘grand theories’ as explanations of reality.

4.1.1.2 The Postmodern moment: Hill (1998) describes postmodernism as a system in philosophy that demonstrates a growing suspicion towards ‘universal’ or all-embracing systems of thought and explanation. Postmodernity lays stress on the heterogeneity and fragmented character of social and cultural realities and identities as well as the impossibility of any unified, or comprehensive, account of them. It accepts the impossibility of gaining access to ‘reality’ other than via the ‘discourses’ through which ‘realities’ are constructed. Lyotard’s ‘The Postmodern Condition’ became very influential in developing this line of postmodern thinking. For Lyotard, ‘the postmodern condition’ may be defined in terms of growing incredulity towards what he calls ‘les gran recits’ or ‘metanarratives’ of Western thought. The ‘modern’ that the postmodern seems to supersede is not the ‘modernism’ in art, but the ‘modern’ systems of thought associated with the Enlightenment and its association with a project of ‘scientific’ explanation and mastery of the natural and social world.

KGS explains the movement from grand narratives to small and fragmented narratives with the advent of Postmodernism and the impact it had on the re-conceptualisation of politics:

The Leftist movements in India have moved away from grand narratives and members of the new Left moved into the emerging new social movements, especially into environment movements, gender issues etc. These new movements were the result of a new prudence or discernment that came after and as a result of the Emergency; those who moved on to these movements were people, who realized or recognized that values or new inspirations existed in the new social movements or elsewhere.(KGS, context A).

Janaki also locates the evolution of a new concept of politics in the Indian context, in the change of thought that confronted and remoulded the monolithic model of politics in the 1970s, a model that Janaki considers as a necessary stage in this process:
The 1970s engaged with a unitary, fundamental or radical politics. But it had its many limitations. The politics of the 70s was man-centred; it was a different dimension of humanism. Larger political issues of earth, environment and sustainable development hadn’t surfaced in the 1970s….It was the political movements that emerged later questioned the very process of development. That way more fruitful and micro politics evolved in the 1990s. I find today’s political consciousness more productive. I don’t write off the 70s, it was a very relevant period, but lots of water has flowed down after that (Janaki, context. B).

Anvar Ali traces the ‘postmodern moment’ entering Malayalam literature through poems such as ‘Shishtam(the remaining) by K.R.Tony and ‘Makkal’ (children) by Atoor Ravivarma that were written around 1988/9, contrary to an earlier understanding among some critics that postmodernism dawned through the poem ‘Kochiyile Vruksham’ (the tree in Cochin) by KGS. In ‘Kochiyile Vruksham’, one can still trace a ‘prabodakan kavi’ (preaching poet) at the centre, who is above the situations that he describes in the poem, whereas Shishtam is about a doomed poet, who has not written any poem worth mentioning and not to mention he has not written about the ‘political martyrs’: ‘Alas! What a bad poet I am; haven’t written even one poem about a political martyr!’ Then he gives a long list of martyrs, taken from an earlier poem of K. Sachidanandan. The list includes Subramaniya Bharathi, Neruda and others; a long list at the end of which comes K.Venu, the firebrand leader of the 1970s’ Naxalite movement: ‘Not yet dead; will die on sick bed’ (‘panikidakayil kidannu’). Anvar points out that poems like Shishtam announced not only the death of the author but the demise of all grand narratives, theories and movements that were at the centre of societal and cultural life at the peak of modernity:

This poem represents the zero degree writing of the postmodern age, no prophesies of the speaking subject, what is his identity, nothing is clear; no attempt to clarify; this alarming zero degree authorship represents a shift in creativity. It comes at a time of shattered grand narratives. What is shocking is the disappearance or absence of many ‘presences’ that were in the scenario, many realities that are not there anymore. This poem and works in this postmodern age present mainly such shocks of absences. But there is no attempt to state an ideology or ideals (Anvar Ali, context B).

Anvar shares the experience of being at the threshold of a new epoch and part of it, without being fully aware of what was happening: ‘Then I wrote my poem ‘Ekanthathayude ambathu varsham’ (fifty years of solitude) in 1997. I didn’t know
that even my poem was representing this new shift after the disappearance of narratives.’ Slowly they understood that this was a common phenomenon that the writers around the world had faced in addressing a world where all grand narratives had been shattered.

We may not easily identify immediate responses in Malayalam cinema to the advent of the ‘postmodern moment’, if not recognize its spirit in filmmakers’ attempts to experiment with non-linear and episodic narratives. But this was more in the line of what Kurasawa had done in Rashamon in the 1950s, presenting the story in different segments and each segment presenting a version of the story (‘truth’). Recently the Mexican Director Alejandro Gonzales Iniarritu had experimented with this episodic form in his ‘Amor es perros’ and ‘Babel’, two films that became ‘model lessons’ for many young filmmakers around the world. Experiments like ‘Paris I love you’ and ‘Das Kahaniyam’ (in Hindi) incorporated more than one story/film (by the same/different filmmaker) put together or integrated into the body of the film and this model was recently tried out in ‘Kerala Café’ directed by Ranjith (which in fact is ten short films by ten directors and the common link is provided by the ‘common’ director). Adoor Gopalakrishnan also seems to have sensed the ‘spirit’ of this age and his two latest films, ‘Nalu Pennungal’ (Four women) and its sequel ‘Oru Pennnum Randu Aanum’ (A woman and two men/ ‘A climate for Crime’) testify this. Though John Abraham and his team had experimented with a non-linear, non-centred narrative in ‘Amma Ariyan’ (Report to Mother), that film made in 1986 was moulded more in the ‘political documentary/docu-fiction’ framework of the Third Cinema, inspired by classical works in that genre like ‘The Hour of the Furnace’.

A film worth mentioning that in some ways represents the postmodern moment and the broader understanding of ‘politics’ in this age is ‘Kathavasheshan’ by T.V. Chandran, in which the episodic narrative is successfully executed. Chandran continues the experiment in his latest film ‘Bhoomimalayalam’, where he integrates seven separate stories of seven young women, most of them linked to concrete incidents in the current socio-political scenario of Kerala. Kathavasheshan, produced in 2004 as filmmaker’s personal response to the genocide in Gujarat, tells the story of
Gopinatha Menon whose suicide is shown at the very beginning of the film and the reason behind his suicide is investigated through the many different `versions’ about his life presented by other characters. There is Gopinatha Menon at the centre of each `fragment’ and each segment provides some possible reasons for his suicide, but the `non-centeredness’ consists in the narrative format, which does not present a linear progression. With each segment the story begins all over again from where the previous segment had begun and the progress in the story is brought in by the character of Renuka, the journalist (who had been betrothed to Gopinatha Menon and his death had taken her too by surprise), who links the all segments and finally leads us to the reason why Menon might have taken his life. The important segments are the ones presented by Gopi’s sister Vishalakshi, his former girlfriend Sreedevi, his friend and leftist comrade Janardhanan, and Mr. Kathavarayar, his colleague. Through the investigation of Renuka, the film eventually gives us enough clue about the reason behind Gopinathan’ suicide, that he was too good a persons, who always ‘got involved’ unnecessarily in his instinct to help whoever was in some trouble or in need of help. The investigation finally takes us to his `suicide note’ which reads ‘’for the shame of being alive” and the film also reveals that the immediate provocation behind his suicide was the news about Naseem, the Gujarati Muslim girl (who was like sister to Gopinanathan), who had been raped and killed in the communal riots.

There is an interesting scene (no.25) in the film where his friend Janardhanan criticises Gopinathan for his apparent ‘a-political’ positions in life, and Chandran effectively uses this scene to comment on how the concept of `politics’ needs to be constantly redefined in the context of the Left-leaning Kerala. Here politics is often perceived as cadre party politics or militant movements, which always aim at big/grand political acts. Gopinathan tells his friend comrade. Janardhanan how he was wandering in different parts of India doing some good to people around and comments `Humans should help other humans’. Here his friend jumps in and says, `That is politics!’. The words coming from the comrade’s mouth is T.V. Chandran’s reminder

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28 Indebted to the screenplay of `Kathavashesan’ (T.V.Chandran), published by Chintha Publishers (2006)
to all comrades in Kerala or elsewhere to do introspection and find out what exactly are their definitions of ‘politics’.

Chandran could not overcome his temptations to make a ‘martyr’ out of the character of Gopinathan; but this martyr is quite different from the martyr of the 1975 film ‘Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol’ (another Gopi). The martyrdom of Gopi (Kabani Nadi, where he is killed in police encounter) served a definite ‘teleological’ purpose, because he died in the name of revolution, for a ‘better world’. Gopinatha Menon’s martyrdom (he in fact took his life, not an ‘honourable’ act!) in ‘Kathavasheshan’ does not have any ‘goal’; he took his life “for the shame of being alive”. His death in some way represents the postmodern condition of void, an ‘absence’ and a loss of a ‘centre’ or a ‘unifying’ goal in life.

The challenges of the postmodern condition in the globalised world we live in have been significantly influencing the process of redefinition of politics in World cinema, in terms of a significant shift from concerns for ‘greater causes of humanity’ to small, local issues and concerns of individuals, communities and minorities. The transnational challenges like migration, ethnic/religious clashes and the like do figure in world cinema today. But the thrust is not on treating these themes on a ‘universal’ canvas seeking permanent, ‘grand’ solutions or ‘perfect’ ending; the focus is on how individuals and communities are facing these challenges and engaging with them.

K.R.Mohan, filmmaker and the former Festival Director of IFFK (International Film Festival of Kerala), has this observation on the nature of films screened recently at IFFK and it serves as a summing up comment to this section:

> When we look at World cinema, block wise, let’s say Latin American, East European etc, at IFFK we get more films from the Third World block (competition in Afro-Asian and Latin American). These films are influencing us at the level of content. What are the major concerns in their content? Migration, resistance movements, identity issues of a ‘Third world’ person who is exile in a ‘first world’; these are some major themes. (K.R.Mohan, context. A)

### 4.1.2 Situated Viewership

A movement from author-centred or text-centred politics of cinema to a viewer-centred understanding has been gaining momentum recently, parallel to the centrifugal
movements tending towards difference and diversity that have propelled the redefinition of the very concept of politics itself. In an author-centred/text-centred model, we give full agency to the film (text) and in extension to the filmmaker and her/his ideology forming the main focus of discussion on ‘political cinema’. The question raised at the end of a film used to be ‘did the film make a proper political statement’, instead of investigating how the film text is received/read by its multiple viewers coming from different locations, who retain the ‘dominant reading’ and who contest it and produce ‘resistant’ or ‘negotiated’ readings.

Shohat and Stam (1994) explains that neither text nor spectator is static, preconstituted entity; spectators shape and are shaped by the cinematic experience within an endless dialogical process. The strong “subject effects” produced by narrative cinema are not automatic or irresistible, nor can they be separated from the desire, experience, and knowledge of historically situated spectators, constituted outside the text and traversed by sets of power relations such as nation, race, class, gender, and sexuality. Media spectatorship forms a trialogue between texts, readers, and communities existing in clear discursive and social relation to one another. It is thus a negotiable site of interaction and struggle, seen for example, in the possibility of “aberrant” or resistant readings, as the consciousness or experience of a particular audience generates a counter-pressure to dominant representations.

The Third World political cinema, in its preoccupation with political conscientization and mobilization in view of revolution or social change treated its audiences as homogeneous mass. Informed by politics of identity, different constituencies are now seeing cinema as a critical space for engagement and they confront the tendency of ‘militant’ or political cinema to promote a class-based dominant reading. Guneratne (2003) points to such attempts surfacing from alternative sexuality movements. Third Cinema’s emphasis on class struggle to the near exclusion of other, “secondary” forms of oppression has come under more sustained scrutiny with the emergence of such textual approaches as gay/lesbian film criticism. Shaw (2003) notes that many ‘political films’ made in Latin America recently are criticised for its gender bias. For example applying feminist readings, ‘The Voyage’ by Miguel Littin, despite its call for
equality in class terms, is criticised in its representation of women. Some other films are criticised for their stereotyped representation of gender roles.

Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2002) finds an author-centred/text-centred politics of cinema problematic because it promotes the idea that the progressiveness of the film narrative is the most important component of political cinema. New possibilities open up once we move away from this idea: one possible move is towards a model of critical viewing space. The way in which various identities negotiate this critical space becomes the important factor for politics, rather than a pre-given politics of particular cinema. A film can be many things at the same time and that different viewers do not see a film in the same way, the apparent ideology of the film becoming one among the many possible ways in which the film works. By shifting the focus from the filmmaker and the film to the viewer, says Ratheesh, we could include a wide variety of films, films that are generally kept out of the usual discussions on ‘political cinema’.

We revisit the observations of Janaki (Chapter III) regarding the growing understanding that one could read subtle or explicit ‘politics’ in unexpected situations and stories of popular films that we may ignore as ‘family drama’:

Not just making films politically but how to read films politically is also very important now. 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 80s and 90s. Take the example of ‘Veruthe Oru Bharya’: there is no apparent macro politics in it, but there is a deep rooted micro politics in it in terms of power relations in family relationships….we should consider it as a strong political film. (Janaki, context B).

It is not only different genres of film and the possible ways of understanding those film texts and their context, but also the changing subjectivities of the film spectators/viewers complicates the understanding of the politics of cinema. Such an understanding marks a striking difference from the earlier perceptions of film texts and audiences as essentialised, static entities (‘Malayalee’ audience for example). Muraleedharan observes that the structural changes in the construction of subjectivity from the 1980s to 2000s were phenomenal. So we cannot say that the same kind of people watch Malayalam movies today, in comparison to the ‘Malayalee’ audience of
the 1970s. Another drastic change has been happening in the visual sensibilities of our audiences with newer technologies and news vistas of entertainment emergent since 1990s. The construction of individual or collective subjectivity and identity, say ‘audiences’ of Malayalam cinema depends on education, influence of media, people’s own idea of what you are, what you could be, what you could attain etc.

Unfortunately attention to these diverse elements that influence the formation of subjective positions of spectators has been a lacuna in the ‘political cinema’ experiments in Kerala in the 1970s and its ‘supporting ground’, the Film society movement, which has played a special role in shaping the visual media culture of Kerala. Guneratne (2003) attests that this lacuna was common in different models of the Third World cinema that they consistently ignored and under-theorized the nature of spectatorship in relationship to the cinematic apparatus. Bindu Menon (2002) takes up the case of the film society movement widespread in Kerala in the 1970s and afterwards; she notes that their idealization of high aesthetic sensibility and the discussions conducted strictly within that framework limited the discussions to the aesthetic qualities of the film text or the hidden politics of the text/director. They did not take the politics of the cinematic apparatus into serious consideration to see how it privileged or discriminated typical subject positions and certain sections of the population.

The film criticism in the region never engaged seriously with the cinematic apparatus or the shifting linkages cinema had with other domains. It also failed to gauge the relevance popular cinemas has in a location like ours, as a primary site within which our sense of ourselves is imaginatively engaged and tested out, across variety of culture forms (Menon 2002: 9).

Menon argues that though the film societies in Kerala are generally presented as liberal spaces, the participation of women in organizing and as members has been quite nominal, and still continues as such. A cursory glance at the history of film societies, their organizational structure, patterns of screening and consumption suggests that the ‘viewer subject’ of these spaces were always gendered and male. One could assume that the makers and the ‘privileged’ viewers of the typical ‘political cinema’ in Kerala were always preoccupied with the political content and impact of the film text but their restricted idea of ‘serious spectatorship’ in effect promoted what
Laura Mulvey described, a `male gaze’. Janaki finds our concept of politics and the politicization process lagging in terms of gender sensitivity in film spectatorship:

In the cinema of 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….This disparity should be traced to the wrong politicization process in Kerala that one gender was kept away (Janaki, context B).

Patricia White reviews how Laura Mulvey had confronted the `masculinisation of the spectator position’ in her path-breaking essay `Visual pleasure and Narrative cinema’ in 1975. 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 digesis 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’ (White 1998).

Perhaps this `permanent’ mould of male gaze has kept `serious’ film-viewing and filmmaking as exclusive male privileges to the extent that even those women who work in films (an `insignificant minority’ even in the ‘First World Cinema’, not to mention the case of Malayalam film industry) tend not to identify themselves as `women filmmakers’ but simply as filmmakers. Deedi Damodaran recalls an interview in television channels with Anjali Shukla, the first woman cinematographer to have been recognized as the `Best Cinematographer’ in the National Awards 200929 and she disagrees with the so called `neutral’ perspective that Anjali held on to, like many other women artists/filmmakers do:

She said that her angle/looking through camera doesn’t have anything to do with her being a woman. This should be disputed. A woman looking at a man/woman and man looking at a woman/man through camera is different (perspective); we are not talking about how technically well or bad each one will shoot this shot/scene. But the experience/perspective of a woman camera

29 Anjali Shukla was awarded the `Best Cinematographer’ award in 2010 for her work in Kuttisrank, a Malayalam film directed by Shaji. N. Karun
person is definitely different from that of a cameraman (Deedi Damodaran, context B).

V. K. Joseph, film critic, admits that the society has been imposing the ‘standard’ (male) outlook of life on women and men alike that has badly failed to promote the individuality and diversity of aesthetic experiences:

We have imposed the male-centred public-consciousness on our women and we expect things from women in a way that always should please us. Cinema is designed to appease ‘male gaze’. Thus many complex elements are deeply connected to our public consciousness (V.K. Joseph, context. A).

Attempts to broaden our understanding of ‘politics of cinema’ should acknowledge the ‘masculinisation of the spectator position’ in our cinema and the socio-cultural context of orchestrated by the patriarchal hegemony. But in the postmodern age that we live in, we need to further broaden this understanding and pay more attention to the ‘situated’ nature of film spectatorship, qualified by the markers of class, caste, gender, caste, religion and so on. Hill (1998) notes that although the feminist film theory was crucially important in the mid-1970s in introducing questions of gender into the previously sex-blind ‘apparatus theory’, it itself became criticised for an ‘essentialising’ conceptualisation of the ‘female spectator’, which failed to do justice to ‘the multiple and fluid’ nature of the female spectator who may be, and/or be constructed as, simultaneously female and black and gay. Hill agrees with Kuhn, who argues that ‘the future of feminist work on film would appear to lie in micronarratives and microhistories of the fragmented female spectator rather than in any totalizing metapsychology of the subject of the cinematic apparatus’ (cited in Hill 1998).

The recent media theory explorations of the sociologically differentiated modes of spectatorship in different cultures across the world have not yet entered and become part of the discourses on the politics of Malayalam cinema, partially because the Keralites generally tend to imagine themselves as sharing a homogeneous ‘Malayaleeness’, as they are not explicitly divided in the lines of language or ethnicity and as caste still remains an issue not sufficiently addressed. The heated

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30 Even the large number of recent migrant workers from East India flooding in does not appear to pose any serious challenges to the ‘close-knit’ linguistic and ethnic composition of Kerala. Most of the earlier immigrants from other states (predominantly Gujarat), who came and settled in Kerala for
discussions at the Kerala film festival (IFFK) is centered on a lament, the loss of *malayanma* (*typical Kerala-ness*), which Deedi Damodaran takes issue with:

Those who lament about the lack/loss of “Malayaliness” in our cinema are chasing away the highest percentage of people in Kerala to the margins and putting the culture of the high caste as the Malayalee culture. ‘Kasavu veshti’ (Kerala sari) is not the official dress of Malayalee women; to observe November 1st as Kerala *piravi* (inception) day, not all our women have to be clad in kasavu veshti in order to appear as “authentic” Malayalee (Deedi Damodaran, context. B)

The standard ‘serious viewer’ promoted by the political cinema of the 1970s and the general reluctance of the Kerala society to address the realities of caste and community, have effectively discouraged discussions on the sociologically differentiated modes of spectatorship in Malayalam cinema. Shohat and Stam (1994) clarifies that the culturally variegated nature of spectatorship derives from the diverse locations in which films are received, from the temporal gaps of seeing films in different historical moments, and from the conflicting subject-positioning and community affiliations of the spectators themselves. They argue that any comprehensive ethnography of spectatorship must distinguish multiple registers:

1. The spectator as fashioned by the text itself (point of view conventions etc)
2. The spectator as fashioned by the cinematic apparatus (movie hall/home theatre etc)
3. Spectator as fashioned by the institutional context (social ritual etc)
4. The spectator as constituted by ambient discourses and ideologies and
5. The actual spectator as embodied, raced, gendered, and historically situated

Each film texts apparently presupposes an ideal spectator, to whom it is addressed. This is mainly regulated by the cinematic apparatus itself through the organization of shots. But such an ‘ideal spectator’ always remains an ideal. The ‘viewer’ is the human being watching the film, marked by the force field that we call identities. There will be always a tension in the process of film viewing resulting from the viewer’s constant attempt to approximate to the spectatorial position, from which the film is most intelligible. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2002) cites Ashish Rajyadhyaksha’s business purposes have been neatly integrated and are living a ‘Malayalee’ existence in spite of their multi-lingual capabilities
explanation of the tension between ‘citizen’ and the ‘viewer’ in certain Hindi and other regional films intended at ‘nation’ building, in order to compare the tension between the ‘ideal spectator’ and the ‘viewer’. That ‘unmarked’ subject position of ‘citizen’ is contested by the majority, minority and marginalised communities in their attempts to assert difference and status. This contestation, Ratheesh argues, is the space for politics of/in cinema. He cites a certain discourse around the Malayalam film Susanna, directed by TV Chandra as a case of the marginalised identities coming forward and appropriating the cinematic space:

The high point in the discussions was when a group of commercial sex workers in Thrissur decided to felicitate TV Chandran and Vani Vuswanath (actress who played Susanna). This incident should have been seen as the ‘political moment’ of the film, completely extra-textual, irrespective of the possible controversy over whether Susanna could be called a commercial sex worker or not (Radhakrishnan 2002:26).

T.V. Chandran in an interview had clarified that his ‘Susanna’ is not a sex-worker, because that character as he conceived, does not fit into any ‘single’ identity descriptions. This political ‘intervention’ by the sex workers, looks similar to the reported appropriation of the film Fire by various lesbian groups in India, where again the filmmaker Deepa Mehta tried to explain that her film was not a lesbian film. There were another set of reactions to the same film, Fire, from across the country, objects raised in the name of ‘Indian’ culture, accusing the film as “cultural degradation and selling India to foreigners”. Responding to similar reactions at the screening of Fire at the Kerala Festival in striking contrast to the usual reactions of such ‘serious’ film festival crowds to films with ‘women-oriented’ themes, Bindu Menon presents a different reading of the ‘Malayalee male spectator’:

Can we read the overwhelming response to Iranian films at the festival as instance where ‘the proclaimed Secularism’ (also the Malayalee sense of having an already liberated female population) of Malayalee spaces coinciding with a majoritarian Hinduism to sympathise with the backward female subject of Islamic nations? (Menon 2002: 10).

Different groups and communities contesting to appropriate the critical space of cinema make cinema a substance of political activity. If a film text apparently presents ‘dominant’ reading foregrounding a single religious identity to represent the ‘nation’
(as in the case of Roja by Maniratnam), other religious groups may contest it with ‘resistant’ readings. Also a particular religious/caste community may object to the representation of their subjectivities by a film text, challenging the film’s gaze that stereotypes them in a particular mode of ‘looked-at-ness’. A review by a Muslim youth31 (K.Asraf) of the recent Malayalam film Anwar by Amal Neerad (based on the Hindu-Muslim riots, explosions etc in Coimbatore) serves as an example:

Amal Neerad produces cinematic pleasure in this film Anwar at the cost of overlooking the histories and lives of South Indian Muslims. Thus, the riot victims and the whole ambiguity about bomb blasts in South India are systematically neglected by his camera. Instead, the gaze falls on the figure of the Muslim terrorist, in the figure of Babu Sait (Asraf 2010).

People read film differently. Radhakrishnan (2002) urges that the redefinition of the politics of cinema needs to move forward from its static positions. It should take the different negotiated/resistant readings of a film by various viewers, as an important political move, without losing sight of the closures that the film puts in place. Such negotiations open up new and interesting possibilities for different constituencies like gender, sexualities, caste, religion etc. Instead of getting fixated at the ‘classist’ or ‘intrapsychic’ (Shohat and Stam 1994) readings of a film, these constituencies, the feminist movement for example, could imagine the politics of that film as a nexus of negotiations coming from different locations—women from Dalit communities, the working classes, religious minorities, sexual minorities, commercial sex workers etc. Such an approach to the politics of cinema will be qualitatively different from the often used political frames and parameters that the ‘serious’ audiences of the ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s were so familiar with and which certain sections of critics and spectators still attempt to promote.

4.2 Left to ‘Broad Left’ and ‘Beyond Left’: Changing contours of Kerala cultural politics, 1970s-90s

To review the circumstances and factors that prompted and propelled the process of redefinition of politics of Malayalam cinema, we naturally look back to see how the very concept and praxis of politics has been redefined in Kerala cultural political

31 Taken from post by K.Ashraf in the film discussion forum (2010) on ‘Green Youth’ online/e-group
sphere. In the unique history of Kerala where the cultural renaissance and other resistance movements had laid the foundation for a long term Left legacy, this process of redefinition apparently have come from two directions: one is a movement from within the conventional and radical Left that attempted to realise a ‘broad Left’ (dialogue and/or coalition) and the other trend is a movement from outside, from the civil society and from people at the margins (who are in the interstices of Left and Right) to take politics ‘beyond the Left’. When we look at these two movements, the branching out of the Naxalites into diverse directions in the early 1980s and their joining hands with the New Social Movements (NSM) are very important. The struggles of the marginalised and the subaltern populations triggered by the politics of identity are very significant in imagining the ‘broad Left’ and ‘beyond Left’ redefinition of politics. But in spite of all diversity in thought and action in these ‘broad and beyond’ political movements, the frame of reference still remains ‘the Left’, which is understandable in Kerala context. Consider the fact that Kerala, like Cuba, withstood the collapse of socialism and communism that shocked the Left political movement across the world towards the end of 1980s. But since 1990s, the communist movements in Kerala are facing severe challenges. The clarity in the Leftist/Marxist theory and practice and the commitment of the leaders as well as cadres have faced steep decline, but their foundations have not been fully knocked down and shattered as it happened in the Soviet Union, East Europe and elsewhere. Grounded on the shaking foundation, the Left in Kerala therefore can comfortably discuss ‘broadening and going beyond’, while the Left in other parts of the world is talking about ‘rebuilding’, from the scratches, as evident in the concerns of Marta Harnecker, writing from the contemporary Latin American context.

We live in a world that is nothing like the world of 50 years ago. Ours is a world characterised by the defeat of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the transformation of the United States into the world’s biggest military power with no countervailing force at all, a situation that has dealt a heavy blow to the Left and progressive forces….New Horizons are opening up but the challenges we face are enormous. And we are not in the best shape to take them on. We need to rebuild the Left….To do this we must first take a harsh look at the weaknesses, mistakes and deviations that hang heavily over our past and we must make sure that we know what caused them (Harnecker 2007: 1).

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We have already reviewed the attempts of the `new Left’ or the `radical Left’ to renew or broaden the conventional Left, an initiative emerged in the 1970s. Most of the young radicals or Naxalites were originally members of either the Left-Communist or the Right-Communist party, who had got disillusioned with their party’s preoccupations with parliamentary politics and resulting lack of interest in `real revolution’. KGS, who for a while had joined the cultural wing of the radicals and ignited the movement with his `revolutionary’ poems, considers the radical Left in the 1970s as the first major initiative to renew and broaden the Leftist politics. So he calls them the first brand of the `New Leftists’ in Kerala.

The `Left’ which should be with the proletariat, the oppressed, was with the upper class and the elite, protecting their interests; thus the `leftist’ in reality was a rightist party. So a movement that opposes 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. It was an ever-renewing self, ever renewal of the situation (KGS, context A).

Sara Joseph, writer, who along with her colleagues and students had taken the first steps to launch perhaps the first women’s movement (known as `Manushi’), visualises the renewal or broadening of the Leftist movement as an impact of the movements from the margins that persuaded the Left, the Right and all systems, to open up and accept change:

In the 80s we see the flourishing of the new social movements from the periphery/margins and at the same time they were demanding the main stream political movements to grow and extend to the margins: `Liberation Theology’ to the official church, the eco-feminist movement to the `developmentalism’ ideology and agenda of the mainstream Left, women’s movement to the `male-domination’ inside the party, Dalit Movement to the casteist supremacies in the party (Sara Joseph, context A).

There were people who pushed the Left real hard, and still there are people who do that, with the intention of renewal or remoulding. I. Shanmugadas, film critic and Leftist fellow traveller acknowledges the interrogation of the Left from many quarters, even to the extent of some former Left activists pronouncing the `death of the Left’, but he thinks that total effacing of the Left may not easily happen in Kerala:

Some people find fault with the `left’ mark of Kerala, as a stumbling block to Kerala’s progress compared to other states. Civic Chandran, K. Venu and
others find the ‘left-leaning’ as the main problem of Keralites. They argue for liberation from the left! Keralites who were born between 1950 and 2000 can’t easily take off the stamp of left, even for the ‘Right’ front people. In Kerala ‘socialism’ is a must entry in any political agenda for the Hindu right wing too’ (Shanmugadas, A)

K.A. Mohandas, writer and former Naxalite activist, agrees with Shanmugadas as he finds the left ‘bias’ as part of ‘Malayalee psyche’ that links the left to the idea of ‘progress’:

In Kerala even the Jamaat-e-Islami if it wants to be critical and progressive, it has to be ‘left’. If you want to talk of the ‘malaylee psyche’, it has this left bias. Sometimes Malayalee is criticised and mocked for this left bias/leaning (an object of criticism). There is no such typical ‘Malayalee left consciousnesses, but we can see a majority of Malaylees showing this preference/taste. There is a character that formed through many years, which we can’t deny (Mohandas, context A).

Civic Chandran, who has travelled a great ‘distance’, as he says, ‘from anarchy to radical Left’, is now a concerned critic of all forms of ‘left’ politics; he challenged the most popular political play of the 1950s by KPAC, ‘Ningalenne Communistaki’ (you made me a Communist), by staging a parody ‘Ningalare Communistaki’ (whom did you make a Communist?) discusses the need for a ‘Third Way’ in Kerala politics, I conversation with V. G. Thampy, lecturer and poet.

Civic: In Kerala there are only two positions: left or anti-left; there is nothing in between. I say that my house is ‘Third left’ (not the first or second). We need to look for a Third way.

Thampy: But even in your ‘Third Left’ the left is there. You wrote in the preface to my book/ of poems, “this is for all those who have their heart on the left.” ‘Left is right’ consciousness is there even in our subconscious.

T.T. Sreekumar (2007) holds that the desire for a ‘Third Left’ could and should be realised in the politics of the Civil Society, which works as an effective opposition to the excess of the liberal capitalist system of politics and all repressive socialist models of governments, similar to those in Russia at the time of Stalin and in some parts of East Europe. In Kerala and elsewhere it is the Left that often opposes the politics of the Civil Society and of the marginalised. The Left opposes the politics of the marginalised/subaltern, saying that they ‘sabotage’ the ‘greater cause’ of class
struggle, because for them the ‘marginalised’ are only part of the larger category of ‘class’. Sreekumar warns that the Left would always try to ‘contain’ if not appropriate the ‘marginalised’ and their movements as it happened in the ‘Anti-Coca cola agitation’ at Plachimada, in Palakkad, Kerala, originally spearheaded by the local Adivasi communities. The Left also opposes the ‘identity politics’ as they find it different from their politics of class struggle and ‘harmful’ to their macropolitical interests.

Cherian Joseph, a Left leaning political and film society activist, is convinced that the future lies not with the political movements that attempt to consolidate large masses under conventional political fronts, but with small peoples’ resistance movements:

Resistance movements are not yet dead; they are not mass movements; they are new, small social movements, which fulfill the role of keeping the global political movement alive. The role of filmmakers (artists) and activists will be to link different movements, keep them alive at national level and thus strengthen resistance at a collective level. Such small resistance movements at local or regional levels have scope in the 2000s. The big movements of the 1970s-80s have to back out or wind up; times have changed (Cherian Joseph, context A).

Sara Joseph who started her writing and women activism in the late 1970s has now broadened her area of involvement to include environmental concerns, subaltern politics and to all possible local resistance movements. There are many other writers and theatre activists in Kerala equally involved in these issues. But one wonders, says Sara Joseph, why Malayalam cinema has not yet taken the pain of bringing these movements into limelight:

These revolutionary movements/epochs didn’t get reflected in our cinema. The documentaries, of course, did take up this movement from the centre to the periphery. Our cinema is got stuck in time and even now indulging in male-dominated values. In the 70s at the time of ‘new Malayalam cinema’ the thrust was not on cash flow and retrieval, but on ‘how to make good films’….In present times, when capitalism reigns supreme, surely Cinema will be seen as a ‘commercial product’ first, and other concerns take a back seat. (Sara Joseph, A).

The mainstream Malayalam Cinema has not yet had a full-fledged feature length fiction film, discussing the New Social Movements or the movements connected to identity politics. But the popular Malayalam cinema did mould some characters that
resemble the ‘new political activist’ in the new social/resistance movements. Two significant films from the middle stream that took the ‘issue-based politics’ as their theme; they are *Jalamarmaram* (Whisperings of Water), directed by T.K.Rajeevkumar, indirectly linked to the ‘anti-pollution agitation against Gwalior Ryons, Mavoor and *Ivide oru puzhayundayirunnu* (Once upon a time there was a River Here), directed by Kalavoor Ravikumar connected to the anti-Coco cola agitation at Plachimada. It was *Amma Ariyan* (Report to Mother) produced by Odessa and directed by John Abraham in the typical ‘political cinema’ category profiles the ‘broader Left’ politics inaugurated in Kerala after the Emergency. It is T.V.Chandran, from the same stream, who, from his first film onwards, has rigorously followed the concerns of the marginalised. Films dealing with politics of identity--mostly themes of ‘gender and sexualities’-- have found a place in a considerable number of films, but mostly not as the core thematic concern of the film. A recent film, which is an exception to the rule is *Sancharam* (Journey), a film with lesbianist orientations, directed by Ligi Pullepalli (who is based in the US), one of the rare films directed by a woman in Malayalam.\(^\text{32}\)

One possible reason for why Malayalam cinema is not updating with the new political concerns represented by the resistant movements and Identity politics may be that culture and politics in our society often travel on parallel tracks. One significant exception, a moment in history of Kerala, where culture and politics came very close and into constant interaction was the period immediately after the Emergency, late 1970s and early 1980s, with the launching of the ‘*Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi*’ (Peoples’ Cultural Front) by the ‘second wave’ of the Naxalite movement. This new initiative experimented with a new concept and model of politics, namely ‘cultural activism’, where ‘cultural as political’ became the preferred mode of praxis. Though the enthusiasm with cultural activism, popularised by the Peoples’ Cultural Front through *theruvunatakam* (street plays, *kaviyarangu* (poets’ recital forums), *janakeeya Vicharana* (peoples’ tribunal) etc. did not last long, it presented a new model to re-

\(^{32}\) There are hardly some seven Malayalama films directed by women till date. The list include actress Sheela, Ligi Pullepalli (US-based), Suma Josson (Mumbai-based), Anjali Menon (trained in UK and now based in Mumbai).
imagine ‘politics’ as rooted in individual and collective creativity and freedom. Such a cultural-political model was detached from the power centres of party politics. In the following, we examine three movements, emerged in the 1970s-80s and related to one another, which eventually influenced the shift from a monolithic model of politics to broad polycentred politics; these three movements are: ‘cultural activism’, ‘new social movements’ and ‘identity politics and the movement of the marginalised’.

4.2.1 Cultural Activism

Sara Joseph, writer and activist, recollects the vibrancy of the 1970s, where many writers and artist wanted to move forward from the concept of ‘progressive art’ that the conventional Left had converted into almost a ritual. Parallel to the modernist-existentialist trend in literature and art, a group of poets like Sachidanandanand, K.G.Sankara Pillai, and Kadmanitta spearheaded the line of ‘political awakening’.

Parallel to the existentialism excess in Literature we also see the bold experiments of Kadamanitta, Sachidanandan and KGS. In the wake of Emergency, Sachidanandan wrote a poem titled ‘Navu Maram’, Kadmanitta’s ‘Kurathi’ and ‘Kattalan’ also became very popular and meaningful. These poems allegorically attacked the powers against democracy and human freedom. In ‘Mundu’ by KGS, a dobi tries in vain to wipe out the red colour spreading over the white dhoti…the doby tries to stop the spread, but in vain….at last the ‘reddening’ stops, but then the whole dhoti was fully torn out. This poem represents all those Naxalite youth who had been tortured brutally (Sara Joseph, context A).

These ‘revolutionary poets’, artists and theatre activists like Civic Chandran, Madhu master and others, who had jumped into the radical political band wagon in the 1970s—many of them put behind the bar during Emergency—many of them were not even sure if they were on the right track, creative artist embracing direct politics. This confusion lingered in their minds when they all came out in public after the martial law was lifted. They went into peoples’ midst with their poems and plays, eventually evolving into a movement of cultural activism, called ‘Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi’ (Peoples’ Cultural Front). P.N. Ashokan (1989: 21) looks back to read the mind of those firebrand artists-turned-activists:

People asked them to tell stories and recite poems; their inner spirits were longing to hear the roaring music of revolution. Those writers and artists had
joined Naxalism and celebrated their honeymoon with politics. The idea of the 'Peoples’ Cultural Front’ was born from these cultural activists who had identified themselves as cultural activists; culture came first and then politics. Many of these writers had already been recognized as ‘revolutionary poets’ and thinkers. After Emergency they easily moved on to cultural activism through writing and publishing an array of little magazines: *Prerana, Prasakthi, Vaku* and so on.

Ashokan notes that the *Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi* was born out of the conviction that Communist party world over had failed in addressing art and literature. The pioneers did not simply present PCF as a forum for promoting art and literature, on the contrary, they demanded that such activities should meaningfully represent the ‘superstructure’ which the Marxists never considered as pertaining to direct political concern.

KGS confesses that before Emergency artists like him, who had walked in the Naxalite line, had followed the radical line of the primacy of politics; but once they realised it they took a different track, a democratic approach:

> After emergency what we have is a democratic approach that view reality, our day-today experiences, with a democratic vision and that rereads our experiences in that light. The radical approach in art of the 1970s thus transformed into this post-Emergency 'democratic’ approach. There is a self-criticism that we went after a movement blindly saying ‘Charu Majumdar is our chairman’ and embraced this extremist line *(KGS, context A)*.

Premchand, who had just joined for intermediate in 1977, right after the Emergency, recollects how easily his friends and he got attracted to radicalism. The Cultural Front had made the ‘angry young men’ image of Naxalites appealing to Keralites. The first “peoples’ tribunal” conducted at Calicut Medical college premises put a bunch of corrupt doctors on open trial. This innovative event created such an impact among the public that it gave the Naxalites a ‘passport’ to openly identify themselves as activists of *Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi*, which did not have any system of membership and so anyone could easily join the group; launching of the ‘student wing of the Vedi’ spread the movement fast across the state. *Gulmohar*, (screenplay: Deedi Damodaran, direction: Jayaraj), is perhaps the only film that profiles the ‘second wave’ of
Naxalism, in which the “peoples’ tribunal” and the spread of the movement into college campuses are highlighted.

Muraleedharan testifies to the ‘heroic’ receptions that Naxalites received in the college he studied, because the post-Emergency period had generated a spirit of awakening among the youth to speak against injustice and curtailing freedom of expression: ‘we need to question them; we need a change’. Premchand shares the deepening of his involvement in the movement through Madhu master, who apparently was instrumental in upholding ‘culture first’ position among the radicals:

We three (Joy Mathew, Pavithran and me) were not ‘hard core’ radicals; our interest was cultural. We invited Balachandran Chullikad, Sachidanandan and others to the campus through our connection with Madhumash. After class we will reach Madhumash and he would share the jail experiences during Emergency (Premchand, context. B).

It seems that K.Venu, Ajitha and other first line radical leaders had ideological difference with Naxalites exposing themselves in public and getting involved in public life, but still Venu urged Madhumaster to get involved in the cultural front. Madhu master thus coordinated a play production titled ‘Padayani’. Premchand, Joy Mathew and others got an immediate experience of activism through art when the play was staged. They say that the style of presentation of Padayani uprooted their whole concept of theatre. This experience also helped them to get a sense of divergent streams of thinking among different Naxalite leaders. Madhu master held a quite different line that gave the prime place to culture instead of politics because he always thought that there was something wrong in the ‘politics in command’ theory of conventional and radical Marxism. He, like KGS and other artists, had difficulty in accepting the absolutism of ‘the Charumajumdar line’. He maintained his creative freedom to disagree with the party line, but carried forward with theatre productions that attracted many more young people to the radical movement and to the Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi, which became the ‘people friendly face’ of the Naxalites:

‘Parallel to this, he began the preparations for his next play after Padayani. It was Gorky’s ‘Amma’ (mother). He was creating a blend between Gorki and Brecht…. Madhumash hadn’t directly associated with Samskarika vedi, but the general impression was that he was in it, and so he also got arrested after the ‘Janakeeya vicharana’ (people’s tribunal) at the medical college. But in a way
you can say ‘Samskarika Vedi’ was built up across Kerala through the tour of the play ‘Amma’ (Premchand, context. B).

Civic Chandran, whose commitment to radical politics also had culture in prime focus, took significant leadership in coordinating the Samskarika Vedi activities across Kerala. He in his partly autobiographical writings titled `Ezhupathukal Vilichappol’ (when the seventies called), clarifies the dynamics between culture and politics, the two different lines among the radicals:

We were against mixing up the party structure with that of Samskarika Vedi. We insisted that the party and the Vedi, and culture and politics always should be in a dialectical relationship. Vedi should not be made into a party platform. Vedi should not be used to host party functions. The Vedi would take its decision on its own; both the Vedi and the party would not interfere with each other’s policy decisions (Chandran 2009: 52).

Civic Chandran describes in detail about how Padayani and Amma (plays directed by Madhu master) had motivated the launching of ‘Campus Theatre’ movement and later to experiment with the format of street theatre, which resulted from the ‘instantaneous response’ to some incidents of injustice anywhere in the state. A very significant play performance that Samskarika Vedi took to all nooks and corners of Kerala was Nattugadhika (Baby 1983) and performed by a group of Adivasi youth and elders. Gadhika is a ritual among the Adivasis that they perform every year seeking the intervention of their gods to relieve them from diseases, curses etc. Samskarika Vedi brought them to the public and organized some six hundred shows throughout Kerala. In a way it gave the society an experience of ‘return to the original/primal cultures’. The play also confronted the ‘revolution’ promoted by the conventional Left in the play ‘Ningalenne Communistaki’ by KPAC in the 1950s, where the upper caste leader takes the red flag from ‘Neeli’ and ‘Karamban’, two characters from the lower caste, who had originally spearheaded the revolution at the grassroots. In `Nattugadhika’, the adivasis confront the Left and challenge the ‘revolution’ they proclaimed to bring about. This provoked the Left party in power those days and their activists attacked the theatre troupe frequently, and finally the CPM Government arrested the performers from the stage and put the young adivasi girls in the troupe in a juvenile home (Chandran 2009).
P. Baburaj, who hails from a conventional Leftist (CPI) family, analyses the influence of the Naxalite model of ‘culture as politics’ on him and many others that later led him to get involved with the ‘Little Magazines’ campaign and later in the New Social Movements:

The conventional Left, with their ’Pu.Ka.Sa’ (Progressive Artist Front) had almost stopped asking questions, under the presumption that things would happen the way they are. The MLs raised questions and questioning habits. Their ‘Two-line’ policy led to the formation of Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi (to incorporate sympathisers of radical politics). ‘Natugadhika’ play was part of this; the Nayanar government (1980s) banned the play. This period thus became very active, ‘culture as politics’ became very active again after the time of KPAC (Baburaj, context. B).

Baburaj recollects his entry to cultural activism through the Little Magazines, which had been taking forward the ‘culture as politics’ model in another direction:

In contrast to the monolithic model of the conventional Left, there were many centres or ‘line’ of thought among the radical Left, which positively promoted democratic and dialectical relationship among the different centres inside the party, but that great deal of divergence eventually led to the disintegration of the movement, as evident in the reactions to Madhu master from some ML quarters, who mostly preferred the ‘politics in command’ line. Premchand, who had worked closely with Madhu master shares those experiences of dealing with different perspectives and standpoints:

In our times, cinema, theatre and culture in general came into the focus of political activity. On the other side activists of ‘politics in command’ were working on such projects. Madhumash went for culture, and also alternative approaches in it; he brought (ideas of) Tagore into his works, whom other comrades described as liberal bourgeois. When he presented his ideas in the Olarikkara camp, they insulted him and sent him back. He had expected that poets, writers and others would at least support his ‘culture in command’ theory. Since his independent movement didn’t take off, he continued as part of the Vedi and also as a staunch critic of it (Premchand, context B).
Civic Chandran describes this tension between the Vedi activists and the official party line (Marxist Leninists) that had not fully digested the excessive popularity of the cultural activists in the society. Those ‘loyalists’ who always stood strictly with the party line with its thrust on the ‘theory of annihilation’, branded the Vedi activists as liberal ‘pettie-bourgeoise’. Premchand assumes that some ‘extreme party loyalists’, with an intention of sabotaging the Samaskarika Vedi (in order to ‘save’ the party from the ‘liberal intellectuals’), conducted a couple of ‘annihilation’ operations at a time when the majority in the party had agreed not to implement the ‘annihilation theory’ at all. Two specific incidents, the assassination of ‘Kenichira Mathai’ and the ‘Alappuzha Somarajan’, led to the immediate withdrawal of many intellectuals and cultural activists from the ML party and the incidents plummeted the popularity of the Samskarika Vedi and the party.

Anvar Ali, poet, takes a quick glance into his past, his school-college days, which coincided with the rise and fall of the Samskariaka Vedi and its mother organization, the ML movement:

Since my 9th grade I used to buy their journal (‘Chorus’) in secret. But when I was finishing my Pre-Degree the ‘Samskarika Vedi’ had reached its nadir or end point; especially after the ‘Alappuzha Somarajan’ episode its popularity was dull and took a downward curve. Their political party was active with ‘unmoolan siddantham’ (annihilation theory); but the samskariaka vedi was working in another direction: Civic Chandran, Sachidanandan, KGS and others. Kadamanitta writing and reciting poems and also Chullikkad; then attempt at a new ‘culture for slogans’; songs (Sachidanandan); all these were gaining popularity among young people in Kerala.

Civic Chandran, who stood committed to the very last phase of the Samskarika Vedi wished if such an alternative model of ‘culture as politics’ could have survived. But he considers that the decision to dissolve the Vedi was the right one in that period; those who came out could join the new social movements that were in the offing:

When the samskarika Vedi was almost getting dissolved, we could have prolonged it stayed in the scene like ‘purogama kala sahityavedi’. But we knew that we were already singing the ‘hamsagana’ (swan song) of our movement. We knew that we were going to be working along with people from many other streams. It was the 70s that made the ‘parivarthanva vaadam’ in congress possible (John, C.K. Jeevan). Children of the senior CPI-CPM leaders were also with us, because ‘radicalism’ had given them a flame/hope.
K.P.Sasi and others joined us that way; he introduced us to the causes like that of Niyogi (Civic Chandran, context A).

KGS complements Civic Chandran’s observations about this particular juncture in Kerala cultural politics, when many intellectuals and artists ventured into broad platforms of the social/peoples’ resistance movements, after losing hopes for a ‘New Left’ that the Radical Left had enkindled and the ‘cultural activism’ proved as a possibility. These developments did not cause any significant opening up among the conventional Marxists; they either watched these new formations and formulations with suspicion and scorn or tried to disprove such new initiatives as defeating the cause of the ‘adisthana vargam’ (basic/lowest class).

There were also other leftists who didn’t move in to any new movements, but continued to represent/advocate socio-economic analysis and action. But most people across India went actively into the new social movements because their creative involvement in the society like in writing, art, theatre etc gave them insights to change the course and many of them became active in the frontline/secondary/middle line leadership of these new movements. Thus, the `New Left ‘eventually meant those people who were seeking and practicing alternatives. And we had many creative output that took the ‘New left or alternatives’ as its theme, in literature, theatre, cinema etc. (KGS, context A)

Civic Chandran recognizes the paradigm shift in the concept of politics that happened at the meeting of culture with politics and the micropolitics with the macropolitics even before the collapse of Communism at the global scenario. This meeting, which Civic and others describes as the meeting of ‘Red’ (Marxism/Radicalism) and ‘Green’ (environmental and other movements), eventually fore-grounded the politics of the Civil Society, a ‘Third Way’ between the ‘Left’ and the ‘Right’:

Then the movement from “yes Marx to “no Marx” had not yet begun. But we had realised that it was imperative to reclaim politics that the political parties had turned ´a political´ and to reconceive politics more as the micropolitics of cultural activism. Why should we leave politics with the politicians? We never leave wars with the soldiers, do we? We need to reclaim the space of an oppositional civil society and make it active and responsive against the establishment and the market (Chandran, 2009: 47).

In retrospect, we assume that due to the intervention of the ‘party line’, the movement for ‘culture as politics’ ultimately became direct politics; it did not grow beyond and revitalise the superstructure as they had originally envisaged. ‘What people wanted
was ‘heroes’, whom they received and honoured; gave them refuge, but people did not want to be part of the revolution and they were right. Instead of mass mobilization for revolution, what could ultimately create history are the movements from within the society’ (Ashokan 1989).

The Naxalite movement of the 1970s and its ‘second wave’ in the 1980s, predominantly through cultural activism, did their role not through consolidation, but through disintegration. It proved that when the ‘monolithic’ breaks out, its many fragments can still grow; grow together with other fragments—the new social movements-- of different colour and shapes. Growing ‘away from the centre’ to the margins and growing ‘from small to smaller’ seem to be a unique dimension of the new politics of the 1980s and after.

4.2.2 New Social Movements and the Polycentric politics:

An interview with Sugathakumari, the poet who became the torchbearer of the environmental movement in Kerala through the ‘Silent Valley campaign’ begins with this introduction: ‘It was in 1984, after the long struggle for eight years, the Central government denied permission for building a dam in Silent Valley….it was Sugathakumari, who sowed the seed of environmental sensitivity in the Malayalee mind, watered it and ensured it would grow’ (Hakkim 2009: 8).

The success of Sugathakumari and the Silent Valley campaigners was that they could transform it into a new form of ‘cultural activism’, in which many writers, artists, thinkers, youth and common people participated. One could see the first seeds of the ‘New Social Movements’ in the Silent Valley Campaign, the Adivasi agitation, the Fisher workers struggle and similar campaigns that focused on a ‘single issue’ around which people from all walks of life—the Civil Society-- came together and discovered a new dimension of ‘politics’. Sugathakumari recalls the “peoples’ power” that was mobilized through the efforts of many people including the inspirational energy of her poems:

I feel so great about the unity among poets for the ecological movement for Silent Valley and all….even during the Independence struggle there wasn’t such a unity among poets. …I hadn’t seen those forests …but we all wrote for
The ‘politics of the Green’ had begun in the 1970s, in the same period when the ‘politics of the Red’ was thickening in Kerala and most poets and artists had been charged with the zeal for the ‘human’ cause. Civic Chandran points to the debate in the 1970s between the Green and the Red, where the latter had privileged positioning among the intellectuals because the ‘larger cause’ had gripped them all in that ‘age of liberation’, when the revolution had reached ‘around the corner’:

There was this famous interaction between Sugathakumari and Sachidanandan: Sugathakumari told Sachidanandan, ‘you’re so concerned about man, but why not about the nature?’ Sachidanandan responded, ‘You are so concerned about nature, why not about man?’ That dialogue didn’t happen in the 70s, but did happen in the 80s and thus the environment movement spread all over among intellectuals, radicals etc. They were all there even in the 70s, but maybe it was us who was ‘burning’ and so got attention of the media (Civic Chandran, context. A)

P. Baburaj, filmmaker, whose interest in alternative politics was influenced by the Silent Valley campaign, eventually strengthened the environmental and other social movements through many significant documentaries that he and late C. Saratchandran produced and propagated by screening them at places where peoples’ agitations had been happening. He underscores the role of the Silent Valley campaign in developing a new and ‘beyond Left’ political sensibility in Kerala:

All these developments began in the 80s, when the grip of the conventional left was loosened or they lost their grip. Take the example of ‘Silent Valley’ campaign; all political parties, left leaning trade unions were all promoting the project and it was an ‘unorganized’ group of KSSP (Science Forum), school teachers and others who led the campaign, which got international support. The campaign was very unique. Two friends who came from Amsterdam University told me that ‘silent valley’ campaign is now included in their syllabus. I am not sure if it is now taught in our syllabus (P.Baburaj, context B)

Two other resistance movements that contributed to this new political sensibility are the struggles of Adivasis and the Fisher-workers’ community, who have been waging the battle for survival, for almost two decades now, not budging to the mandates of the mainstream political parties, especially the Left. Baburaj cites the instance of the
Fishermen struggle, inspired by the 'Liberation Theology' that became popular in Christian circles in the 1980s:

Almost in the same period of ‘Silent valley’, the ‘fish workers struggle’ began and the priests and nuns gave leadership to it. Sr. Alice, Tom Kochery, Sr. Philamin Mary and many others; Sr. Alice became an international celebrity. When Sasi made the documentary ‘We who make History’, I knew almost all of them, Fr. Dominic George, Aloysius Fernandez and all (Baburaj, context B).

Civic Chandran holds that the spirit of ‘fight for justice’, the slogan that the Radicals had raised in the 1970s exerted its influence on many peoples’ resistance movements in the 1980s, including the Liberation Theology that brought the radical Left and the ‘Right’ (church) to join hands with the Fisher workers’ struggle.

Naxalism also energised many other groups: Gandhians, Socialists; along with ‘Rasna’ there was ‘Suchana’ a socialist little magazine from Thalassery. One factor behind the launching of Liberation Theology in Kerala is the influence of the 70s Naxalism movement (Civic Chandran, context. A)

In the Ariyannur convention (‘Call for Grassroots Action’) convened by the ex-radicals after dissolving the Samskarika vedi, a broad coalition of all who believed in a Third Way came together; this get-together was also meant to launch the ‘Patabhedam’ alternative magazine, which very soon became the forum for all new social movements and ideas in Kerala. The media reported the Ariyannur convention as ‘From Naxalites to nuns’ (nuns from the Fishermen struggle); that title indicates the range of diversity of the groups that formed the coalition of the New Social Movements and their ‘agendas’. This openness to difference on the part of the ex-radicals, in contrast to the usual suspicion of ‘hidden agenda’ and ‘foreign (CIA) conspiracy’ typical of the conventional Left, could be an outcome of the experience of disintegration and fragmentation they had undergone.

Fragmentation had taught them that the ‘consolidation’ ideal of the Left may simply remain a dream and what was more important was strengthening the small movements and letting the ‘small’ remain ‘small’. Civic Chandran writes about this realization they had immediately before dissolving the Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi, which happened in the ‘goodbye session’ held at Payyannur, Kannur:
The structure of the ‘vedi’ with its leftist hangover was standing in the way of genuine cultural activism…it had prevented us from reaching out to the ‘post-Marxian’ alternatives happening outside our circle in the area of women’s liberation, Dalit-Adivasi empowerment, alternative development, environmental activism, organic farming, new ‘secular spirituality’ and so on (Chandran 2009: 61).

T.T. Sreekumar (2007) observes that it was those who were active in Samskarika Vedi, who paved way to the broadening of the Left, when they moved out and into people’s resistance movements, starting with ‘human rights’ movement, ‘alternative health care system’ and ‘pain and palliative care’ etc. They joined the agitation against the Naval academy at Ezhimala, Kannur, which was later linked to the Baliapal agitation against nuclear power plant in Orissa. The documentary film *Voices from Baliapal* (by Vasudha Joshi and Ranjan Palit) was screened across Kerala and it carried forward the environment movement inaugurated with the Silent Valley movement. If the Samsakarika Vedi were alive and intact today as the ‘control or coordination centre’ of the New Social Movements, the paradigm shift in the 1980s to the ‘politics of fragmented narratives’ would not have occurred.

Premchand gives an account of the launching of the ‘Pain and Palliative care’ after the conflicts at Samskarika Vedi. It was Dr. Brahmaputran who proposed a forum called ‘Medico Friends’. He, following Ivan Illich, held that the problems that we faced in the sphere of health were due to the ‘Limits to Medicine’ and the ‘Inhuman structure of the medical System’ in our country. So Brahmaputran, who was a student at Medical College, Calicut, quit the system, did not want to graduate (he did it later, after 20 years). He was instrumental for the ‘corrections’ in the field of medicine. Then new movements evolved within that, like the ‘Palliative care’, under the leadership of Dr. Suresh). KSSP (Science Forum) under the leadership of Dr. Iqbal significantly contributed to this new thought in medical field.

Premchand also recollects how the idea of women’s movement was unthinkable and unacceptable in the 1970s, even for a person like Ajitha, the ‘first woman revolutionary’ in Kerala (along with her full family, Kunnikal Narayan, Mandakini and others), who later launched the ‘Anweshi’ women’s organization in Calicut, and is coordinating it still now:
I remember going to meet Ajitha first time with Umesh. She warned us, `These Samskrika vedi activists are all traitors; with them, the movement is going to die out immediately; also too much exposure would help outsiders to infiltrate into the movement.’ Those days the women’s movement hadn’t started; even Ajitha hadn’t thought in that line. So in the conventional left and also in the radical movement there weren’t many women (Premchand, context B).

Involvement of women in the Leftist movements was not just a matter of numbers but of policy; in general also the conventional Left and the Radical Left in the 1970s were not ‘pro-women’. Premchand remembers that what happened was only marriage between the comrades. KGS adds that they could open the radical Left movement to the new realities only when they eventually moved in to human rights movements, to Dalit issues/movements, to women’s movements etc; it was a new approach of concentrating on a single issue: ‘These diverse movements pave way to a symphony of movements, coming together and doing things together or in their unique areas. If it becomes another single `great organization’ it will lead to another grand narrative and will lead to self-destruction.’

George master contends that the idea/ideology of ‘being/doing small’ was not entirely new. The Lohiya-M.N. Roy Socialists in Kerala, who had attempted a `Third Way’, combining Communism, Gandhism and many things had experimented with `small change’ under the initiative of M. Govindan and friends (they were also known as 'Royists');

There were such initiatives even before; M.Govindan was famous for this; also P.K. Rahim, who published ’Jwala’ only 12 issues because he had said it would be only 12 issues. People like Govindan believed in a `pushing politics’; he didn’t boast of bringing about a big change himself, but believed in effecting a small change, breaking open a small stream of change, and he believed that may be one day such small streams will merge/come together and effect a big change. The ‘big river’ may not necessarily retain the full character of the small streams, but the diverse beauty of all those streams will be contained in the big stream (George master, context. A).

T.T. Sreekumar (2007) and others have argued that the politics of the New Social Movements is the politics of the Civil society. Madhyamam weekly (2008) in their special feature on New Social Movements clarifies that these ‘small’ peoples’ movements exist and operate in the ‘middle space’ between the ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ or between the ‘Ruling-Opposition front’ binaries:
Many experiences of corruptions, discriminations and denial of justice on the part of the political parties and leaders have convinced the people, the civil society, that in parliamentary politics `ruling front’ or opposition does not make any difference; they both are part of the ‘state’. Today the conflict or the battle is between people and the state. So the politics of the civil society urges people to fight their case on their own, instead of leaving it to the politicians, people-representatives of the ruling front or the opposition (Madhyamam, 2008:7).

Activists who are often found at the upfront of the social movements are only trying to stand with the people, but ultimately it is the people who are the actual fighters, for whom these issues are a matter of survival, says Claude Alvares (2008), environmental activist and the editor of ‘The Other Press’:

People in Singur and Nandigram are ordinary people; they will hesitate to call themselves as ‘environmentalists’. I believe that so long as they fight for their fields, their water and their seeds, they are better environmentalists than anyone of us. For them this is a struggle for survival; for us this is a struggle for protecting the Earth and other elements, a struggle that is won or lost (Alvarez 2008:8).

Anwar Ali traces the postmodern moment/condition in the evolution of the new social movements and in their polycentric politics:

The new social movements and local struggles have come to fill in the vacuum created at the shattering of grand narratives. Realms that were not addressed till then, like the Dalit politics, women’s politics etc attained attention; so also very small local struggles and issue-based struggles. There was another ‘centric’ force surfacing, which later connected all these small movements, this centre is the global, digital network or internet. Thus things become more complex or say, the world has now become arekhiyam (non-linear) (Anvar Ali, context B).

Reshma Bharadwaj and Dileepraj (2005) argue that the political models of modernity tried to fill the empty category of ‘democracy’ with other empty categories such as ‘development’, ‘progress’, ‘welfare’ etc. Power and liberation were perceived in their ‘instrumental’ sense. Thus social change was conceived as that moment when ‘an unjust system is overthrown’ through revolution. The revolutionary subjectivity is ‘liberated’ already, which confronts the ‘enemies of revolution/progress’ and realises social change. The new politics does not aim at transformation or progress but at ‘conservation’ of resources, Nature, job security, food security, the public sphere etc. There are no universal, teleological projects in its agenda.
Janaki observes that in a society when people talk of politics, there is this question of confronting a power that was or is wielding power and political change is seen as overthrowing or replacing that power centre:

‘This is part of modernity, where change in politics is seen as change in power centre; for example the European feminist models: women replacing men who were yielding power. But there could be another model: treating multiple identities and power centres well, letting those multiple perspectives to operate on their own levels and making use of their diverse potentialities. This approach demands a redefinition of politics’ (Janaki, context. B).

I. Shanmugadas looks at how the conventional Left parties are slowly paying attention to the ‘new politics’ and how this new politics is becoming part of the philosophy of our life. Nowadays ‘March ahead’ may not be the best slogan; making a new road may not be the best eco-friendly thing to do; it may be a politically incorrect act. Now in our panchayat we may still go after so called ‘development’ projects, but at least in our conversation, we are already conscious of what is politically ‘correct’ and what is ‘incorrect’. Also the communist response to the women’s movement is changing.

The communists (party) were ‘solely’ concerned about the liberation of the working class on the whole all over the world; so they could see women only as part of that working class and their issues not as specific issue. Also since the women’s liberation movements came from the West, the communists might have looked at them as conspiring (agenda) against the universal class struggle. One basic question raised in such cases is the source of funding for some of the alternative movements--women’s, environmental etc’ (Shanmugadas, context. A).

Sara Joseph describes how till the 1980s, our views on the environment and development were all borrowed from the ‘developed’ West, which was an anthropocentric view that glorified the achievements of science and technology. It was perceived that the nature of the Nature was self-replenishment and so men could ‘till the earth and subdue it’ (Book of Genesis, Chapter one, The Bible) forever. A drastic change in attitudes has happened with the advent of Ecofeminism.

The new Ecological movements and its vision confronted the ‘developmentalist’ views and when feminism was combined with ecology, that vision became really profound and comprehensive and shed its ‘man-centred’ approach to the cosmos. The new demand that was presented to the leftist parties in the 1980s was to integrate the ecological and eco-feminist
philosophies and thus broaden their ideology/philosophy in such diverse perspectives (Sara Joseph, context. A).

George master, a Leftist fellow traveller (in fact a former Trotskyite), has firmly stood with the peoples’ agitation against the proposed solid waste management plant at Chakkamkandam, near the temple town Guruvayur. Master is happy about the composition of the resistance movement, comprising people from diverse backgrounds, from political parties and the civil society; but he is not sure if such ‘decentralised’ movements could survive and achieve their goals. He admits that he is more familiar with movements connected to a political power, which was the outcome of even a mass peoples’ movement like the ‘JP Movement’:

I see a sign, however weak it might be, it is a positive sign. Let’s take Thrissur district; there are some 20 resistance movements that I know, am sure there are more. People who are in leadership in such movements are diverse: someone like me who has clear political stand, some congress men, some CPM activists, who are in some away staying away from the party, some CPI activists. So these movements are not solidified under one party/one politics structure. Is it a weakness? We don’t know (in conventional sense, yes). What we observe in terms of outcome is that it lacks the firebrand, ‘militant’ quality and energy; so if not careful, such movements may die out for lack of clarity and concerted effort (George master, Context. A).

Conventional political powers are looking for any given opportunity to ‘solve’ the issues of these ‘fragmented groups’ of ‘oppressed’ people. ‘They all should stand with the mainstream and fight for their rights’ this is what most political parties are proposing; any case of divergence should be a ‘poly’ they think. The conventional Left parties would always want to play the role of the ‘saviour’ of the oppressed masses, who, they present as easy preys to clever schemes of the imperialist forces/ideology. But even in this ‘standard’ judgement, we sense a new sensitivity developing to respect ‘difference’ as found in the words of V.K. Joseph, film critic, leftist thinker and the director of the ‘Chintha’ (Thinking) publications (one of the official organs of the CPM in Kerala)

‘I believe that the samryajyam (imperial forces) has a role in keeping the subaltern forces fragmented….it is important to raise identity consciousness. But should we create a ‘false consciousness’ among them that they can solve their problems themselves? It will weaken the struggles and efforts of the society on the whole; care should be taken to address the identity concerns of
the Dalits, Adivasis and women. So you will have to bind them all to the mainstream. The mainstream party shouldn’t try to change the different identities, but should allow the different/diverse voices inside the mainstream. This radicalism of the total space, with diversity is what we need today (V.K.Joseph, context A).

4.2.3 Discourses on Identity Politics

The mainstream ideologies, the Leftist-Marxist thought for example, tend to believe in 'binding together' all sections of people, overlooking all forms of difference in gender, caste, religion and ethnicity etc, in view of their universal ideal of 'liberation of humanity' through revolution or social change. But people, whom they are supposedly liberating, are not a universal category, but are individuals who share different identities such as ‘women’, ‘men’, ‘lesbian’, ‘Dalit’, ‘Muslim’ and so on and such groups and communities often feel ‘marginalised’ by the mainstream and their ‘dominant ideology’. Women would say all the revolutions so far have been led by men; all history and politics and anything is ‘his-story’. They ask how a male-dominated politics could represent and speak for women. The gays and lesbians would challenge any ‘straight’ versions of politics as not representing their interests; so do the Dalits and Adivasis and all subaltern populations, who question the ‘political correctness’ of upper caste and upper class people speaking on their behalf. The new political consciousness emerged in order to address the different identities that contest for representation and self-determination, reject modernity’s ‘universal political subjectivity’ and stand to assert difference and diversity (Regu 2005).

Shohat and Stam (1994)) find the politics of identity as a call for “self-representation” of the marginalised communities, the assertion of their right for “speaking for oneself”. Gayatri Spivak’s celebrated dictum, “Can the subaltern speak?” summarises the anxieties underlying politics of identity and political correctness (PC). What is happening now is “those who have been traditionally empowered to speak feel relativized simply by having to compete with other voices. Made aware of their own complicity in the silencing of others, they worry about losing a battle, a long taken-for-granted privilege. The disempowered or newly empowered, on the other hand, seek to affirm a precariously established right.
Deedi Damodharan is convinced that unless women assert themselves and appropriate the ‘public’ spaces that always privilege men, the hegemonic patriarchy would keep you locked to the ‘private’ sphere:

Only someone who has worn shoes can talk about ‘shoe bite’. Only a woman can speak well about what does it mean to be a woman. Is this feminist fundamentalism? If it is, what other alternative women have to present her views and experiences? OK, call it so. The reality is that in Thrissur Pooram or in the procession of political parties, how many women would you find? (Deedi Damodran, context.B).

Sara Joseph, one of the pioneers of the women’s movement in Kerala (they had named theirs as ‘Manushi’) recollects how difficult it was initially to claim their space in the left-leaning Kerala context, because the Marxist party had clearly said that there were no problems or issues that were specific to women. Some factions among the radicals, the CPI-ML also said that “women’s issues are not mainstream issues” but are ‘peripheral’ issues. The nascent women’s group entered into a debate on how the issues of half of the population could be should be brought into the mainstream.

There had been a series of instances that argued for ‘upliftment’ of women, women’s education, freedom for religious worship etc. But the 1980s raised a question of ‘women’s liberation’. Are 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’ (renewal) but ‘mattam’ (change/liberation) hundred percentage (Sara Joseph, context. A).

Manushi visualised the vimochanam of women, realized through attaining equality in socio-political, economic and cultural spheres. They knew, says Sara Joseph, that a total change would not be possible because of patriarchy, which kept women restricted to their ‘place’ ‘inside’ the family. Rekha Raj (2005), Dalit scholar, acknowledges the value of those struggles against patriarchy undertaken by the first wave feminist movements in Kerala, but still such initiatives did not have any resonances of ‘different levels’ of oppression that different subgroups in the macro category called ‘woman’:

Early women’s movements that fought against patriarchy concluded that all public spaces that privileged men were related to power and such a male-dominated society restricted women’s lives and activities to the ‘private’ sphere. These upper caste/class women, even when they were discriminated on
gender, they were on an upper rung on the caste hierarchy with some limited
privileges that made them more powerful than Dalit men. The Dalit-Adivasi
women suffered ´double discrimination´ (Raj 2005:28).

George master finds an unwillingness on the part of the mainstream Leftists even now
to address the issues of the discriminated and marginalised for reasons other than
class-discrimination:

I believe that the Marxist definition of the ´oppressed´ can’t be reduced to the
level/category of class, but it should embrace other realities of oppressions,
other sections of people, whom the left ignored in the 1970s and even now to
some extent; mainly the Dalits and women. What is issue now is ´vastuhara´,
stealing/depriving of what people have (George master, context A).

Sara Joseph remembers that their movement did create an impact; it demanded the
Left to broaden and include women’s issues as integral part of mainstream politics:

With the demand of women for equal rights or equality and equal treatment it
became necessary that the Leftist politics in Kerala be broadened and
redefined. Women demanded that women’s issues should be treated as
mainstream issues and not as a sub-issue of class struggle. Women’s issues
were more basic as those issues were connected to morality, and the ´value
system´ of the society and was not just economic or political issue. This
awareness led to raising the gender question, which led to the broadening of
the leftist politics (Sara Joseph, context. A).

Mustafa Desamangalam started his active political life with the youth wing of the
Marxists, the DYFI (Democratic Youth Federation of India) later moved on to New
Social Movements. He speaks against the value system promoted by the Left that,
along with the ´fatwa’s of the fundamentalist religious establishments, subjugate
women and turn them the victims of male aggression and violence.

The Left applied the colonial, Victorian morality in Kerala and forced it in our
society….This has led to numerous atrocities and injustice, faced by women in
Kerala. Along with that the Islamist and Christian and Hindu fundamentalist
groups have suppressed the identity issues and expressions of women….The
fake/pseudo morality and sexual suppressions or inhibitions in the name of
´high culture´ have paved way to inhuman attacks against women (Mustafa
Desamangalam, context. B).

Deedi Damodaran holds that our male-centred value system perpetuates the power
structures and relations as such, never unsettling its gender bias; nothing has even
touched our system at a deeper level:
In this value system, even inside progressive movements, the person who is at the centre and is dominating others with his position or command is always a male master….In this system hardly is there any difference between a ‘powerful’ man or woman; a powerful woman is one who has assimilated all male traits regarding ‘power’. She readily embraces all those negative elements we (who work for liberation) have been attacking (Deedi Damodran, context B).

Sara Joseph recalls the optimism their movement had in the 1980s in the ‘sisterhood of all women’ that would eventually ‘erase’ all borders created by caste, religion etc.:

We raised some basic questions inside our organization: how will we address issue of caste, hierarchy etc. This led to the evolution of our politics. We realised that a ‘sisterhood’ was possible among women of all hues, a sisterhood born out after severing all difference of caste, creed etc. We wanted to address class, caste and all other issues but we wanted to overcome or go beyond those barriers through this ‘sisterhood’. Here we found that naming a Dalit as ‘Harijan’ by Gandhi didn’t serve any purpose. It is not special treatment/concession that the ‘downtrodden’ needed, but equal treatment as ‘sisters and brothers (Sara Joseph, context A).

Not everyone would agree with the optimism of the women’s movement in its initial stage and would challenge their tendency to conceive the category of ‘woman’ in essentialist notions; many groups even today tend to essentialise certain identities, failing to realise these are only constructs, which could never be understood as static states. Calhoun (1994) argues that gender is socially constructed and no such unqualified identities exist in reality. So we will have to talk about different categories of women--for example Dalit-Adivasi women, lesbians, Christian women, Kerala woman etc—who share ‘identities within identity’. The theory of social constructionism explains the complex nature of identities:

It challenges at once the ideas that identity is given naturally and the idea that it is produced purely by acts of individual will. At their best, social constructionist arguments also challenge “essentialist” notions that individual persons can have singular, integral, altogether harmonious and unproblematic identities. And by the same token subtle constructionist arguments challenge accounts of collective identities as based on some “essence” or set of core features shared by all members of the collectivity and no others (Calhoun 1994: 13)

Rekha Raj (2005) is critical of the first waves of feminism in Kerala, which fought for education, mobility, for family inheritance and equal rights in the family, because they
had conceived the identity of ‘woman’ simply in opposition to ‘men’ and this undifferentiated notion silenced the diverse voices and experiences inside ‘womanhood’.

Equal right to resources in fact applies only to those sections of women who belonged to those communities that had access to resources. Thus women’s issues became in reality, the issues of upper caste and upper class women. Such macro representations of ‘women’ as an essential category marginalised the Dalit-Adivasi women identities. The simplification of the category of ‘women’ suppressed various, diverse women identities (Raj 2005: 28).

Rovino (2005) comments on the ‘upper caste’ bias of the mainstream women’s movement in India with regard to the ‘33% reservation for women’, which they promote as ‘women’s cause’, but object to ‘reservation within reservation’, which only would ensure justice to the marginalised sections of women.

For them, a person is a ‘woman’ at a point and a ‘Muslim’ at another. They fail to admit that a person could simultaneously be all these identities (caste, religion and women). The mainstream feminists argue for ‘reservation for all women, irrespective of caste, religion etc. This can be read as an attempt on the part of the mainstream feminists to conceive their ‘women’, and ‘upper caste’ identities as separate and hide their privileged positions (Rovino 2005:23).

When women fight for the ‘undivided’ cause of women positing ‘undivided’ men as the ‘other’, gay men and men from the backward or Dalit castes, religious minorities etc challenge the ‘undivided’ notion of manhood. Radhakrishnan (2005) criticises the pitfalls in approaching masculinity as static, unhistorical entities. To conceive gender, caste etc as macro-structures ignores the historical and cultural specificities that qualify all identity constructs. He cites the examples of idealised masculinities in the novels of M.T. Vasudevan Nair, which in a closer examination of micro-structures, reveals its strategy of ‘othering’ the Dalit or Muslim masculinities vis-a-vis the ideal high caste male.

This macro approach to gender, argues Janaki, is not different from the Leftists’ attempt to subsume all identities under the category of class. She cites the example of Mayawati model of power politics, which in fact is simply substituting conventional male models of blind power with female power; there is no change in perspective. Janaki finds hope in women’s active entry into politics, which should open up more
possibilities for Dalit and all subaltern women to share the positions that high caste, males held earlier. This model of diverse co-existence rewrites the old model of ‘unity in diversity’, presenting difference in visibility, action and perception. Janaki envisages possibilities of creating new spaces within the system, in contrast to the 1970s model of radical Left politics that tried to bring in change through overthrowing the existing structures. The politics of the 1970s was ‘radical’ and anarchic to the extent that it was outside the system and was revolting against it.

Now what we are trying to do is to create a democratic space within the system, in order to democratise the institutions a bit more. In most of the institutions, we could only critically engage with the system/situation and move forward; just blunt revolt is not the order of the day. I find such awareness among more people now. The neat polarization of the 1970s is not possible or advisable today; a stand that refuse to be part of any institutional structure, but prefers anti-establishment anarchy, turns out to be non-productive eventually (Janaki, context B).

Sara Joseph agrees with Janaki in proposing ‘change from within’ as a possible model for effective political change, which she argues taking the case of Muslim women and their gender discriminations:

The Pardha/Burqa issue can’t be taken up by women from outside; or they can do it only to certain extent. Such issues have to come from within. There are revolts to happen from within each community or society. Others can’t force such revolts from outside. Only movements from within for self-liberation will be strong enough to fight against all forces unto the end

(Sara Joseph, context A).

Sara Joseph recommends subversion as the political model for the marginalised and the minorities, for example for Muslim women inside their patriarchal religion and community, a model that looks for ‘cracks’ within the system and strategically use those slippages for changing the system from inside.

I see stifling of women’s voice among Muslims and still pretending that they have all freedom inside. You take Muslim publications, all of them have Muslim women discussing women’s liberation, but they do this ‘in obedience’ to the male power/superiors. If this continues it becomes unlikely that there will be any cracks from inside….Even if P.T. Kunjumuhammed makes a film on issues of ‘Muslim women’ that film also will be limited; Muslim women have to speak out about their issues and concerns (Sara Joseph, context A)
The politics of identity, the theory and practice, has considerably been elaborated, diversified and thus enriched, incorporating the factors in a flux ‘out there’ that constantly challenge and complicate the notions of identities and their multi-layered, overlapping ways of existence and operation. Such dynamic approaches to identities and their representations—real life, cinematic etc—have been contributing to redefinition of politics itself. Calhoun underscores the dialogical/polylogical process that theorization and praxis of identities have become today. The present prominent identity politics is linked to an increasing recognition that social theory itself must be a discourse with many voices, not a monological speaking of a simple and unitary truth or its successive approximations. An increasingly transnational sphere of public and academic discourses and increasing roles for women, gay men and lesbians, people of colour, and various previously dominated or oppressed ethnic groups all press theorists not only to make sense of differences in the “world-out-there”, but to make sense of the difference within the discourse of theory. This calls on theory to take culture seriously and approach it reflexively, not objectivistically (Calhoun 1994).


The new aspirations in Malayalam Cinema by the middle of the 1980s, specifically inside the genre that was earlier considered as ‘political cinema’ in the pattern of the ‘Third World Cinema’, have been filtered by more of anxieties than enthusiasm, of how to engage with the changed socio-political and economic climate after the disintegration of the radical Left and the imminent demise of Communism. Monolithic and centrist ideologies and theories lost their battle to smaller, fragmented narratives pushed forward by various marginalised sections of people from the periphery, in their struggles for assertion of identities and self-determination, recharged by the New Social Movements. The resulting redefinition of politics demanded a redefinition and reformulation of politics of Malayalam cinema, not just in content, but in its form, mode of production and distribution as well. The ‘invasion of celluloid’ by electronic and digital technologies also impinged on the familiar constituencies of cinema politics, which influenced the modes and formats of filmmaking and moreover
drastically transformed the time and space of film viewing as these technologies restructured the conventional cinematic apparatus.

Observations of Ismail Xavier regarding the change in perspectives of Brazilian filmmakers of the 1990s in contrast to their predecessors, the pioneers of Cinema Novo in the 1960s, have analogies among the Left-leaning or radical filmmakers of Kerala in the 1970s, who also suffered the pain of a lost dream by the 1990s.

In Cinema Novo’s vision, the nation was seen as a much more cohesive and ‘matter-of-fact reality than history came to reveal. We all know the ways of culture and politics in the past decade, a period in which the filmmaker no longer has had that conviction and has plunged him/herself into that defensive stance, typical of current art cinema in its relationship to the social and the political. Looking back, one realizes how the sense of loss—related to the legitimization of political cinema through the idea of a popular mandate—had come to foreground already in the late 1960s, when the Brazilian filmmakers moved away from a utopian impulse (Xavier 2003: 41).

There are not many buyers for a universal utopia now. On the part of filmmakers and viewers, there is a sense of loss evolved towards the beginning of the 1990s. Laura Mulvey traces this sense of loss as a gap, a caesura, in aesthetic and political continuity that gives a distinct edge to the way that new cinema movements in the 1990s conceived of themselves. Mulvey (2003: 264) concludes:

These are issues to do with change and continuity and to do with the question: how to find a way to stay in touch with a ‘then’ separated from ‘now’ by a familiar litany of phrases: the decline of the industrialised working class (post-Fordism), globalisation, neo-liberalism (and) the collapse of communism….

How did Malayalam filmmakers begin to define ‘politics in the 1990s as different from ‘then’, the 1970s? If that mandate from Goddard was well taken, how did the ‘political filmmakers’ of the 70s broadened their perspective on politics of cinema and begin to ‘make films politically’? It is observed that the mid 1980s had witnessed an emergent new politics of filmmaking, with the involvement of the young cultural activists charged with the charisma of John Abraham and the innovative concept of ‘Odessa peoples’ filmmaking company’ he had developed with input from many ex-radical or radical political activists.
T.V. Chandran, who started with John in his ‘Agraharathile Kazhuthai’ eventually moved on to infuse his own films with a different kind of ‘radical’ politics, starting with his début ‘Hemavin Kathalarkal’ (Tamil) and ‘Alicinte Anweshanam’ (Malayalam), both addressing questions of identity and gender. Chandran continues his pursuit till date, constantly broadening his definition of politics of cinema, which he effectively translates into a beautiful blend of content and form. Unfortunately we are not left with many daring and politically informed filmmakers like John and Chandran by 2000s, and the broadening of the politics of Malayalam Cinema happen predominantly through the viewers’ appropriation of film texts and the critical spaces they offer, irrespective of the streams they belong to—mainstream, middle of the stream and ‘art/political’ cinema. And some of these viewers who also happen to be actors in grass roots peoples’ resistance movements and are also sympathisers of marginalised peoples’ struggles for identity, feel that such ‘new/alternative politics’ seldom find a place in any streams of contemporary Malayalam cinema. George master, an activist and a ‘friend of all filmmakers’, shares his disappointment:

I feel that the relevance of the new social movements is not getting reflected in cinema, fine arts, theatre etc. Why? Why art is not concerned about these struggles which are raising issues of survival? For example, environmental issues, global warming, love for the earth etc. Why those issues don’t get a space in our feature films? Of course documentary films do show a difference in this regard. But the concern doesn’t get disseminated into other films, art, music, theatre etc. Why? (George master, context. A).

KGS, who pursues the new alternative politics in his writings and direct interventions as well, compares the situation in world cinema with that of Malayalam cinema in terms of new political sensitivity, which he finds lacking in our region:

In a bunch of African films we saw in the film festival at IFFK, serious ecological problems and issues are discussed. The African people are holding on against the new ‘encroachers’ fiercely than the people at the time of colonization. For example that film where an old man with bugle is challenging cutting down trees and other ecological terrorism. Somehow our Malayalam cinema is still deaf to these issues. Why? It should be the contemporary political insensitivity (KGS, context. A).

P. Baburaj, filmmaker, who has many issue-based political documentaries to his credit, could only trace two films in Malayalam main/middle stream cinemas, that
showed concern for the new political sensibilities and movements that reflect this sensibility:

*Jalamarmaram* was one film that tried to address these issues. It is connected to the Chaliar struggle. Now we have Kalavur Ravikumar’s *Ivide Oru Puzahyundayirunnun* (connected to Plachimada struggle). But it didn’t enter the mainstream. Whereas the film by I.V.Sasi, *Meen*, which addressed the trawling issues was a popular hit (P.Baburaj, context B).

Musta Desamangalam, who used to be journalist, has become active as a documentary filmmaker by the mid-1990s. Currently he gets involved in popular feature filmmaking projects too. He is concerned about the insensitivity and caste-bias of Malayalam Cinema as well as literature that is becoming more glaring recently:

I wish to point out that the presence of Dalit filmmakers/technicians in Malayalam cinema is a question we need to address. Look at the attitude towards Kalabhavan Mani and to the black, ‘ugly’ (not handsome) Sreenivasan? Also take the case of Dalit writers; also look at the associated organizations of the Left: KSSP, Pu.Ka.Sa etc and also the women’s wing of P.Ka.Sa….these organizations didn’t do anything to address caste, but maintained the `upper caste, elite mentality throughout (Mustafa, context B).

Baburaj feels that our contemporary filmmakers are in no way connected to those issues that affect ordinary people. Most Malayalees are not aware and sensitive to the small local struggles. This indifference and ignorance has increased with people spending more time online to the extent of not reading or watching daily news. This shows as lack among filmmakers when it comes to developing a sense of political correctness that should reflect in their films. A recent trend in Hindi as well as regional cinema is ‘remakes’. Baburaj wonders in a remake, why the filmmakers do not ensure that the politics of that particular film would go beyond the political sensitivity of the times when the film had originally been released. A typical case is *Neelathamara*, scripted by M.T.Vasudeva Nair, the master screen play writer, who had penned the original screen play for Neelathamara some thirty years ago.

I had a recent experience of watching the latest `Neelathamara’ (2009, Dir. Lal Jose) and then the original `Neelathamara’ (1979). M.T has scripted both….The second `Neelathamara’ has deleted the last scene of protest against the feudal youngster who was scheming to molest the maid servant and dump her. This transition from 1979-2009 shows where our Malayalam cinema is moving to; we are regressing (P.Baburaj, context B).
Baburaj says that we should be more concerned about the decay at the `roots’ questioning MT himself, why he opted to be succumbed to temptations of the new age and ‘adjusted’ his original script to suit the climate of our times. MT otherwise is considered an intellectual in the post-Marxist milieu, who has been consistently involved in all alternative struggles of Kerala, Silent Valley, Chaliyar etc, and promotes all alternative thinking and living and also keep questioning structures that need to be questioned. Baburaj agrees with Sasikumar, media scholar who has described our times as ‘The age of the spectacle’, which is what gets the prime place in our cinema instead of raising political questions and concerns.

V. K. Joseph does not agree with people who think that our contemporary films do not reflect contemporary political concerns and issues. He believes people who see a lack now, are possibly positing a `perfect political cinema’ in the 1970s and are refusing to move forward. As an example he points out the films of T.V.Chandran, who did not end his radicalism by the end of the 70s. “He burned like a sun then, and still he burns”, says Joseph:

Chandran makes his films by breaking open the structure and grammar of conventional cinema. I consider them as new forms of political cinema; also we have Priyanandan’s films and M.P.Sukumaren’s films. One can’t say that ‘everything was over in the 70s’. Chandran’s ‘Kathavaseshan’, ‘Bhoomimalayalam’ etc are very political films….there are some new faces too daring to make political films, like Dr. Biju. In our public consciousness there is still that feeling that ‘70s was the end of all’. (V.K.Joseph, context. A, 1970s)

Talking about the `radical’ political cinema of the 1970s, Venkiteswaran (2005) chooses to focus on a specific aspect, namely, the ‘politics of the body of a Naxalite’. In the ‘persecuted body’ of the revolutionary protagonist of ‘Kabani nadi chuvannapol’ (the film that we discussed in this study as a key text), he reads the inevitable sacrifice of the `martyr’, a body destined for a greater cause, a body that refuses all ‘earthly’ pleasures. Such intense micropolitical analysis is comparatively a very recent trend that has entered Malayalam film studies only after the availability and popularity of DVDs of films that were available only on analogue media formats a decade ago. Now the omnipresence of digital technology is evident in all aspects of filmmaking, in film production, distribution, exhibition and everywhere; the new
technologies have revolutionised film viewing experience, elevating it to ‘pensive cinema’ in Raymond Bellour’s phrase. The technological revolution and its impact in all different dimensions of the cinematic experience put greater demands on filmmakers and viewers to constantly update and rearticulate the politics of cinema.

4.3.1 Challenges from Changing Technologies and from the Film Industry

Reviewing how the political cinema of the 1960s-70s is coping with the digital age, negotiating its continuity and relevance, Laura Mulvey (2003:265) points out the drastic changes that the medium of celluloid cinema is undergoing:

Cinema, the emblem of twentieth century modernity, had actually aged. By the time of its hundredth birthday, its century old mechanical technology had been overtaken by new, electronic and digital technologies which gave a high profile to its ageing process. Despite the fact that people still go to the cinema in large numbers, and doubtless will continue to do so, most of them are likely to be introduced to cinema electronically, either on television, roughly speaking from the 1960s, or on video, roughly speaking from the 70s. And alongside cinema going, consumption is increasingly on video and DVD.

For the new generation filmmakers and viewers, the shift from celluloid to video/digital format and of late to online streaming is not a matter of concern, but an open door to immense possibilities. But it has not been an easy transition for those who still indulge in the nostalgia about the celluloid and its bond with the hard core filmmaking styles (mostly on 16m.m) of the 1970s political cinema period and its unique film exhibition methods, using it as an effective mass media. But in a second viewing, they also come to visualise the diversity and hybridity the new technologies as a bundle of blessings rather than a ‘tower of Babel’. The wide range of cost effective non-linear film/video formats and film exhibition facilities like multiplexes and home theatres, they realise, has made the new technologies user-friendly to the extent that such technologies and facilities can be appropriated even by uninitiated non-professionals, a new breed of new ‘authors’, for their empowerment. Such an appropriation of new technologies falls in line with the kind of negotiation that Mulvey (ibid) proposes:

If the cinema in the 60s offered a framework or metaphor for contemporary radical aspiration, it is logical, perhaps to try to consider whether its hybrid descendent might offer a framework or metaphor within which the problem of
historical loss and discontinuity might be thought or imagined. The cinema in its present configuration, combining its long celluloid memory with its new digital capacity, might offer a means for negotiating across the divide.

Ramachandra Babu, senior cinematographer, looks backward and forward to assess the changes in film technologies and what it does to people’s aesthetic and political sensibilities:

Think of those days when we had to book a trunk call and wait for long. Today people don’t have the patience. No patience to read a long novel. I am trying to update according to the technological/stylistic changes in each period. I did the first Cinemascope film and the one and only 70mm film, `Padayottam’. In Hindi it was ‘Sholay’. I also paved way to the first 3D film ‘My dear Kuttichathan’ . It was me who went with the first Malayalam film that was shot abroad, ‘Ezham Kadalinakkare’ (Ramachandra Babu, context. A).

K.G. Jayan, cinematographer, started working in the `parallel/art cinema’ after graduating from FTII. He is the `good Samaritan’ most popular among filmmakers who work with a `shoe-string budget’. Jayan works on film format and also on video formats, but he feels that the changing technologies are at times taking people away from the love for cinema, which he had witnessed in the collective creative process of the `cinema of the 70s’:

In the 70s-80s, it was a network of literature, theatre, fine arts and cinema, film societies all combined and paved way to the `parallel cinema’ movement; you can’t see cinema in isolation. Today even the film society members don’t go to theatre to watch regular film releases. They are all `Film festival people’. Also people no more feel that they missed the release of a film, because one can `see it later as DVD/CD’ . So attitude and approach have changed. Now `Beemapalli’ is the `final solution’ for many film enthusiasts in Kerala (Jayan, context A).

Ramachandra Babu insists on constant update on the part of filmmakers and technicians to keep abreast with the changing sensibilities of the audience, mostly adolescent or youth:

The audience has changed drastically. Today’s audience is well exposed to visual culture; there is flooding of visuals via TV, DVD and all. Their attention span is very short/limited. Their pace of life has changed. In future

33 Beemapalli, situated near Trivandrum is infamous for its DVD market which hosts a rich collection of pirated films on video/digital formats. The `video piracy’ also should be brought into a broader discussion on the politics of Malayalam cinema
cinema may become an interactive medium. This is a post-MTV generation. (Ramachandra Babu, context A)

Jayan feels that if the audience of Malayalam cinema is showing less interest to experiments and not demanding films with profound vision and visualisation, the filmmakers should take responsibility of providing them with cheap quality of films, less in political an artistic sensibilities. Malayalam cinema had a well-defined period 1980s predominantly, holds Jayan, where we had good stories that were connected to our land and society; we could touch those ‘characters’; there wasn’t any ‘larger-than-life’ removed from our lives.

Now things have changed and Malayalam cinema is selling IMAGE/S of a super star, or ‘supernatural/superhuman’ characters or we are selling ‘sympathy’ through characters with some ‘deficiency’ (the film ‘Kunjikoonan’). It’s basically spectacle and exaggerations, things that we filmmakers can’t believe and we are forcing the audiences to believe it. The deficiencies are exaggerated which can go to the level of vulgarity. Now we have tuned our audiences to these tastes and they demand ‘more’ (spectacle/exaggeration) (Jayan. K.G, Context A).

We should not be surprised because this trend of vying for ‘big and loud’ is seen in world cinema also, says Jayan, and it could be part of cinema’s survival strategies in its competition with the pervasive television and new media that have robbed the steady audiences of cinema:

Today’s cinema is ‘Matrix’ and other computer-related films. But still those films present some different perspective, which we don’t see in Malayalam films, why? Lack of investment in our films prevents experimentation and daring projects. This may be one reason (Jayan, context A).

Cherian Joseph that in India we are now in a period that demands good films, in all respects; there is a scarcity of good and different cinema to provide for the multiplexes, satellite etc. Marathi cinema and other regional cinemas have geared up productions in order to face the crisis at national level:

Where we used to produce 1000 films a year, now at least 1500 film should be made to meet the needs, of different types of films, some would be screened only for a short period in theatre, only for small audiences; but that possibility is there. Now we are in a period where we need cinema software almost double than earlier and here is when number of cinema in Malayalam is shrinking. There used to be 100-110 films a year in Kerala, now it has come down to 60-50. (Cherian Joseph, context. B)
Cherian also points out that response to meet the increased demand does not have to come from the established filmmakers; new filmmakers should come up with new ideas and responses. Super stars are intervening in all new initiatives today and bar new and young talent from entering the industry and establishing themselves:

Government should work on a new film distribution system with subsidies etc. Now the superstars are controlling the theatre system. There should be policy decisions to fund projects of new filmmakers (say 25 lakhs and insist on small-budget films). If the Government cannot do it, there should be private/corporate film production networks like the ‘IPL’ in cricket (Cherian, context B). Bina Paul, Film editor and the Artistic Director of the Kerala Film Festival (IFFK) finds the compromises with the film industry as the main factor that works against the freedom and flexibility that political filmmaking would require; the restrictions from the industry may come in the form of exclusive promotion of ‘popular’ formats and as the preferences imposed by the superstars, who also control the lion’s share of the profit, if any, through satellite rights, video rights etc. Recent apathy to political filmmaking on the part of the film industry is also coming out of the desperate efforts by the industry to play to the tune of the drastic innovations in technology that have affected the production relationships among different sections:

In the 1980s, there was a reversal to the 60s, back to ‘feel good’, ‘middle of the road’ cinema; then the coming up of this whole star system in replication of Bollywood. These two trends killed our ‘new cinema’, a cinema that tried to position itself in a context addressing the concrete realities of the society. These trends drastically changed the ‘politics of filmmaking process’, production, exhibition, distribution etc; a kind of ‘swallowing’ happened (Bina Paul, context. B).

V. K Joseph compares the present time with the 1970s and the political fervour in films those days and argues that making film politically is becoming a big challenge today:

I consider our present time as very difficult age for taking political or personal films. That time there was subsidy, a network of production team, low cost of production etc. Also there are experiments attempted on video format. I argue with many people that now we have more open approaches and searches are there in cinema, compared to the 70s (V.K.Joseph, context A).

The huge response to short film festivals and online sites that showcase short films and documentaries and the great creative potential many of these short/documentary
films unleashes gives us hope in the ‘the present barrenness of Malayalam feature fiction films’, says P.Baburaj, who has been a member in the selection jury for film festivals like ‘ViBGYOR’, ‘SIGNS’ and few other festivals in Kerala and elsewhere. These young filmmakers, without much baggage from the conventional mainstream film industry show sparks of new creativity and confidence in handing the medium.

K.G. Jayan also testifies to the scope of short films and documentaries to deal politics since they do not have many restrictions imposed by the film industry:

Today Malayalam cinema is in a ‘sedate’ stage, it’s burning, but just smoke, the very last fumes; only area that is still vibrant is ‘short fiction/documentaries’ posted on the web or screened at festivals. In Malabar, the ‘CD film’ is also very effective and popular...in our times documentaries were government sponsored; nowadays independent documentaries are coming up and are enriching our cinematic language and its politics (K.G.Jayan, context A).

Anvar Ali, poet and screenplay writer, is on the lookout for funding for the next film project after ‘Maargam’ a film which he co-scripted. Their next script is ready, they have completed the pre-production works, but the project is in pending, due to the uncertainty of support from Government sources (NFDC-National Film Development Corporation) or private sources. He says these limitations also play a role in preventing young talents from realising their independent/personal cinema projects and prompt them to look for alternatives:

We haven’t witnessed a surge of young talents coming to make good and alternative cinemas. There is talent in main stream commercial cinema, which is a good thing. But we don’t find anyone who wants to make films on their own angst, questions of identity etc. Also if at all people make films on alternative themes with alternative formats/treatment, they are doing it on video and they are not ready to take the risk of making films on film format. (Anvar Ali, context. B).

4.3.2 Imaging Revolutions: Political filmmaking in Malayalam in the postmodern, post- Cold war context

Some people would conclude that ‘the first and the last’ politically made film project in Malayalam is ‘Amma Ariyan’, produced by Odessa ‘Peoples’ Film Collective’ and directed by John Abraham. Many activists o the Film Society movement that had played a significant role in defining and promoting a particular ‘political cinema’ in
the 1970s after the model of the Third World Cinema embraced the ‘Amma Ariyan’ project as the dream of ‘ideal political cinema’ coming true and got actively involved in finance mobilization, production management, in moulding the film text and more importantly in the very unique method of its distribution using non-conventional networks. Many ex-Naxalites also came forward to involve in the project; some participants of this study recall that the idea of a ‘people’s cinema’ project originated in the cultural group of the radicals and we read the active presence of the radicals and their political and personal life of the 1970s-80s in the film.

‘Amma Ariyan’ is history now; so too is the great visionary filmmaker who designed this project the way it is today. Did political filmmaking in Malayalam end in 1986 with this single instance of a ‘people’s cinema’ project? What did the film society activists and the radicals--some of them became filmmakers and critics later—do further in order to take political filmmaking forward? Many of them religiously attend the Kerala film festival and many other film festivals every year, they organize festivals and film screenings in their respective areas, and many of them would have an elaborate personal collection of DVDs of many ‘political films’ from across the world. How does such intense involvement with the medium of cinema by a significant section of Kerala’s intellectual community result in broadening the concept and praxis of politics of Malayalam Cinema? This cross section could provide us with a benchmark to evaluate the impact of the Amma Ariyan project and other instances of ‘political cinema’, ensuring continuity with its predecessor in the 1970s.

Bina Paul, who was the Editor of Amma Ariyan and who has been collaborating with many alternative projects ever since, could give us an overall assessment of the ‘zeal’ for political filmmaking in Kerala, as she is also the Deputy Director at the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy (which is the main public sector institution to promote film culture in the state) and the Artistic Director of the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) that entered its fifteenth year in 2010.

I don’t see the ‘world cinema of today’ in no way reflecting in our filmmakers’ works; we are just consumers of world cinema, that’s all. You should see the kind of films coming out from Philippines, Malaysia etc. These are our sister countries, where we share some common stories and experiences. There is lot
of experiments happening all over India and outside (East Asia etc), but nothing is happening in Kerala (Bina Paul, context A).

Bina says that it is actually baffling whether it is the ‘film festival culture’ combined with the film societies movement legacy or a much deeper evil that is plaguing Kerala filmmaking scenario today, that not many innovative and productive experiments are happening here. Perhaps it is a good sign that our filmmakers are no more dreaming of a ‘tri-continental revolution’ that would work to liberate all ‘wretched’, poor masses of the world. Instead, a bunch of filmmakers who have been working on their ‘personal’ cinema projects seems to have redefined the politics of their cinema more in micropolitical terms. There are no collective film projects like Amma Ariyan, but there are very unique independent film projects, by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, T.V. Chandran, Shaji. N. Karun, M.P.Sukumaran Nair, Shyamaprasad, Murali Nair and others, each film addressing distinct political issues and opening up diverse discourses.

When we review the course of political filmmaking in Malayalam in the period starting with the post-Emergency wave of Naxalism to the 1990s and beyond, in terms of the post-Marxian and ‘post-modern’ trends, what hits our mind-screens first is a move by certain filmmakers to present a head on critique of the conventional Left. An important film in this category is Mukhamukham (face to face, 1984) by Adoor; Marana Simhasanan (Throne of Death, 1999) by Murali Nair also deserves special attention.

Though Mukhamukham brings the ‘ideal self’ of a Left party leader with his ‘real’ self, face to face and shatters the perceptions of his friends and followers about him, the film also forces the Leftist political movement to do a face to face with itself, its past and present, ideal and real. Sreedharan, the protagonist is a respected communist union leader in the period before the split of the party into two. To save himself from a possible arrest after the boss at the factory he had worked got killed, Sreedharan goes in hiding leaving everyone under the impression that he was dead. He returns after ten years, when the party already had split into ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ communists. To their dismay, Sreedharan has returned physically and morally ruined, alcoholic and silent. They are forever restoring his ‘ideal’ image and the film ends in a ‘no ending’, letting
the viewers take any conclusions, an aesthetic and political device that “brought upon him the wrath of the zealots of the Communist party”, says Yves Thoraval (2000).

George master finds *Mukhamukham* as a portrayal of the disillusionment that people in Kerala have felt towards the Marxist, leftist party and its state of affairs. He says that the film showed the actual experience that many individuals in Kerala have gone through. May be many of them didn’t question the party, didn’t frankly confess their doubts and confusions.

The ‘shell’ of the left is so crystallised in many individuals so that even if they lack the inner spirit, they still continue as communists. *Mukhamukham* told the truth and I like it for that. The party looked at the film as a deliberate attempt to attack the party/leftist movement. I remember the criticism (in ‘Desabhimani’ etc) was that *Mukhamukham* was an attempt by Adoor, a right minded (anti-communist) artist to sell a film with anti-left bias to a strong anti-Left lobby (Georgemaster, context A).

Adoor does not agree with those who say that this is simply a ‘political film’ critical of the Left; he wants to stay from generalised, one-dimensional views about his characters. He says that the film could be about many things, about party politics, about youth, about memory, about creation, about story telling.

I made that film also with the intention of subverting the conventional expectations of dramaturgy. So even until the last moment we are guessing the character of ‘Sreedharan’, we don’t know who he is, we are not even sure if his name is actually ‘sreedharan’ or not. You see the whole film, still you know very little about it. Our usual convention is to let the audience unravel the whole story, leaving no stones overturned. If a film like Mukhamukham, leaves them without conclusions and final answers, our audience react out of despair; and to this particular film there were very many different reactions, from the official party line and others (Adoor, context A).

Murali Nair’s film *Maranasimhasanam* also is not just a critique of the Left, but a statement on the complex social condition after globalisation, in which the conventional Left also have sold themselves into the lure of the global capitalist market, though they may never part with the empty ‘shell’ of their ideology. The film sarcastically presents the tragedy of Krishnan, an unemployed seasonal worker, who steals a bunch from his landlord and the punishment he met with also included charging him for a non-elucidated murder in the village. The political parties take advantage of his plight during elections, parading his poor wife and demanding
justice. Not much later a new electric chair, bought with a loan from World Bank, is introduced in the village and Krishnan agrees to be the first to be executed on the *Maranasimhasanam*, for the greater cause of ‘progress’, which also would save his wife and child from starving. The text is not complex, it presents an allegory of the actual dilemma of the Leftist-Socialist ideologies after the demise of Communism; but still in the last leg it is not the party (who lost its ideology) that will be a loser, but the ordinary people, especially the marginalised, who is outside all ‘politically empowered’ margins and borders.

It is such individuals, groups and (minority) communities that T.V. Chandran foregrounds in his films, and giving a voice to their fight for survival and assertion of identities becomes the ‘politics’ of his films, in which he is influenced by the Marxist-Leftist thinking, but he is not standing where he stood in the 1970s, with John Abraham, with the iconoclastic spirit of that time. Chandran has moved forward, as he clarified in interviews, from perception of reality in ‘black and white’. John Abraham and his `band of cultural-political activists’ worked more or less within the framework of the Marxist-Leftist thought, they did not get into criticising the party politics, but attempted a self-criticism, themselves as individuals and as a movement. Right from the beginning they turned their camera on themselves (in ‘Camera Buff’, by Kieslowski, the protagonist (filmmaker) turns the camera on himself in the very last sequence) and also to the diverse realities, concerns and on-going struggles of the unorganized people across the state of Kerala.

**4.3.3 John Abraham, Amma Ariyan: A Peoples’ Cinema Model**

If there is one film in Malayalam that does not have a ‘producer’ and ‘distributor’ in the strict sense, it is *Amma Ariyan*. Production money was pooled from a wide range of people, even a single rupee from ‘the man on the street’, thus the film revolutionized the politics of the filmmaking process, turned it into a ‘bottom up’ model, growing up from the grass roots, without depending on any film production/distribution establishments, or government subsidies. Once ‘their’ film was made, people took over the distribution and exhibition too, which was organized through a network of film societies and cultural organizations spread across the state.
This model of ‘politics of the process’ was repeated never again in the history of Malayalam cinema.

Another way of looking at its politics is the approach to analyse the narrative structure and treatment of Amma Ariyan. A comment by Anvar Ali, poet and screen play writer is an apt summary of all possible comments regarding the structure (which we will take up later) of this film:

‘Amma Ariyan’ is the first attempt in Malayalam that attacked the (‘centred’) conventional form and craft. Thus that film still stands like a model; am referring to the treatment, not the content. After such films, the trend didn’t continue, but Malayalam films simply confined to the interests of the industry (Anvar Ali, context B, 1970s-90s).

How did such a ‘Peoples’ Cinema’ project originate in the 1980s? Was it the idea of a single genius like John Abraham, who is given lots of its credit; lots of the credits for conceiving the open, flexible structure of the film, which allows interventions and constant dialogue, should definitely be given to John. But the story of how ‘people’ became the ‘authors’ of this cinema should have become another elaborate history, obviously not a written history. Unfortunately the trend of documenting and preserving the process of filmmaking namely, recording ‘The Making of Amma Ariyan’ on an extra DVD had not entered our filmmaking practice in the 1980s.

Bina Paul, who along with her husband cinematographer Venu was involved in the first stage of scripting, later joined certain stages of its shooting too. It was Venu who cranked the camera for major portion of the film (the rest was done by K.G.Jayan); editing was completely done by Bina. To the question, ‘if Amma Ariyan was successful as a model?’ Bina replies, “No, it was an ideal”. She thinks that such a film model with a huge mass of people as its authors cannot be repeated again.

John as the director was the defining figure of that film, one can’t deny it. If the 500 members of the Odessa collective came together simply that film wouldn’t have been born…so it is ridiculous to say that the 500 members own the film. In Cinema we have to look for individual artist as the defining figure of a creative work, though it might be a team work. So that way, I am not very impressed with the ‘Amma Ariyan’ model of filmmaking. I can only say that it worked once for the kind of person that John was, it got showed in many places and still is being screened, but would that model work again? I don’t know (Bina Paul, context B).
Premchand, who came to the radical political movement through its ‘second wave’, which had its high point in the cultural activism of the Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi (Peoples’ Cultural Front) gives a first person account of how the Odessa film collective was formed in view of realizing the dream of a ‘Peoples’ Cinema’:

Sethu (he was an accomplished actor) had begun the ‘Dialogo’ Film society in Kozhikode. After the setbacks in Samskarika Vedi, Sethuvettan brought John Abraham to Kozhikode and proposed the idea of ‘Odessa’. The first meeting of Odessa (I had attended in it) came up with the idea of ‘Janakeeya cinema’ (Peoples’ cinema); ‘Kayyur revolution’ was proposed as the first film project (Premchand, context B).

If the ‘Kayyur revolution’ had been reconstructed and filmed as the first ‘peoples’ cinema’, perhaps Amma Ariyan would not have born. The Kayyur project was started as part of an attempt to create a broader-Left platform for dialogue among all left leaning factions, including the conventional Left party activists. Premchand recalls that process of collective creativity in which many writers, artists, film people, ex-radicals and common people had collaborated, like John, Sethu and K.Sachidanandan, the poet in the screenplay.

‘Kayyur’ project was going to be such a cinema that one can say that the script was created by a ‘race’ and not done by an individual. Under the guidance of Sethuvettan, John and Sachidanandan mainly worked on the script; and at one point the group reached Kayyur. But there was a ‘tragedy’ about it: the ‘Kayyur episode’ that they had imagined and worked into the film script didn’t correspond with the actual event that had happened in history; but the team came to realize it only when they reached Kayyur (Premchand, context B).

Premchand remembers that Madhu master and others after they came back from Kayyur commented that the Marxist communist party had cheated Kerala public by promoting false image of what happened in Kayyur. The frustration with Kayyur episode caused a rupture once again in the dreams for a broader-Left and it almost killed the ‘people’s cinema’ project. But one can say that Amma Ariyan project was born ‘from the ashes’ of the Kayyur film project. Premchand and a few of his friends somehow did not like the way it turned out after the Kayyur project did not materialise:

After ‘Kayyur film project’ was shelved, later they embarked on the ‘Amma Ariyan’ project. The ‘road movie’ structure of ‘Amma Ariyan’ (from one end to the other of Kerala) comes from the ‘maddening wandering’ that the group
(many people) had done for the preparation of ‘Kayyur’ project. We, who were involved in ‘Kayyur’ and later in ‘Amma Ariyan’ project, didn’t like the latter for many different reasons (Premchand, context B).

Ajithan (1989:27) after evaluating Amma Ariyan as a unique model of radical filmmaking confronts the activists of the Odessa movement: “Why aren’t there any other Odessa films after Amma Ariyan? Why couldn’t Odessa find another filmmaker after the death of John?

The Collective will have to do a collective introspection. For twenty five years they could not come up with an answer. In the twenty fifth year of the making of Amma Ariyan, a group of people involved in the original Collective and also in the different networks that have been exhibiting the film at different places so far came together and eventually formed a ‘Amma Ariyan Collective’; one could say that the new collective announced the death of a ‘Peoples’ Cinema’ dream, because in a way, they declared that Amma Ariyan was the first and the last peoples’ cinema and there will be no more.

4.3.3.1 Amma Ariyan-Rebel Sons returning to the Mother: review and discussion

Plot structure: Purushan, a young intellectual, who was supposed to pursue higher studies outside in the nation’s capital, all on a sudden changes his mind, leaves his lover and embark upon another ‘mission’ when they come across the dead body of an unidentified young man (Naxalite?). Purushan realises that the deceased was one of his friends, and so he takes up the responsibility of ascertaining the dead man’s identity and informing the news of his death to his mother. On his journey to meet the mother, he is joined by a big group of people, most of them not actors or characters, but ‘real’ people, bearing their ‘real life’ names (Balan, Mokeri Ramachandran and others). Purushan, who in a sense could be called the protagonist, whose ‘Report to mother’ (his own) forms one stream of the film’s narrative (along with many other). But the real protagonist is the group, which grows bigger as the narrative progresses. The film shows us the sons bidding farewell to their own mothers (as does Purushan in the beginning) before they begin the long journey. The presence of many mothers underscores the absence of fathers (typical of that period when many men had left homes, were missing or dead). The suicidal death of ‘Hari’ (it took time to identify him) reminds similar deaths of many other young radicals who had taken their life in disillusionment.

The film takes a loose and flexible narrative structure, mixing past and present, fiction and actuality; the story of Hari (past) is interwoven with the journey episodes of the group that goes in search of Hari’s mother. A parallel narrative is added as the ‘report
to mother’ in the monologues of Purushan. Scenes of torture of the Naxalite youth/s are reconstructed, again as a reminder of the 1970s-80s period. Some segments linked to the main body (example ‘the play rehearsals with Ramachandran Mokeri, “Free Free Nelson Mandela”’) takes us back to major political issues and incidents in the 1980s, adding lot of documentary elements into the plot structure.

The journey begins, cutting it then straightaway to various peoples’ struggles that came up in Kerala in the early 1980s, which also interrogates the ‘failed Left’ and the radical Left, that did not stand with the agitations of the poor and unorganized workers to claim their basic rights. Naxalite ‘period’ is reconstructed (police station attack etc), Marxism and its practice in Kerala is subjected to scrutiny. The poem, ‘the intellectuals of my country will be confronted by the poor’. As a report to the mother, actual socio-political episodes narrated: Kottapuram agitation against black market, Vypeen liquor tragedy, the ‘first’ communal riots and killing happened in Fort Kochi (among two sections/dialogues of fishermen) and scene of women workers’ struggle suppressed by police. Journey reaches Fort Kochi, where the parents of Hari live. The ‘impatient’ revolutionaries of ‘yesterday’ now wait for the ‘mother’.

The last scene in the church, where the ‘protagonist’ paying attention to Jesus’ martyrdom and discussion on the Naxalite theory of annihilation, the effectiveness of ‘people’s tribunal’. A reminder to all revolutionaries: ‘our victories are short lived’. The big crowd gathers around Hari’s Amma after she is informed of Hari’s death. She ‘marches’ forward with the group and the film freezes there. Now the film stops and the final image is transformed into the film ‘Amma ariyan’, that is being screened in front of an audience. The ‘Mother’ of the protagonist, Purushan is also there in the audience, watching the film. The meeting of two mothers: the ‘real’ and the ‘image’ or ‘an image within a image’ (as memory), connects many more mothers, sons and daughters.

On one level this film is the collective introspection of the group, the ex-Naxalites, about their ‘radical past’, about their ‘revolutionary missions’ without telling their mothers/family. Civic Chandran, an ex-Naxalite connects the text to their life-story of the 1970s-80s.

The attempt to rectify our radical past (1970s) and the decision to move on to the future (1980s) resulted from the questions, ‘what happened to the Naxalite movement? why couldn’t’ we talk to our mothers in the 70s?’ ‘Amma Ariyan’ came from that thinking (Civic Chandran, context. A).

V.G. Thampy, who had faced many of his radical friends’ parting with mothers and family, finds a ‘returning home’ motif in the film:

I see a great spirituality/search in the film ‘Amma Ariyan’. It was a reclaiming of an important truth that the 70s had negated/ignored, that any revolution can
be won only if you let your mother/mothers know; mothers can understand. A revolution that doesn’t accommodate one’s individual/private worlds, his/her family/women, can never succeed as revolution. The radicals of the 70s were ‘dry individuals’ without roots and branches (Thampy, context A).

Thampy argues that the revolutionaries in Kerala in the 1970s were ‘empty’ individuals, all male, who walked out of their homes, avoiding their mothers (since ‘women can not go out and lead revolutions). Revolution snatched sons and daughters from their mothers. Civic Chandran, in conversation with Thampy admits that ‘going away’ (1970s) and ‘coming home’ (1980s) are the motifs that separate these two periods:

Thampy: In the 1980s I see many of them returning to their mothers. This is one reason why we get back fullness of culture in the 80s.

Civic: Yes, in the 1970s Chullikad wrote, ‘kanneru kondenne thirichu vilikalle amme’ (mother, please don’t call me back with your loving glance). But towards the end of the 1980s, we see ‘unnikal’ (sons) returning to their mothers.

Thampy: This return to mother could be return to the ‘nature’ (ecological revolutions), to our own identities, not necessarily the ‘physical mothers at home’. This also becomes an appreciation towards womanhood.

Amma Ariyan thus became a ‘ritualistic’ experience for those who walked through all the junctures of the film, meeting many mothers who had lost their sons, including the mother of Hari and the final sequence of the group marching forward with Hari’s mother and ending the film in the meeting of image and reality: on the whole Amma Ariyan becomes a ‘Tribute to all Mothers/Motherhood’.

Acknowledging something that they had not acknowledged at the zenith of a ‘man-centred’ revolutionary project of the 1970s; the ‘revolutionary sons’ (and daughters) can now begin a new, comprehensive life with ‘the Mother’, in the 1980s. Leaving behind the violent, man-centred, teleological concept of history, they could begin a new life of ‘here and now’, respecting life, the Nature and all indefinable elements in life, for which ‘the Mother’ becomes a symbolic representation, a figure that is not guided by the scientific rationality principles of modernity. Amma Ariyan thus heralded a new beginning, where the meaning of politics got broadened and diversified moving on to environmental activism and involvement in the New Social
Movements that wanted to stand for justice and human rights and stand with all marginalised people, whom modernity and revolution had neglected. This shift could be recognized in the dedication that Civic Chandran has done later when he wrote `Ezhupathukal vilichapol' (When the seventies called); he has dedicated the book to his mother and five other women in his life, one can say, ‘dedicated to womanhood’.

Amma Ariyan presented a different ‘politics’ of the cinematic form, by moving away from the conventional centred, linear narrative styles. We would not see a ‘clear and distinct’ politics of John Abarham in Amma Ariyan, as the single author of the film. The ‘group’ on the move is the author, the protagonist, and the ‘co-creators’ of the film text. When Odessa network took this film across Kerala and elsewhere, more people in each locality felt that they were also ‘co-creators’ of Amma Ariyan, interacting with a group of ‘real’ people and real issues of life. The decision to end the film at the meeting point of image and reality provides the viewers with a possible continuity and growth of the film text in their own lives. Also, at no point, the audience would feel that they are watching a performance; the distance between the viewer and actor/character is eliminated through Brechtian alienation technique. The ‘road movie’ format with multiple layers of narratives—of reconstruction of the past, the encounters in the present, fictional/staged segments and documentary footage connected by the voice over of Purushan (as report to his mother and the voice over of the Narrator), resembles styles of Third World political filmmaking in Latin America cinema, like the `The Hour of the Furnace’ by Solanes and Getino.

4.3.4 T.V. Chandran-Susanna: Cinema of People at the Margins

In the interview given for this study T.V.Chandran explained the politics of his cinema, which underscores his insistence on ‘personal is political’, that clearly departs from the slogans of the Malayalam commercial ‘political films’ and the macropolitical ‘emancipatory projects’ of the typical ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s, charged by the Marxist-Leftists thinking and the Third World political cinema models:

I see every human being as a universe, a unique one. In other words, I see the universe in the humans. My tendency from my childhood was to pay attention not to the ‘people of the main stream’ but of the margins. That’s why I could

V.K. Joseph challenges the usual lament of critics and film society activists that not any/many filmmakers in Malayalam make ‘political films’ anymore, by citing the example of T.V. Chandran, who from the time of P.A. Backer (Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol) and John Abraham (Amma Ariyan) have been involved with all of them in the ‘collective commitment’ of the 1970s that people talk about; Joseph says that Chandran makes himself and his films relevant always, by going beyond Backer and John and beyond the 1970s. Whereas many ‘art cinema’ filmmakers are still standing under what Satyajith Ray saw decades ago.

I see Chandran as one director who keeps changing in film structure, form, language etc. He has some madness for experimentation; so we are hopeful about him. He keeps making films addressing the changing times. Are all his films fully evolved products of art and craft and politics? We can’t expect it. He has some daringness and flexibility and spontaneous insight to think and act different and create instead of repeating tried out patterns. He is not afraid of breaking the film grammar since he is bold in experimenting, in taking chances (V.K. Joseph, context. A).

Chandran maintains his continuity with the past, his roots in cinema and politics lie in the 1970s. He says, “Those days, the socialist, revolutionary movements and that climate had given a hope, something positive and optimistic/futuristic to the generations. The world those days had found meaning and base on this hope and many people made sacrifices to sustain this hope in humanity and a better tomorrow for the whole world.” Times have changed, he admits, so he needs to move on and redefine politics and cinema, “standing on the shoulders of Ray and others”, as V. K. Joseph would say. Chandran, instead of indulging in any utopia of the past employs his spontaneity and creativity to make the right ‘cinema for today/tomorrow’. This is what makes Chandran different from other filmmakers, says Venkiteswaran (2010: 211).

Among our filmmakers who are wallowing in the past or gloating over the glories of the past, T.V. Chandran is a rarity. His films are distinguished by their spontaneity and concern for the oppressed.

Chandran’s films do not get glued to the past, ideology or imagination because he keeps his inner eyes and discerning mind wide open to the changing contexts around him and across the world:
Making political cinema or making cinema politically is to take a stand on what a filmmaker perceives as reality around him; his perception is influenced by his circumstances, the context where he lives, what he reads, the films/plays/performances he watches and also the collective consciousness of the whole humanity of which he is also part of (T. V. Chandran).

Gopinathan (2010) uses the expression `woman-republic’ to describe the specificity of the politics in TV Chandran’s films. Commenting on ‘Susanna’, Chandran had clarified that `woman’ in his films does not simply represent only women, but all marginalised people, who are removed from the mainstream of the society. The characters at the margins whom we meet in Chandran’s films are those who have realised that they do not have ‘their space’ in the ‘man-republic’, controlled by patriarchal ideology (party/political) and morality (religion). Malayalam cinema also is a `man-republic’. It is said that in Malayalam cinema of the 1950s-60s we had “strong women” characters and we do not have any now. Gopinathan challenges this comparison saying that not anyone of those ’strong women’ had their distinct names, except ‘Kalli Chellamma’, whereas all of Chandran’s women/ men characters have a name, ‘Alice’, ‘Mankamma’, ‘Susanna’, ‘Mada’, ‘Dani’ and so on.

George master used to sit down with Chandran as his film project would evolve from the level of idea to script. It was difficult for George master to call Chandran’s films ‘political’ in the sense the films of the 1970s were called. He says that Chandran’s politics comes from the ‘broad thinking’ he infuses in his characters.

‘Mangamma’ is not ‘Karuthamma’. Mangamma is a woman who is herself by herself not because the society assures her any status or protection or anything. Magamma asserts herself and her identity. If Chandran has created Mangamma, he clearly has a politics of who is a man, who is a woman, what is family etc. Chandran has clearly spelt this out and it shows that Chandran has a clear politics/stand. This political stand may not have the same vigour of the old slogan `mattuv.in chattangle’/change the structures/laws (George master, context A).

The audiences in the 1990s and now in the 2000s are not the same as those `serious viewers’, of the 1970s, who used to readily and devotedly accept any `political cinema’, especially if they were from Latin America. Chandran realises that the
audience has come of age and they take chances to question the politics of a particular film and challenge the filmmaker and the film text.

Situations have changed drastically from the time I started getting involved in cinema. But anyway for me what is most important for a film is its reachability/communicability. As far as my films are concerned I had faced severe criticism from all sections of audiences: ‘ormaka undayirikanam’ was not well received in the party circles. ‘Susanna’ was misunderstood just as the story of a ‘sex worker’. I had clearly given a note at the beginning of the movie: ‘streeyude nana prathykshangalil Susanna’ (Susanna in many manifestations of woman). But people including thinkers and women activists like Sara Joseph tended to look at Susanna one –dimensionally.’(T.V. Chandran).

Chandran shares how the politics of his recent film ‘Aadum Koothu (2005,Tamil) was questioned by viewers with a ‘static political view point’. They said that the portrayal of ‘Vellayammal’ (the Dalit woman who had been forcibly tonsured and paraded naked some 50 years ago) was not politically correct because they wanted the film to portray her as the ‘eternally suffering woman’. Chandran’s thrust was “not to tell the story of a Dalit woman insulted and kept in her humiliation forever”, but to show through two of his central characters, two young filmmakers, that how the story of Vellayammal had inspired them to do a film on her life and on her humiliation.

Chandran is not making films for the marginalised as a ‘mission’ to ‘liberate them’; his films are stories ‘of the marginalised’, the assertion of their subjectivities and identities. He is investigating what the presence of the marginalised means in our society, what ‘unsettled’ spaces they occupy, and what ‘restricted/limited’ spaces they are able to claim for themselves. In contrast to the ‘old politics’ of ‘reform or emancipation’ of women and other marginalised peoples, Chandran’s politics is concerned with how the marginalised on their own are finding their space. It is about how and why they refuse to stay in the ‘private’/’closed’/’restricted’ spaces that the patriarchal society and its value system (morality) have imposed on them. By asserting themselves as active subjects with full agency, with a ‘name/identity’, they keep unsettling the ‘static’ identities/definitions that the society has thrust upon them. Instead of scheming to solve their problems, Chandran’s films present multiple
perspectives to look at the problems of the marginalised and possible solutions wherever they come from.

It disappoints Chandran, when viewers and critics do not respect his vision and experiences out of which his characters are born and the diverse experiences those characters may encounter depending on their concrete contexts, which he as a `single author’ does not want to control, but wants to let it unravel on its own. Many people in the audience and some quarters with vested ‘political’ interests want to see him draw his characters one-dimensionally:

It happened with G.P.Ramachandran, who criticised my portrayal of child marriage among Muslims saying that the progressive, leftists should be sensitive to the minorities; but what I had portrayed in the film was a reality in that region and was not of my making (a similar incident happened while we were shooting). I know the story of EMS living in hiding in the house of a Muslim; EMS insisted in feeding him non-vegetarian food (fish); he did this as a sacrifice (he was pure vegetarian) in order to live his ideology (not to betray his life incognito)….What is more important is not a fake, stereotype morality, one for all, but a realistic, existential understanding and appreciation of each individual human being (T.V.Chandran).

His film _Susanna_ that we have taken as a key text for analysis does not hold onto any stereotype morality or static notions of subjectivities and identities. Susanna is many things, as Chandran has made it clear often: “Susanna is a lament for all marginalised people removed from the mainstream of the society; it is not just a film about a woman.” The subtitle which the film opens with, _streeyude nana prathykshangalil susanna’_ (Susanna-in many manifestations of woman’), is a clear indication of the multi-layered perspective through which Chandran wants the viewers to look at Susanna.

4.3.4.1 ‘Susanna in many manifestations of woman’: review and discussion

_Plot summary:_ The film begins with Susanna in her advanced age, looking back, taking the audiences into her story. It all began as an ordinary story; a poor girl falls in love with the son of an estate owner, but fate makes her a widower when her lover dies in an accident. His father Planter Varkey sets up a business in view of his granddaughter’s future and so Susanna is made the owner of that business venture. Life fails Susanna in fitting herself into the strictures of a conventional marriage and eventually she is branded as a ‘fallen woman’, destined to live at the ‘dark’ outskirts of the ‘decent’ society, But Susanna decides to live her life in full, in broad sunlight,
with the help of a bunch of rich and influential men who find 'true love' and solace in her, which they could never find in their traditional martial bonds 'inside the family'. Susanna takes up all the feminine roles as 'roles'—she is a mistress, whore, mother, sister etc. Though she is forced into being the mistress of the five old men who are 'co-directors' in her business venture, she gradually grows up into an individual. It is not just these five old men, who are attracted to Susanna, there are more: her son-in-law, Rameshan (son of one of her 'lovers'), Joseph (singer/poet) and to some extent the artist (painter) priest. But her life was not smooth sailing; she faces opposition, even physical attack from a Hindu fundamentalist group, who accuses her of violating the dignity of the 'sacred moral tradition' of the nation.

The film turns into an interesting and at the same time disturbing examination of our value system and relationships. What would happen if a woman or man refuses to take their fixed/static role or definition and attempt to define their subjectivity and identity on their own? The answer can be found summarized in the couplet that Susanna sings and dances with the wife of Colonel Nair (one of her 'clients/lovers'). It says 'pennu pennayaal...aannu aannayaal?' (if a woman be really a woman and if a man be really a man?). The song readily answers what would happen if a woman really be a woman: 'veedinu purathu' (outcast from home/family). Thus, Chandran is critiquing the Kerala society and in extension, the Indian society at large, where a woman’s identity is strictly defined within the confines of, 'inside' home (ancestral or that of the in-laws). Any woman who ‘comes out’ is most likely to be a ‘lose woman’ or will be turned into one.

When this film was released, its politics had caused heated discussions among the various sections of the Kerala society. The society at large seems to have perceived it as a feminist film, arguing for 'woman’s freedom' at different levels. One can imagine the reactions this film would have created among the conventional, moralistic majority of the Malyalee population, both male and female. But interestingly, as already mentioned (Radhakrishnan 2005), the sex workers in Thrissur claimed Susanna as the first film in Malayalam to represent their reality.

In one of his later films, 'Dany', Chandran makes indirect but obvious reference to 'Susanna', ironically through the same actress, Vani Viswanath who had played Susanna, but now playing an elite class woman, Margaret. His intentions are not clear in almost denouncing 'Susanna' as a fake feminist film, putting words in Margret’s mouth; we may assume that Chandran wanted to elicit more reactions to Susanna by provocation, dividing the discussants into 'for and against' polarisation on whether it is a 'feminist' film or not or could be something more. That possibility underscores the
fact that a film text is never a ‘static’ entity and so we can never limit the discussion on the politics of a film to what the filmmaker proposes as its politics.

Gopinathan calls attention to the fact that no other character, man or woman, of Chandran raised such curiosity and heat in discussions among the critics and the ordinary audiences as well. In the history of Malayalam cinema, possibly no other character has been discussed and debated like ‘Susanna’:

The mainstream feminists disowned Susanna suspecting her as a ‘false prophetess’. Many leftist critics received her merrily, extolling her as a ‘yogini’ in whose smile they saw the smile of Buddha….G.P. Ramachandran remarked ‘when Susanna smiles it unsettles the fake morality and the upper caste spirituality’ (Gopinathan 2010: 162).

George master recalls the reaction of some young people in their circle to Susanna; most of them did not like the film because it did not match with any notions that they were familiar with and also with their voyeuristic ‘expectations’ that the theme had generated in media. He thinks that the society with its ‘sanitized’ notions on ‘sexuality, fidelity’ etc, did not want to receive a ‘free woman’ (=prostitute), who dares to move around freely. What many male spectators might have expected, argues George master, was a sequel to Avalude Ravukal, an earlier film on a prostitute’s life that apparently had clear commercial intentions of selling by sensationalising.

‘Prostitute’ or ‘sex worker’ is a need, especially a male need. Chandran has created ‘Susanna’ the prostitute as someone who acquires social status, not just social wealth, but the guts to question everyone in the society and in fact questions the values/conventions of the society itself. Is Susanna a sex worker? No, she shatters the value system of a conventional society that has upheld monogamy as the greatest value. She has ‘five husbands’; she treats all five ‘husbands’ equally. The young people of those days, who might have been to brothels, they too didn’t accept this film nor like this film (George master, context A).

Venkiteswaran (2010:213) questions the politics of commercial cinema that objectivises woman in the line of ‘Avalude Ravukal’ and the ‘art’ cinema that may not deal with a character like Susanna, because she is not a ‘victim’ whose cause they can champion as ‘progressive politics’. An independent, free woman, who decides for herself may not appeal to both genres and their audiences:
Both viewpoints objectify woman, either as a desirable object or as a victimized one. The films, which deal with the marginalisation and exploitation of woman, are also more often animated by an undercurrent male guilt that runs through them. Both genres deny woman a subjectivity and interiority of her own.” Susanna is neither a passive sex object nor a sympathy-seeking victim. She is one who has a mind and more importantly a body, of her own.

From a male point of view two stereotyped notions of women are the subjugated or domesticated wife (‘Madonna’) or the ‘fallen’ woman, an object of lust. If a woman refuses to match these masculine definitions and expectations, she is victimized. Susanna refuses neither to be subjugated nor victimised, but to live as an independent woman on her own, expressing and enjoying her sexuality the way she wants, moving around in day light with any men who desires her and she desires, thus denouncing the norms and expectations of a patriarchal society. Even men are enslaved by the rigid strictures of patriarchal morality, which she chooses to surpass and thus become a source of hope and consolation for those who are ‘wounded’ by the inhuman system, observes Gopinathan (2010: 162):

The politics of Susanna is ‘personal, which comforts and consoles those who are ‘wounded’ by conventional moralities based on binaries. Her politics is beyond ideologies and conventional relationships and so it can discern the thirst and hunger of persons, whose wounds she helps to cure—she becomes a source of hope for her five elderly ‘lovers’, to her brother (a revolutionary) and symbolically to all those who are orphaned/marginalised.

The mainstream feminists find Susanna’s definitions of freedom outside their jargon, because the space she has chosen for herself expression and celebration of freedom is still a ‘man’s world. The Leftists are not sure if they can safely thrust their ‘flag of emancipation’ or their ‘agenda’ of unsettling the institutional morality’ in Susanna’s hands, because her fight with the system does not appear as per any ideology. Narendra Prasad (2010: 107) summarises a range of responses to Susanna as follows:

One: appreciating the film, accepting it as a criticism of our society and its rigid value systems. Two: feminist critique from outside the framework of the film, a stand that is burdened by the ingrained codes of the patriarchal morality and the typical language of feminism. Three: criticism using the theoretical jargons of Marxism that does not touch us anywhere inside. Four: concerns of religious fundamentalism to safeguard its interests, and not its spirituality.
“Pennu pennaayaal…aannu aannayaal?” (If a woman be really a woman and if a man be really a man?) This is one basic question the film raises. If it is alright for a man to be fully a man, find love and happiness as he wishes inside or outside the confines of family (like the ‘five husbands’ of Susanna do), why a woman is not allowed to do so? A woman whether she is happy or not, should live inside the family ‘within boundaries’ until death, as the ‘entrapped’ life that the Colonel’s wife lives, in contrast to the free bird Susanna. Gopinathan (2010) argues that what Chandran proposes in Susanna is a complete reassessment of our unjust patriarchal morality instead of attempting to ‘condemn’ or ‘contain’ her at the very outset.

Susanna sought and gained her sense of justice outside the conventional systems of morality, which is based on the binary opposites of good and bad. So, it is doubtful if those who opposed her (the feminist critics) and stood with her (the Leftist critics) have their own unique perspectives about sexuality and morality. The feminists argued that Susanna basically was a ‘victim’ of the patriarchal value system and morality, who had surrendered to its mechanisms and she was only reinforcing those values. Those who found her as a ‘yogini’ that unsettled the ‘fake’ morality and ‘upper caste spirituality’ were trying to ‘contain’ her and tame her into their ‘system’/ideology (Gopinathan 2010: 162).

Chandran has chosen a circular narrative structure to tell this story, offsetting audience expectations and predictions. The camera is always restless and it constantly breaks the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the ‘public-private’ boundaries. The camera never linger over anything, because the film does not want to privilege any particular ‘settled’ and ‘static’ perspective and reinforce it. The viewer is ‘taken for a ride’ along with all characters, who happen to come and go breaking the boundaries of past and present. The multiple perspectives that Chandran presents in this film without imposing any of them on the viewer is characteristic of his ‘politics of cinema’ and is his contribution to the process of redefining the politics of Malayalam cinema in the period 1970-1990 and beyond.

4.4. Seeking ‘Third Ways’ in Malayalam Cinema: Multiple Voices and Diverse Perspectives

When we closely examine the ‘politics of cinema’ of John Abraham and of T.V.Chandran, as highlighted in Amma Ariyan and Susanna, we see ‘personal as
political' as an important undercurrent in their films. This element contrasts their works with the 'teleological, emancipatory' political thrust of the political cinema in the 1970s. The trajectory of 'liberation of the oppressed' has shifted to acknowledgement of difference and co-existence of diverse political subjectivities and identities, informed by the new developments in social sciences and also inspired by the insights and experiences from the New Social Movements. A striking difference between the politics of the 1970s which was practically a monolithic model and the evolving politics from the 1980s-1990s and beyond is that the latter is a broadly open framework that shows willingness to acknowledge and embrace the elements that were 'absent' in the unitary model of the former. Bringing the 'Mother' or 'Woman' into the centre of the narrative in both films could be a significant gesture to render all other constituencies that were 'absent' earlier--the Dalits, Adivasis, people with alternative sexual orientations, religious/ethnic/linguistic minorities and so on—now present. Venkiteswaran (2010: 212) notes:

TV Chandran, in all his films has been concerned about the eternal mother-'woman'. The film (Susanna) ponders on 'woman' or 'womanhood' and what society makes of her. Who is she? What is she? A mother, lover, friends, nurse….? The one who nurtures, loves, comforts or destroys?

If we consciously foreground a motif like 'mother' or 'woman' in all discussions of the politics of Malayalam cinema, could it, as a leit motif, represent other hitherto marginalised/subaltern subjectivities and their multiple voices that had always been pushed away from the centre of the film narratives? As the next step, instead of remaining 'images/representations' that others create and stories others tell 'about the marginalised' could the marginalised/subaltern represent or speak for themselves foregrounding their agency as 'image-makers', telling their stories themselves, erasing their 'absence' and rendering themselves 'present'? 

We look 'beyond the 1990s’ to see what new initiatives are in the offing in Malayalam cinema, with the aid of new, digital/non-linear technologies, that would make the unheard voices heard and the unfamiliar territories brought into light. How could the so far 'silenced' sections of the society, utilize the cinematic space and technologies to empower themselves and give voice to their 'cries and whispers'? How could these
marginalised people use cinema in order to redesign the contours and textures of the future revolutions in life and in politics and other spheres? A new and different revolution needs to be conceived in terms of drastically different options and possibilities, a revolution drastically different from the earlier ‘totalitarian revolutions’ that rendered half of the world’s population ‘absent’ (the ‘Hidden Half’).

Cinema could be instrumental for the emergence of ‘Third Ways’ of new politics. Third Ways cannot emerge from the old, static models of politics, but through a dialogue or polylogue among different constituencies, addressing and engaging with the impinging contradictions and divergence. In such an on-going dialogue/polylogue, strategies such as a ‘woman’s solution’, a ‘Dalit solution’ and so on could come up as alternatives that we have never or sufficiently explored and experimented within the hegemonic patriarchal systems. Such alternative ‘solutions’, such ‘Third Ways’, have become imperative in the globalised world, which has turned into an arena of never ending competition of every kind, where the existing borders between nations and peoples are thickening and new borders are coming up. Bina Paul’s observations about the changing politics across the globe and its reflections in cinema capture our attention:

Anywhere you travel now, Holland, Spain, UK, the US, everywhere people are worried about the ‘other’ (‘invasion’ by immigrants, other ‘religion/culture’ etc) The ‘other’ is getting defined so much now….in European cinema the most frightening thing is violence, domestic violence, I am utterly shocked. Their films now are describing violence in horrible details. There is such a lot of brutalization within the families, whether it is loneliness, physical violence or the economic situation whatever prompts it, it’s sheer violence we witness on the screen. (Bina Paul, context B).

T. V. Chandran, as filmmaker and human being, is aware of the challenges he faces in this changed world, where the reality escapes all definitions, quite different from the 1970s, when he began life, when the world was clearly divided into ‘socialist’ and ‘capitalist’ blocs.

Today’s generation, the post-socialist and post-90s generation is very practical and pragmatic; they are not ready to live a life based on hope in a tomorrow; they just live by day. This ‘temporariness’ in the way people live and the way people think about everything has affected the politics of life and politics of art, cinema and all (T.V.Chandran, context A).
In a conversation, Civic Chandran, V.G.Thampy and the researcher discussed how the categorical divisions into Left’ and ‘Right’ wing politics is reducing the depth and diversity of politics in Kerala, with its long history of the ‘Left’ controlling the parameters of political correctness:

Civic: I always wanted to quote Jesus’ words, ‘throw your nets to the right’ and promote it in the Kerala context; but I didn’t have the courage so far.

Researcher: The problem is in Kerala ‘Right’ is identified with ‘congress, religion, minorities, religious fundamentalism etc’ so we can’t use the option ‘to the right’ without qualification.

Thampy: It is now part of our language, ‘left front’ and ‘right front’; one individual can’t change this language. It’s part of the social contract, right?

Researcher: So for women, Dalits and others there is no ‘slots’ left. They have to opt for left or right.

Thampy: Think of ‘Left Adivasi organization’ etc?!

Civic: The tragedy of Kerala was that once again in the 80s, we ‘radicals’/leftists got an upper hand in shaping our society. This point has not been discussed properly). So the left hangover is still with Keralites. So Feminism in Kerala was ‘Feminism + Maoism’. Ajitha or Sara Joseph haven’t completely broken away with the conventional ‘left’ politics’….It’s true that we ‘radicals of the 70s’ tried to change ourselves, but since the leadership of Kerala cultural/political field again came to us; it prevented a total change/transition.

‘Now the second generation of women is looking for a ‘new feminism’ and they are taking it beyond Marxism and radicalism’, says Civic Chandran. This should happen in all spheres in Kerala, for example in the Ambedkar movement in Kerala, a departure from the conventional Left and finding their independent identity. Most of their intellectuals are pushing “Ambedkar + Mao” policy.’ But even after denouncing the ‘Leftist frame’ individuals and groups may possibly bind themselves with another set of ‘closed’ framework, as it happens with some organizations of the marginalised, for example when the Dalits insist that ‘only a Dalit can speak for Dalits’ and that their ‘Dalit reality’ does not share common/overlapping borders with other groups. ‘It amounts to dethrone a ‘grand narrative’ and install another in its place’, says Anvar
Ali, who prefers to see the present phase of politics in Kerala cultural politics as the ‘postmodern moment’:

Among the new social movement activists we still find ‘linear’ tendencies. For example look at the comment someone made about Sarat: “Sarat shouldn’t have made a film on John Abraham”. They meant that Sarat should only make ‘environmental’ documentaries….also, if someone spends his/her whole life just for looking at the world form the Dalit perspective and nothing else, it goes back to creating another set of grand narratives (Anvar Ali, context B).

In Kerala, perhaps we face this danger to a greater extent than elsewhere, because of our long legacy of seeing the world in black or white, siding with the Left or the Right and nowhere ‘in between’. Thus we always face this big danger of ‘small narratives’ (scattered narratives) becoming grand narratives, if ‘Dalit’, ‘Adivasi’ ‘Left’, ‘Muslim’ and other identities are considered as ‘bounded’, water-tight compartments instead of imaging them as creative, overlapping spaces. Once the boundaries are hardened even among artists and film lovers, ‘loyalties’ and ‘brand’ become more important than freedom itself, comments Bina Paul, reflecting on the present status of World Cinema.

I find the defining character of the 21st century to be the hardening of boundaries. Take the positioning of Kerala intellectuals to an Israeli filmmaker. One may disagree with the politics of Israel-Palestine etc. But how do you look at the work of an artist? Amos Gitai, Elias Suleiman and others? Suleiman is a Palestinian but lives in Israel with an Israeli passport. I was quite surprised at the kind of reactions he received from Malayalee intellectuals. He clarifies that his ‘being artist’ is most important and it is not defined by which passport he holds on to (Bina Paul, context B).

What alternatives or solutions could the ‘Third Ways’ of new politics offer to a world, where the boundaries that divide nations and people are getting hardened? At the global and local scenario when nations, communities and individuals make their identities narrow and bounded than ever, how could the new politics create more inclusive and overlapping spaces? Here, perhaps ‘reporting to mother’ could help; a ‘woman’s solution’ (as Sara Joseph puts it) could perhaps throw light into areas that have been lying in the dark so far and could bring into light people who have been forced to remain in the dark and at the fringes of the society, as women themselves are still forced to remain in certain societies.
A ‘woman’s solutions’, could propose and work out a politics of negotiation, where the old models of politics of confrontation have failed. Instead of working to overthrow the present man-centred systems, where ‘powerful women’ would replace ‘men in power’, alternative modes of revolutions could be imagined, not any revolutions from outside the system, but small revolutions from within the system, that work through its cracks and thus weakens its hegemonic agendas. Cinema--both its making and viewing processes--presents immense possibilities for foregrounding a women’s perspective to reimagine and rearticulate politics in new ways, incorporating multiple voices representing multiple identities, men, women, and alternative sexualities, religious and ethnic minorities and in short, all people at the margins. Here ‘woman’ is not used as an essential category that erases all differences, but as ‘one’ representative identity among multiple identities. In a new political scheme of ‘heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin), all identities deserve their distinct space and expression. In the new politics of the ‘Third Ways’ those peoples, groups and communities that have been sidelined or pushed to the background so far need to be brought into the foreground.

4.4.1 Foregrounding the Feminine

*Adaminte Variyellu* (Adam’s rib) by K.G.George, a film that comes in the category of ‘New Malayalam Cinema’, took its inspiration from the Women’s movement in the 1980s and addressed the subjugation of women in the society, taking three instances of a upper class, a middle class and a lower class woman undergoing different but ‘same’ experience of humiliation and torture for being a woman. The film ends in an interesting ‘climax’ or ‘epilogue’ which shows a big ‘gang’ of oppressed women charging ahead, led by the three protagonists, pushing aside the male director, camera man and the ‘all male crew’ of the film. Those women could not wait any longer; they ‘marched’ forward ready to break away all barriers that had been preventing them from coming to the foreground, to the centre stage, refusing to merge into the background where the society had ‘installed’ them.

That is the state of affairs on Malayalam screen; we are only seeing ‘half’ of the picture or ‘half-truth’, because the other half is hidden. Women, Dalits, Adivasis and
all `people at the margins’ forms part of the `hidden half’\textsuperscript{35} of Malayalam cinema. Deedi Damodaran, who has extensively worked on `Film and Female’, in relation to Malayalam cinema has the major portion of her observations on the `absence of women in Malayalam Cinema’ than the `presence’. She says emphatically that the `absence’ of women in Malayalam cinema in terms of sharing equal creative and organizational responsibilities like their male counterparts is bount to continue, if not some drastic steps are taken:

If I stick on to gender and talk about politics of Malayalam cinema I should say nothing has changed….There have been some small movement, or pointers etc to the broad scope of a discussion on gender in Malayalam cinema, as such things haven’t changed at all. I can say this since I have done a very close study in this regard…. Malayalam film industry is a sole male business, although a producer here and there may announce a production in his wife’s name in order to avoid tax etc. 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 (Deedi Damodran, context B).

In the history of Malayalam cinema, we only have had some four or five women directors, who did their début and then never returned to the `Director’ seat. The list includes Sheela, an actress of the ‘golden era’ (1960s-70s) of Malayalam cinema, Suma Josson, a Malayalee diaspora living in Mumbai, Anjali Menon, who studied film in the UK and now based in Mumbai and Ligi Pullepally, a NRI based in the United States. With the boom in short-fiction and documentary filmmaking, rejuvenated by low cost video/New Media technologies, we are slowly seeing more Malayalee women entering film/video production arena and making their mark. Last year three women directors, who had made one short fiction film each, planned a daring scheme to showcase their films as regular theatre release package. However, women, on the whole, are being wiped out from significance whether it is in filmmaking, film criticism or simply from the status of being a good viewer at cinema halls, film society screenings, film festivals and all possible public spaces that are ‘male territories’.

\textsuperscript{35} Title of an Iranian cinema, directed by Tahmineh Milani, a woman director, portraying the condition of women in the patriarchal society in Iran
Bina Paul says that the situation is different in Mumbai, in the Bollywood film industry, where as in Kerala the ‘decency’ question is raised against women involvement in films:

In Kerala the situation is worse. Even at the film festivals, women presence is very less…now in last few years girls/students have started coming in big groups. But there are warnings given in colleges to girls, ‘don’t go to film festivals, there are bad things happening etc (Bina Paul, context B).

In regular cinema halls too the picture is not different; gone are the days when women could go for movies with their families, because the industry had promoted what is called ‘family entertainment’. Now fans association members fill the movie halls. Ligi Pullepally, the director of ‘Sancharam’ (possibly the first film with lesbian-orientation in Malayalam), shares her surprise at the homogeneous crowds that she saw in Kerala in contrast to theatres in the United States.

When I go out to the cinema in Kerala, the audience is primarily male. This was unique to me because in the states, there is no noticeable preponderance in gender like that. It leads me to believe that films that seek to make their revenue from theatrical release must cater to the young Malayalee male. Still, there are films in which the female characters are portrayed as well rounded, and realistic; I can think of commercial films like Achuvinte Amma, and all of the films by Shyamaprasad and Adoor Gopalakrishnan, where the women's Point of View is treated with sensitivity (Ligi Pullepalli).

Janaki says there is a broadening in the understanding of politics, acknowledging that even in a very small space a political act could be happening. This has become very liberating. But when it comes to the politics of cinema, even now we are assessing audiences, for example ‘women audiences’ with our stereotyped ideas. Nobody has paid attention to the diversity of women audiences.

Earlier we used to describe a film ‘meant for ‘women audiences’ with contempt or mockery….Fans associations are predominantly male. Films which are publicised as family dramas meant for women audiences many times are presented from a male point of view. ‘Women audience’ is not a standard en masse, readymade entity. There has not been any serious market survey/research on women audiences, except the stock statements that women go to movies to cry and to see ‘family dramas’ etc (Janaki, context B).

36 Interviews with Ligi Pullepalli, Suma Josson and a few others were done online; we have not included them under a particular ‘context/juncture’.
If someone looks into the dynamics of the filmmaking process in Malayalam, the power relations, decision-making etc, one things becomes obvious, seldom does it give the impression that it could be a “woman’s place”. Suma Josson, the director of two feature films Saari and Janmadinam (Birthday) her entry into Malayalam film industry with anxieties and apprehensions, but finally coming out with a different experience. When she mentioned to some friends that she wanted to make her first feature in Malayalam the reaction was ‘Don’t do it. The attitude there is very patriarchal. You will have a tough time’. But then her story was set in Kerala, the script was getting ready and there was no way she could change what had become so much part of her sub-conscious.

Surprisingly the actual execution of the film was so smooth, positive, and pleasant and the team worked in the most democratic way possible, so much so that Subrata Mitra the late illustrious cameraman of Satyajit Ray from whom I had hired the camera said, “What magic have you cast on the team? The boys (who had accompanied the camera) say that it is the best shoot that they have had so far!!” Was it because I was a woman film maker the others felt that they had to be on their best behaviour, I frankly don’t know (Suma Josson).

The patriarchal hegemony is not simply a typical case in Malayalam mainstream film industry, but more strikingly a feature since the days of the explicitly ‘political’ cinema of the 1970s that emerged in the Third World. With all the openness of modernity and the vigour of the avant-garde ideals, those ‘revolutionary’ filmmakers conceive their revolution also in terms of gender justice. Ella Shohat (1996) observes that in the post-independence or post-revolution era (Cuba), women, despite their growing contribution to the diverse aspects of film production, remained less visible than men in the role of film direction. As is the case with First World cinema, women’s participation within Third World cinema has hardly been central, although their growing production over the last decade corresponds to a worldwide burgeoning movement of independent work by women, made possible by new, low-cost technologies of video communication. Guneratne (2003) cites Ranjana Khanna’s criticism that Third Cinema is “incapable of engaging with gender politics in a way which calls into question male domination.” He finds Khanna’s argument as underscoring the Third Cinema’s double marginalisation of women both as
filmmakers and political actants in that without access to much power and as many resources as their male counter parts, they have, with rare exceptions, historically been less capable of “living up” to the political demands of Third Cinema.

Bina Paul, the only ‘privileged’ woman to have worked (as Film editor) all alone in a ‘man’s world’ since 1980s, puts the partial blame of ‘exclusion’ of the female from a creative endeavour like cinema, on the ‘radical’ filmmakers, the pioneers of the ‘New Cinema’ movement in the 1970s, who remained a stack club and did not encourage women to get involved.

With all that great political modernity, they didn’t practise it in their own life, so it was definitely double standards. The exposure and freedom they enjoyed as male they didn’t extend to their female counter parts; they didn’t practise in their family what they preached in their films. You have great filmmakers, but you don’t even know if their wives ‘exist’, where they are, what kind of creativity they like etc. I haven’t heard many people (artists) speak “we are together in this”…..it’s very odd. In other parts of the world all great artists acknowledge the contribution of their partners, wife or lover or mother or whoever. But in our Kerala we don’t see it (Bina Paul, context B).

Suma Josson shares her ‘not so pleasant’ experience after successfully and smoothly completing her first feature film, an independent film project, an area where she realised eventually that the highest competition, disrespect and rivalry exist.

It was after the film was made did I become aware of all kinds of warring groups functioning in the alternative Malayalam cinema area. I am not aware whether this exists in the mainstream film industry. The problem is that good cinema gets hit and it deters filmmakers from taking creativity forward. In Mumbai I have worked only in the documentary field but it is a fair playing level ground and nobody attacks the filmmaker at a personal level (Suma Josson).

What difference would have been there if Malayalam cinema were not an ‘exclusively’ man’s world? How a feminine sensitivity, now absent in Malayalam cinema and supposedly different from the ‘aggressive masculinity’, would have made a significantly different presence if filmmaking were not such a gendered space as it is now? Would the entry of more number of women directors and technicians automatically bring in a drastic shift in the way Malayalam cinema operates now? The difference perhaps lies in a woman’s vision, her ways of looking at life, says Sara Joseph, writer and activist. She finds more hope for the world, for the posterity, that all
important struggles of ordinary people for survival are led by women, namely Medha Patkar (Narmada movement and many other), Irome Sharmila, Janu (Wayanad Adivasi movement), Maheshwatha Devi (involved in many grass root peoples’ struggles across India) and others.

I’m more concerned about the ‘vision’ of women. I haven’t heard the word ‘darsanika’ (woman philosopher). Men have monopolized the right/capacity to be a ‘seer’. Why not women? But a new politics is coming up, that is very much a ‘women’s politics’ and women’s vision. When the world is at the brim of destruction, I am writing a novel on ‘water’. Some other woman writer is writing about trees, birds and all living beings. Now the mothers are more concerned about a green earth without which they know their children can’t survive (Sara Joseph, context A)

Nandana Reddy (2010) the socialist in the line of Ram Manohar Lohiya, emphasises the union of purusha and prakriti implying the meeting of the feminine and masculine powers or faculties, she refers to the concept of Ardha Nareeswar, Lord Shiva, the God-head and Parvati the Shakti (power) meeting in an inseparable union as the basis of male-female complementarity in contrast to competition. But in the world today, she says, we find more of the ‘aggressive masculine’ qualities prevailing, leading to violence and wars. Women, instead of nurturing the feminine in them, make themselves ‘tough’ in order to attain equality with men. ‘What women should be doing’, says Nandana, ‘is to share the feminine qualities with men and make them aware of the feminine in them, the tenderness and love and the ability to cry and console those who cry’ (Reddy 2010:17). Ashis Nandy (1990) looks into how Indian thinkers like Ramakrishna and Aurobindo presented femininity as an alternative principle to counter balance the excessive masculinity in the Western cultures and the Semitic religions. Ramakrishna and Aurobindo found in motherhood “the supreme concept of a new godhead, rooted in tradition on the one hand and capable of balancing the overemphasis on masculinity in the Semitic religions on the other”. This appeals to many Westerners, the concept of a godhead that could be counterpoised against the patriarchal orientations dominating the Western view of man and nature.

37 Irome Sharmila has been on hunger strike for almost 12 years, demanding repealing of the Military protection act (AFSPA) in Manipur
If the feminine principle proposes less competition and more understanding, then how would it manifest as more creativity and ‘efficiency’ (the quality that usually men allege as lacking in women) when it comes to filmmaking? Bina Paul, in the light of her creative choices and decisions thinks that women could bring in a unique sensitivity into art, into filmmaking.

I don’t say that women don’t have ego, don’t like power etc; but women negotiate these things differently. That would make a big difference….if there were at least five women creatively/physically involved in the process of Malayalam filmmaking, there would have been a different kind of humanisation in the industry. There would have been a big change in the industry….It’s almost difficult to imagine how Malayalam film scenario will be different with more women coming in, because right now there aren’t any women in there (except me and a few actresses or dubbing artistes). It is strange; I may make a film just like a man, but still there will be a different sensibility. (Bina Paul, context B).

From what two women directors shares, it becomes evident that they came to filmmaking because they had something to say and wanted to say it in their way, drawing from their vision and experiences, connected to life around them, that give their work that ‘different sensibility’ that Bina Paul refers to. This sensibility triggered them and motivated to work in cinema and not apparently for profit motives; they may not come back to do a ‘blockbuster’ film, banking on the expertise they got from the first project/s that did to please themselves first, unless the Malayalam film industry makes an effort to incorporate these women voices into its ‘mono-tonous’ male universe.

Ligi Pullepally: My cast and crew were so amazing and helpful. I did not expect that. I thought that as an NRI, and as a woman that I might get attitude. But rather, everyone pulled together to give birth to Sancharam, both men and women. I know that some of my crew might have wondered how a film like Sancharam, lacking in fight scenes and song and dance, might find an audience, but yet it did - all over the world.

Suma Josson: I ventured into filmmaking because I used to write poetry and for some reason after I started making films I stopped writing poetry. All creativity starts from poetry since balance, rhythm is the inherent principle of poetry and if this upset the earth, the universe reflects it in its myriad ways. As a filmmaker my attempt was to create a piece in which both nature and the
human being is able to heal any kind of situation whether it is in politics, or social injustices.

Janaki refers to the popular perception that the film production crew is very chauvinistic. She does not think that every feminist will be a good women filmmaker and will not be chauvinistic or egotist, because creativity and the glamour that accompanies it especially in cinema may push you into assertion of power than sharing it. Still, in a woman filmmaker’s film her experiences as a woman will definitely reflect in the film and in the process. Janaki shares insights from a discussion that she had chaired during a short film festival:

In the discussion on ‘women and filmmaking’, Sangeeta (the director of ‘Charulathayude Baki’) said, ‘let women first learn the grammar of filmmaking’. But another girl who came from somewhere in the North said, ‘when I live every moment of my life as a challenge, naturally that will affect/determine my filmmaking. Each individual has unique challenges. Women filmmakers have specific challenges and fulfilments. That will definitely be reflected in me/ in my films as a filmmaker and my relationship with my workforce (Janaki, context B).

What renders women absent from filmmaking in Kerala, a state that boasts of one hundred percentage literacy and increased mobility of women and involvement in almost all spheres of life? Is filmmaking projected and so perceived as a specialised, highly technical ‘male territory’, where the females can enter only through transgression of the boundaries or by compromising their femininity, opting to ‘be like a man’? In India, a culture that still reels under the vestiges of colonization, femininity is still identified with passivity, weakness, dependence, subjugation, and absence of masculinity (Nandy 1990). As it gets repeated in literature and in films like Elamma enna aankutty (the boy called Elamma), a ‘strong woman’ still has to ‘be like a man’ or ‘manly’. Analysing the electoral victory of Mamata Banerjee in Times of India daily, Srijana Mitra (2011) points to the fact that Mamata insisted on calling her ‘CM’ standing for ‘Common Man’. It often raises eyebrows, women in positions of power using male terminology—or being addressed in male terms—but is no new practice.

Slipping into the male pronoun (thus) was no ordinary slip. It served to maintain the distance between the ruler and the ruled. It served to remove any emphasis from a woman’s femininity, from her position otherwise in a
world of frying spices, dandling babies and dressing up, to her location instead in a world of authority and no-nonsense decision-making (Mitra 2011: 15)

The reason for such a low self-esteem among Indian women apparently stems from the typical concept of ‘womanhood’ and ‘womanliness’ in India that Ashis Nandy (1990) traces in his analysis of the relationship between creativity and femininity. He holds that making the issues of emancipation of women and equality of sexes as primary happens in cultures, where conjugality is central to male-female relationships. One seeks emancipation from and equality with one’s husband and peers. If the conjugal relationship itself remains relatively peripheral, as in the Indian context, the issues of emancipation and equality remain peripheral. In Indian culture, argues Nandy, both the dignity of womanhood and the male/female creativity are rooted in the typical ‘mother-son’ relationship unlike in the West and elsewhere.

For the Indian mother, her son is the major medium of self-expression. It is her motherhood that traditional family values and respects; her role as wife and to a lesser extent as daughter is devalued and debased. The woman’s self-respect in the traditional system is protected not through her father or husband, but through her son. It is also through the son—and for that matter on the son—that she traditionally exercises her authority. The mother-son relationship is the basic nexus and the ultimate paradigm of human social relationships in India. To an extent this is true of all cultures, but only in a few cultures have the loneliness and self-abnegation of woman as a social being found such elaborate justification in her symbolic status as a mother. Since motherhood is a compensatory mechanism, the society can manipulate and control a woman by forcing her to take on her maternal identity, and a man by forcing him to take on the son’s role, whenever there is crisis.

But from a woman’s point of view, it is possible that she may conceive motherhood as biologically unique superseding the ‘socially constructed’; and instead of the “loneliness and self-abnegation” (Nandy 1990:32), she may relate more to the ‘care-giver’ aspect of motherhood. There have been women writers who have extolled motherhood as the source of their creativity and others who have addressed it critically. Citing Gabriella Dietrich’s poem ‘A Woman’s Blood’, Sara Joseph argues
that a woman’s shedding blood is connected to earth, fertility and to everything that is life-giving or creative:

Always my concern is about taking care (of my unborn baby, of the baby I feed, of whom I help to learn to walk, the big boy or girl whom I see to them growing). This ‘vigilance’ is found even among animals, but only to a certain period, but in humans this vigilance stays with women forever, till the end of her life. A father’s love for his child is ‘socially constructed’, where as a mother’s love is biological. Among humans, women’s vigilance is also a result of age-long conditioning and collective consciousness of what is “motherhood” (Sara Joseph, context A).

Nandy proposes a redefinition of ‘womanliness’, a process that each woman has to undertake in order to subvert the socially constructed and imposed concepts of ‘womanliness’ so that a woman could make herself ‘present’ in large areas of public life, where women are traditionally kept out. The first task that faces her is to devise means of de-emphasising some aspects of her role in her family and society and emphasising others so that she may widen her identity without breaking totally from its cultural definition or becoming disjunctive with its psychobiological distinctiveness. “In the West it may mean defying the limits of conjugality and giving a new dignity to the maternal role of woman; in India it may involve transcending the partial identity imposed by motherhood and winning a new respect for conjugality” (Nandy 1990: 43).

Following the line of argument of Nandy, equating womanhood to motherhood and negating motherhood in womanhood both amount to imposing partial identities on women. There are partial perspectives that view a woman’s accepting motherhood as her weakness, which is a model that does not leave room for negotiation of femininity, but is posited as the ‘other’ of the male in the battle of sexes for equality. Sara Joseph disagrees with some mainstream feminists who stand to remove maternity totally from woman’s identity and definition: “Such a view comes from lack of carefulness or concern for this world, earth and its future (generations); such a view is a-political” (Sara Joseph, context A).

Janaki proposes a model of negotiation that incorporates diverse options and multi-tasking, as more productive than the confrontational model, for Indian women who
attempt to connect the uniqueness of their femininity to their creativity or any other constructive involvement in the public sphere:

I saw a website of ‘slowing down’. It is a move against the high-speed competition of capitalism for which a deliberate ‘slowing down’ process is proposed. They advise ‘don’t take up too many things at a time’, but then they say, ‘it’s difficult to say this to women’ because women by nature are multi-taskers. For women, participation in political leadership may not be a tough task, but just another task, which they can beautifully blend with their other various tasks and add their typical ‘easiness’ to handle them. (Janakai, context B 1970s-90s,).

Sara Joseph takes up another disputed issue connected to womanhood, ‘woman as home-maker’, which is widely debated whether it is part of the patriarchal design to restrict women and self-expression into the ‘private’ space, and monopolizing the ‘public’ space as the arena for men’s self-expression/creativity.

The philosophy of a mother preparing and serving meals in her kitchen is the same philosophy of any religious or spiritual leaders….a mother gives to everyone in her family what is needed for each one. She doesn’t deny anything to any members. There is a sense of justice in this, very close to what Jesus said about justice, ‘Let justice flow like water’. As water flows to the lower depths, a mother’s love and care will flow to the neediest among her children, her son or daughter who is weak in anything (Sara Joseph, context A).

Objections will be raised when a woman idealizes any one of her partial identities, or idealizes ‘womanhood’ itself. Equally debatable are the contentions whether a woman should find her creativity in the private space, where she mostly live, move and act--which is the case in many regional/local contexts in India--or should she move out seeking self-expression. There are women and men as well who argue that a woman should disobey the system and revolt against the ‘private’ spaces (kitchen is the most problematic) that patriarchy has assigned her into and come out in public and demand her right to share spaces—creative, social, political etc-- with men. Deedi Damodaran sticks to this latter position. She holds that women’s movements need to think not on what to do but how to stop doing what they do now that only helps to perpetuate the system:

Our patriarchal system is age old, is a nefarious system; but this system survives as it is, also because women allow it to survive. Women too are serving as pillars to the existing system. So the only way to destroy the system
is to `withdraw’ support from inside (and not perhaps attacking from outside); the pillars should decide to withdraw their role in maintaining the structure…. (Deedi Damodran, context B).

Interestingly, there are some new trends developing in the West that `takes things backwards’ if that is how we see things. Some emerging trends re-assert the value of family, ‘sacredness’ of the private space for women etc. In the urge that Sara Joseph extends to all woman to `reclaim your kitchens’, we can see a resonance of this move on the part of women to assert the `private space’ as a source of joy than as a symbol of oppression and subjugation. Nora Ephron’s recent film `Julie and Julia’ that received Oscar nominations, was advertised as a “film on the joy of cooking”; that is an expression not many woman in the West or East would want to say aloud. `Julie and Julia’ is a woman’s celebration of the `private space’, of “a world of frying spices, dandling babies and dressing up” (Das 2011:15). Such celebrations could be also read as `subversion’ than `obedience’ or `compromise’.

In countries and cultures that are not industrialised like in the West, in contexts like in India, where modernity and tradition co-exist and intermingle, holding on to respective myths, rituals and stigmas, neither subversion nor confrontation but negotiation appears to be more effective strategy, which is close to what Janaki argues:

There are some women who are assertive and aggressive like men, but the majority of women are forced to be `docile’ and `decent’, which make them more tuned to negotiation than confrontation, because at the end they have to achieve the result, have to be productive. In most cases the women in family lead the `boat’ forward in good and bad, though they are painted as `powerless’. They need to be charged and to charge others who are with them, which needs them to accommodate differences and divergence(Janaki, context B, 1970s-90s).

Future revolutions are more likely to be imagined as negotiations, and the feminine principle will have a significant role in redefining such inclusive, comprehensive revolutions, in contrast to the `universal’ revolutionary declarations (`tri-continental revolution’), backed by the Leftist-Marxist ideology and praxis, which also inspired the Third World `political cinema’ movement in the 1970s. S.N.Nagarajan proposes an `Eastern Marxism’, based on a `femininization of dialectics’ in order to rectify the
‘Western Marxism’, founded on a ‘masculine dialectics’. He announces almost like a prophecy, ‘Future revolutions will be led by women’:

I believe that the future revolutions will be led by women, who could establish love at all levels of life and in human beings’ relation with the Nature. Women will overcome the wrong notions of development, of “man subduing the Nature”. The contradictions will continue to exist; however women will prove that friendly relationships could be maintained in spite of the contradictions. Women’s revolutions will also be a declaration of freedom over the economic determinants that restrict human relationships. At the core of this revolution will be the feminine quality of finding success through compromise instead of confrontation (Nagarajan 2008: 12).

Freedom achieved through negotiation does not face constant threat from competing forces, because this freedom is a dynamic freedom. In a ‘masculine dialectics’, based on contradictions and class struggle, it is difficult to conceive inter-existence or co-existence, whereas for an ordinary house wife, she always lives in overlapping worlds/spheres of ‘private-public’, looking after and giving care to many people of different tastes and interests at the same time; so too are the people at the margins—Dalits, Adivasis, sexual minorities, religious or ethnic or linguistic minorities—who always have to negotiate ‘margins’ or borders or boundaries. The fact is most of the time the marginalised, including women in non-industrialised cultures live ‘in between’ blurred boundaries. Since their worldviews and narratives are never ‘centred’ but polycentric, mixing myth and reality, it is not very difficult for people with such mental states to accommodate apparently ‘irreconcilable’ binaries like ‘private-public’, ‘material-spiritual and so on. Look what the ‘Chief Seattle’ tells the white man, who wanted their land:

“….the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves. This we know: The Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.”

For most women and people at the margins, who by nature are not used to conceive reality/earth/cosmos as ‘divided by boundaries’, not competition but negotiation is central to their worldview. To a great extent men also could be seen as victims of the

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38 Chief of the Suquamish Indians allegedly wrote a letter to the American Government in the 1800s and this particular portion is quite often quoted by the Greens and others.
patriarchal value system as their positions/decisions evolve partially from their patriarchal upbringing. So, all future revolutions, conceived out of concerns for the future of the earth and all living beings in the cosmos, need to be imagined from a holistic perspective that integrates the feminine and the masculine principles, representing all other apparently binary realities and constituencies, including the `mainstream and the margins’ seeing them all as overlapping than oppositional.

Today, in a world that is at the brim of destruction, threatened by environmental catastrophes, nuclear wars, cybercrimes and all that a ‘conquering male’ world has amassed, a ‘woman’s solution’, taken as another word for a ‘holistic solution’ will ponder over how to overcome the destructive designs through ways that are essentially connected to the Nature. Efforts to protect the earth and environment through reverential use of the earth and keep it productive become as important as all other creative and spiritual pursuits of the human beings, says Sara Joseph:

I’m not trying to idealise or romanticise woman’s philosophy or her being. I am not saying that women have all solutions and just put women in the place of men and all will be fine. Our issue is not a question of gender/sex change. I’m pointing to an inner spirit; this could be a thought that sprouts out in a man’s mind, as responses against war, against pollution, against endosulfan etc. There is a coming together of such minds and that coming together leads to a spiritual communion. Whether it is literature or cinema or painting, should strive to highlight this spiritual communion; this is the need of the hour (Sara Joseph, context A).

**Summary:**

In the 1960s-70s certain essentialist and categorical political positions were promoted as the ‘political consciousness’ of the period. Both the conventional Left and the radical Left held on to such monolithic models until forces within these movements felt the need to open up and broaden their vision and expand their action to the margins. This search for a `new Left’ or ‘broad Left’ saw the branching out of mass movements and joining hands with small groups, small struggles and small causes. This juncture also coincided with the ‘fall of socialism’, the onset of globalisation, privatisation and economic liberalisation and the emergence of new thoughts and theories in the spirit of post structuralism and postmodernism. That process of
broadening of politics as it is being redefined in Malayalam cinema is what we examined in this chapter.

In a drastically different world after the fall of socialism and the end of cold war, a new movement began from a politics of commonality to a politics of multiple identities, which addressed gender, sexualities, caste, race, ethnicity and religion and so on. These diverse constituencies had been ignored and side-lined or silenced under the overdose of grand narratives/theories that had shaped all political activity and creative imaginations and expressions. In art and in cinema in particular, the grand narratives promoted an author-centred/text-centred politics, whereas the new politics evolved in the 1990s placed the spectators and their multiple readings at the centre. Such a shift from centripetal to centrifugal movement in public sphere and in works of art was triggered by daring initiatives of the various new social movements across the world. In Kerala, the meeting of women’s groups, environmental groups and such new social movements with factions of the radical Left paved way to new modes of cultural activism, action for justice and peace, search for alternative health and palliative care and so on. In general, the Kerala society witnessed a paradigm shift from red to green towards the end of the 1980s.

The movement from red to green also facilitated a movement from man-centred and male-centred politics to an earth-centred or cosmic vision, politics and spiritualities. The shift from a centred politics to a fragmented, multi-centred politics of the postmodern model unearthed new, diverse perspectives to look at reality, where the contributions of the ‘voices from the margins’ need to underscored. When diversity and multiple voices (heteroglossia) take the place of earlier monolithic models of politics, a more dialogical model of politics and living, founded on co-existence, cooperation and negotiation becomes possible, instead of the Darwinian model of competition and confrontation. In Malayalam cinema most films of John Abraham and T.V.Chandran introduced what we could call a ‘feminine perspective’, which is dialogical and cosmic and respects diversities and represents the ‘voices from the margin’.
Along with this opening up and broadening of political vision and practice, we also witness many regressive and conservative trends and tendencies across the globe starting with the 1990s and their reflections in our local cultural politics and expressions of art, especially in cinema. In Chapter 5, we shall address these phenomena in general and specifically the surfacing and shooting into prominence of religion and new age spiritualities in Kerala cultural politics and Malayalam cinema in particular.