Chapter I. Introduction
‘OF GODS AND MEN’

While watching the French movie Of Gods and Men, the winner of the Grand Prix award at Cannes Film festival in 2010, it did not dawn on me that the theme, the context and even the title of this film could very well reflect the issues and concerns I am trying to address in the present research project. The two major components in my project, ‘rethinking religion’ and ‘redefining politics of cinema’, may not appear inseparably linked to each other, if not contrasted as in the conventional scheme of ‘sacred-secular’ binary opposites. In the modernist scheme, religion used to be perceived as pertaining to the ‘sacred’ realm (‘of Gods’) and mundane human activities like politics, cinema, arts and entertainment to the ‘secular’ domain (‘of Men’). But such conventional boundaries like ‘sacred-secular’ stand blurred in the postmodern thinking that has become an integral part of our theorising in the 1990s-2000s. From an overlapping perspective of life that is today’s hallmark, ‘Gods’ and ‘Men’ are not two entirely different concerns and one cannot stay away from either of them. Today, whether it is religion or politics or cinema, one has to cross boundaries and deal with matters of both gods and men (or humans) to a great extent.

The film Of Gods and Men is based on an actual event that happened in Algeria in 1996, when eight French Christian monks were taken hostage by Islamic terrorists and were eventually killed. The monks were very much a part of everyday life in the village; they sold their honey in the local market and participated in rituals and celebrations with their Muslim neighbours. But the monks’ presence, as European Christians in a land of Arab Muslims, is part of a complicated political legacy, fraught with resentment and bad memories (Scott 2011). While the monks are not overtly trying to expiate the sins of colonialism, they are committed to healing its wounds, through interreligious dialogue, social and medical services etc. In keeping with the waves of Islamic fundamentalism that rose across the globe in the 1990s, some sections of the Muslim population in Algeria embrace the path of religious extremism.
and vow to punish the infidels and get their land rid of `foreigners’. Eight monks of
the abbey also fall prey to the fanatic campaign of the terrorists, and the film focuses
on the fact that even though the monks could have evaded this fate they chose not to.
Films like *Of Gods and Men* become significant in today’s multi-cultural, multi-
religious context of majority of nations across the world, where neither the
governments nor the civil society have easy solutions to address `clash of civilisations’
(Huntington 1996) and ethnic and inter-religious strife.

There is another film, which was made in Pakistan (2007) that addresses the clash of
religions, of civilizations and of generations and its title, *Khuda Keliye* (In the Name
of God/ For God’s Sake) says it all. The filmmaker chooses to present facets of
religious fundamentalism, suspicion, isolation, violence and gender politics in the
Islamic and non-Islamic worlds, in the context of the `post September eleven’\(^1\)
incidents. The film presents two brothers, both professional singers, from a modern,
Westernised Muslim family in Pakistan. The elder one goes to the United States for
higher studies in music, where he is detained and put behind bars under suspicion, one
can say `in the name of God/religion’, for his only crime was to bear a Muslim name.
His younger brother stays back in Pakistan, is attracted to the extreme path of religious
fundamentalism of the Taliban, gives up all his roots in Western music and culture and
also imposes the mandates of the regressive patriarchal morality on his fiancée, whom
he marries and keeps in captivity in Afghanistan. The film ends on a positive note
underscoring the fact that true religion does not enslave but liberates and treats men
and women of all kinds equally.

After the cold war politics lost its significance towards the end of the 1990s with the
fall of socialism, new wars have emerged, waged in the name of religion, ethnicity,
language, caste and community. In the West, new conflicts are flaring up from a
perceived threat of the `other’ seen as the `enemy’ or the `problem’. `The other’ could
be someone from a different culture, religion (especially from a non-Judeo-Christian
religion), race, nation etc. In the United States and Europe, the usual victims of the

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\(^1\) ‘September eleven’ or ‘9/11’ refers to the terrorist attack staged by Islamic terrorists in the United
States on September 11, 2001, in which the twin towers of `World Trade Centre’ in New York along
with many other important sites were attacked and destroyed.
new ‘cultural wars’ are Muslims, non-Caucasian/non-white immigrants, the poor and the homeless. Viewed through these filters, we can trace an intertwining of economic, political and religious factors and motives behind most of the new religious conservative and fundamentalist movements that provoke and cause communal strife and mayhem in different parts of the world.

An incident reported in the ‘The New York Times’ daily (July 1, 2011) cannot be dismissed as just another outburst of reactions to the present economic crisis in the United States and across the globe, but calls for a more thorough examination of its economic and sociological contexts:

The hacker group *Anonymous* has declared a cyberwar against the City of Orlando.... as punishment for the city’s recent practice of arresting members of *Orlando Food Not Bombs*, an antipoverty group that provides vegan and vegetarian meals twice a week to homeless people in one of city’s largest parks.... A 2006 city ordinance requires organizations to obtain permits to feed groups of 25 people or more in downtown parks. The law was passed after numerous complaints by residents and business owners about the twice weekly feedings.... (The New York Times, July 1, 2011, p. A11)

When did it become a crime for people to organize themselves and share what they have with the less fortunate? How could the State restrict people who want to exercise their right to commit acts of kindness and compassion? Who are these people who complaint against the poor, the homeless and the immigrants whose presence threatens the ‘tranquillity’ of their neighbourhood and jeopardises their business interests? With globalisation, privatisation and the present world-wide economic crisis, there are more outcries than ever across the globe, from different sections of people (of different ethnic compositions) alleging that ‘somebody moved their cheese’. Certain racial and ethnic groups in the United States and Europe, who think that they are the ‘authentic citizens’ of the land, point their fingers at the ‘outsiders’ (mostly recent immigrants) as responsible for ‘moving their cheese’. Instead of addressing the actual causes of the economic crisis, layoffs, loss of jobs, benefits and welfare schemes, often the tendency is to put the blame on the ‘other’. As the next step they are branded as ‘threat to the nation’, as ‘terrorists,’ and then put behind the bars.
In India, the anti-Mandal commission agitation in the mid-1980s unleashed a new trend of viewing the ‘other’ as a threat to one’s own socio-economic progress. The middle class and upper middle class sections of the majority (Hindu upper caste) took over this campaign and politicians with vested interests paused as the champions of the majority instigated their sentiments against the minorities, mainly Muslims, scheduled castes and other backward castes. The point they highlighted, which gained rapid momentum, was that the upper caste Hindus, though the religious majority in India, were always the losers and all benefits. Government welfare schemes were apparently showered on the minorities in view of securing their votes. Mangekar (1993: 3) points to the rise of the Hindu nationalist politics carried forward from the impetus they received with the anti-Mandal campaign:

The riots surrounding the Mandal Commission Bill highlighted the anxieties and aspirations of poorer upper castes for upward mobility into the middle class and struggle of lower castes to survive in an increasingly competitive, acquisitive society with limited educational and job opportunities. Opposition to the bill reinforced the consolidation of the upper castes and middle classes as an assertive historical bloc. At the same time, the broadening base of popular support received by the predominantly upper-caste, middle-class Hindu nationalist elite reflected the hegemonic success of their supremacist ideologies.

The political and religious leaders who spearheaded the majority politics prompted the majority to view the minorities as ‘the other’ or ‘the outsider’ and projected the economic progress of the minorities as a threat to the majority. Suspicion and hatred of ‘the other’ that started with the anti-Mandal agitations were further fuelled by the Hindutva activists in their campaign for the Ram Janama Bhoomi, which eventually resulted in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. In this campaign (Mangekar 1993), which erupted in waves of Hindu-Muslim violence throughout the land, the Indian nation was represented as a Hindu nation (Hindu rashtra) whose “original” (read Hindu) inhabitants would finally be able to assert their “pride” in their “national (i.e., Hindu) culture.”

But it was in Gujarat that we saw the cruellest instance of instilling the majority with hatred towards the minority turning them into a mob of rioters who systematically annihilated the Muslim minority: the infamous genocide of thousands of Muslims in
Gujarat in 2002. It is said that many politicians, government officials and the police, who were supposed to protect the rights of everyone, of the majority and the minority as well, participated in the carnage of Muslims and encouraged the rioters to carry on the rampage. Media reports\(^2\) say that demographical records were made available to the rioters by state officials in order to mark out and erase the neighbourhoods with dense Muslim populations and their business interests. This was not an isolated instance; the cultural wars between the religious or ethnic majority and minorities continue in different forms in different parts of India, in the city of Mumbai, in Kashmir, in Assam, in Kandhamal in Orissa, in Northern Kerala and elsewhere.

In a place like Kerala, it would have been difficult to imagine religious and communal forces influencing the electoral politics or cultural politics, considering the unique status of Kerala as the first state ever in world history to have a Marxist Communist government coming into power through ballot. The Leftist political movement, built upon the progressive, secular spirit and climate created by cultural renaissance of the 1930s, had openly opposed and unsettled the feudal-religious nexus in the Kerala society (Sethumadhavan 2008). The so called ‘Leftist leaning’ of majority of intellectuals in Kerala, which many participants of this research allude to, also had helped to create a ‘distanced’ positioning towards religion among politicians and intellectuals in general.

On the other hand, in terms of parliamentary/electoral politics, even the leftist Marxist party tended to accede to the demands of the religious communities from 1960s onwards. The split in the Communist Party of India (CPM) and the growing discontent of the radical Leftist faction in the CPM eventually led to the Naxalite movement of the 1960s-70s. In Kerala, the so called ‘cultural awakening of the 1970s’ seemed to have received impetus from the radical Leftist movement (apart from other factors) and its campaign against the parliamentary political games of the conventional Left. The causes of discontent of the radical Left included the compromises of the

\(^2\) Gujarat riots began with the alleged killing of Hindu karsevaks at Godra on February 28, 2002; but then the majority Hindu community, apparently with support from the Narendra Modi government took ‘revenge’ by killing and wounding a huge number of Muslims. The Times of India of March 17, 2002 in its editorial rebukes the Gujarat government for its connivance in killing of Muslims. The daily condemns pre-mediated mob violence in the name of religion.
conventional Left in terms of religious minorities’ politics and the perceived failure of the CPM in responding to some critical socio-economic issues of that period. However, the Leftist parties and the Kerala society as such had not succumbed to play the ‘communal politics’ card until as recently as the 2000s. T. Ramavarman analyses the soft-Hindutva stand taken by the CPM (Communist Marxist Party) in the assembly elections in Kerala in 2011 and infers the extent to which different communities in Kerala (Hindus, Muslims, Christians and so on) are getting polarised in terms of economic and religious/communal interests and concerns (Varman, Times of India, May 14, 2011).

The present study intends to focus on the entry of politics of religion and the community/communal politics into the cultural political sphere of Kerala with Malayalam Cinema as the site of reference as one of the major research concerns. The surfacing of aggressive community/communal politics in Kerala society may be traced in a series of idayalekhanam (Episcopal letters) of Christian bishops urging their faithful to vote for certain political party or to boycott a film, a play or particular political leaders who do not favour the Church’s stands and interests. Or it could be a fatwa of the local/national Islamic hierarchy banning certain ‘modern’ (read ‘Western’) practices from entering the Muslim community (and in certain cases, where Muslim women brave to take new initiatives in public). Religious nationalist politics of the Hindu majority is spearheaded by groups like Bajrang Dal, Rashtriya Swayam Sevasang (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and similar organizations and groups. Religious fundamentalists, of all hues and colour, try to incite religious or community sentiments and also resort to ‘moral policing’ and ‘mob censorship’ in the cultural sphere and urge their followers to ‘defend’ the ‘religious cause’. Films, plays, paintings (for example the case of M.F. Hussein) and other works of art are vandalised, movie theatres and posters are burned, artists are attacked, young men and

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3 M. F. Hussein was haunted by Hindu rightwing groups, disrupting and vandalizing his paintings and shows that he finally had to move residence to Dubai till his death. The most recent controversy was created by the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) Directorate, when it budged to the campaign of Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS) and first cancelled the screening of a M.F. Hussein documentary at the festival (later the film was screened with police protection). The Hindu daily of December 1, 2011 in its editorial ‘Don’t bend to bigots’ warns against religions waging cultural wars against freedom of expression.
women are banned from moving around freely branding it as 'Western culture' and as against the age-old Indian traditions.

As different groups in Kerala continue to play their games of religious or community/communal politics, vying to influence the ‘Malayalee minds’ in the 1990s-2000s, the present study attempts to look back and investigate the ‘cultural awakening’ of the 1970s and critically evaluate the ‘progressive, secular’ society that ‘70s’awakening’ had supposedly created. By the 1990s-2000s, we do not witness any significant remnants of that ‘golden 1970s’. Where did those dreams and promises of the 1970s disappear? What happened to the ‘revolutionary literature’, ‘campus theatre and street theatre’ and ‘political cinema’ which supposedly thrived in Kerala in the 1970s-80s?

In this study, we focus only on the ‘political cinema’ movement in Malayalam in the 1970s-80s and attempt to map its present contours in the age of postmodernity, globalisation and privatisation. How would the Leftist or the radical Leftist politics that apparently fostered a ‘progressive, secular’ society in Kerala in the 1970s address the complex realities and challenges of today? Do these ideologies and their praxis suffice to address the ‘encroachment’ of religion into the sphere of cultural politics and especially cinema in Kerala in our times, the 1990s-2000s? Or should the active presence of religion and spiritualities in the society and their entry into cinema and arts be seen as something positive that offer possible meeting points for dialogue and exchange between the sacred and the secular?

1.1 Statement of Research Concerns

‘The Times of India’ daily of March 15, 2009 carried a seemingly trivial, but disturbing news item from Udupi, Karnataka, titled ‘BJP activists block statue of Chaplin’. It says, “BJP activists of Bandipur near Udupi have blocked the installation of Chaplin’s statue, saying it would hurt Hindu sentiments” because, “Chaplin was a Christian and his contribution to India was nil”. Times of India further comments that Charlie Chaplin must be laughing in his grave, because the Left-leaning, suspected communist sympathiser was called many names during his eventful life, but “Christian” was not one of them.
The news story cited above is a testimony to how the socio-cultural spaces in our country and elsewhere hitherto considered secular and neutral are fast becoming contested spaces, the claims coming from different constituencies, religion being one strong contestant among them. Religion is becoming a very contentious political issue in the public sphere and surely, its impact is being felt in the politics of cultural production and consumption, for example the politics of cinema. But until recently constituencies like religion, caste, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation etc failed to figure among the prior concerns of producers of culture like filmmakers, many of them being professed, ‘progressive’, left-leaning ‘secularists’.

In the 1990s, in contrast to the 1970s, concepts about the politics of cinema have begun to be articulated in less essentialist and reductionist categories and imageries. This new climate, brought in mainly by the postmodernist thought and the advent of globalisation and economic liberalisation has eventually begun to blur the boundaries between ‘religious’/‘spiritual’ (sacred) and ‘non-religious’/‘material’ (secular) spaces, effecting productive and counter-productive exchanges. Such exchanges are representative of the multifarious processes that are influencing the process of re-articulation of cultural politics in a country, region and society.

In the 1970s, there have been enthusiastic discussions on ‘political cinema’ projects across the globe, especially in the context of the Third World ‘national cinemas’. These discussions, informed by Marxist ideology based on class struggle, were centred mainly on the ‘progressive’ or ‘revoultionary’ politics of the filmmaker reflected in his or her work, the text. Guneratne (2003) points to the prolonged and fecund engagement that the Marxist thought had with filmmaking practice, even before it served as a unifying force in the revolutionary struggles against Neocolonialism that inspired Third Cinema. In tune with the spirit of modernity, cultural politics was seen and pursued in ‘clear and distinct’ or ‘black and white’ categories with perceived certitudes and teleological agendas. Grey zones were ignored because those were the days of grand theories (Hill 1994) and mass-oriented projects. Since the emphasis was on privileging the socio-economic point of view of life, the symbolic order--to which
belong some very basic dimensions of life like beliefs, myths, legends, magic, rituals, art and aesthetics—was sidelined (Kapen 1994).

By the 1990s, after the failure of the Soviet model of socialism and with the advent of the global, neo-liberal socio-economic order, the whole world and especially the ‘Third World’, witnessed a sea change in attitude towards politics. This change began to reflect not only in cinema but in all arts and all walks of life as well. In the true spirit of the postmodern era, the one-dimensional certitudes gave way to confusions and uncertainties (Hill 1994) and thus emerged the multi-layered approaches to reality. From this point of view, a writer’s work/text is not seen as completed by himself or herself, but by its readers/spectators. New ways of looking at the politics of a film visualise a movement from monologue to dialogue, involving the author/text and diverse spectators engaged in an ongoing process of cultural production, consumption and appropriation. Shohat and Stam (1994) explains that neither text nor spectator is static, pre-constituted entity; spectators shape and are shaped by the cinematic experience within an endless dialogical process.

Understanding the politics of a film as a cultural process would involve a consideration of the moment of production, the text itself and the moment of reception. Radhakrishnan (2002) argues that 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. Thus the politics of a particular Malayalam film will be complete only when we look at how that film’s audience, coming from diverse social and cultural constituencies—class, race/caste, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation etc—critically appropriate, engage with and thus `co-produce’ the film text. The ‘political cinema’ movement of the 1970s apparently failed to involve diverse spectators from different locations-- women, men, members of Dalit/Adivasi communities, religious minorities, sexual minorities, working class and so on-- in the discussions of politics of a film. The question of who or which sections of people have been included in or excluded from the processes of cinematic production, distribution and consumption is also of great importance when it comes to consider the politics of cinema.
The present study is an attempt to examine the course of redefining the politics of Malayalam cinema over a period of thirty years, 1970s-90s, looking at cinema as a cultural product and a dynamic process shaped by time and space and various actors namely filmmakers, producers, distributors, viewers, critics and others. These actors representing different constituencies and interests like religion, race, ethnicity and gender and sexuality etc have different levels of stakes in articulating and rearticulating the politics of this cultural product and process. We acknowledge these various actors and constituencies, but this study focuses only on one, namely religion, and through a multi-layered methodology we plan to review the two-fold processes happening in Malayalam Cinema--rethinking religion and redefining politics.

1.2. Rationale of the Study

The failure or unwillingness of the modernist and the leftist intellectuals in addressing the complex realms and layers of human life pushed various groups of people—women, Dalits and other subaltern or marginalised populations, people with different sexual orientations etc—to the periphery. They did not fit into the clear-cut scheme of categorization based on class. An important realm of life that the Leftist politics did not address or slotted as `counter-revolutionary’ was the sphere of religion, the sacred or spiritual dimension of life (both institutional and free flowing models of ‘alternative spiritualities’).

Rational and scientific approaches in social sciences and humanities are not always capable of offering comprehensive answers to people’s fundamental questions and experiences in life. Here perhaps a new language of ‘dialogue’ that bridges the aesthetical and the ethical (moral and spiritual) can be of great relevance. Art and religion, both belonging to the symbolic order invested with meaning and value, leave open a universe of multiple approaches and answers drawn from multiple sources like myth, faith, imagination and reason. The complexities of the present age call for a re-imagination of art and of religion and their possible coming together. It is a task to be undertaken by philosophers, social scientists, visionaries and practitioners of religion, artists, critics and common people, who constitute `the creators and consumers’ of the cultural products and processes.
Unfortunately under the strong influence of Western thought and the model of Enlightenment and modernity, there still exists a strict separation of the sacred and secular (profane) in our Indian society and in most of South Asia. It influences politics and governance, art, social sciences and almost all realms of the public sphere. Mahatma Gandhi spoke very clearly against such categorical division that did not make sense in the Indian context, as evident in his statement that those who thought religion and politics could be kept separate understood neither religion nor politics (cited in Nandy 2002: 69).

When applied to the specific site of Malayalam Cinema of the 1970s-90s, the area and period of this study, the sacred-secular dualism in various degrees can be seen in majority of film narratives and discourses and in the attitudes of the creators and consumers of these narratives and discourses. A close examination of the sacred-secular divide shows us that it is entertained and perpetuated predominantly by the elite middle class intellectuals in the name of ‘secularism’, a product of the Western thought and practice. The present study wishes to bring the present versions and practices of ‘secularism’ to scrutiny and interrogate their relevance in the Indian popular culture. Ashis Nandy warns us of the hegemonic language of secularism popularised by individuals and groups in South Asia.

This language, whatever its positive contributions to humane governance and to religious tolerance earlier, has increasingly become a cover for the complicity of modern intellectuals and the modernizing middle classes of South Asia with the new forms of religious violence that have entered the Asian scene (Nandy 2002: 62).

We have been witnessing attempts of politicising religion all over the world, more evidently towards the end of the 1980s. The secularists continue to dream of building a nation devoid of the evils of religion and also positively work for religious tolerance. On a totally different track, the right-wing ‘religious nationalists’ in different parts of the world, including India, have been capitalising on the ‘cultural void’ left by modernity and the failed socialist model and the ‘disorientations’ devised by aggressive campaigns of capitalism. The resulting anxieties and fears of individuals and communities are addressed mostly by religious leaders and groups, who provide their followers and ‘new converts’ with apparently ‘safe zones’ to belong to--
membership to narrow identities based on religious affiliation and approval. Lata Mani does not have high esteem towards the recent trend in India of ‘return to tradition’ (or religion) predominantly among young professionals and promoted as a fad through various media channels. “Humans have frequently turned to religion or spiritual practices in times of need and suffering. However, many doing so in the present seem motivated to find quick-fix solutions” (Mani 2009:73).

A new politics founded on organised religion, rather than spirituality, has clearly emerged in the East and in the West. What they preach is adherence to tradition or the purity of the ‘text’ and a value system that clearly divides the society into ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the 1990s-2000s, we have been observing a resurgence of sectarian and non-sectarian interest in religion and spirituality not only in the conventional ‘Orient’, but also in certain quarters of the Occident too. More young people, than in the 1970s and 1980s, are turning to organised and charismatic religious movements expecting to find spiritual experience and meaning in life. This is happening among the Christians, the Hindus, the Muslims and other religious groups too. The increased membership to the Christian organisation ‘Jesus Youth’ and the increase in the number of young Hindus and Muslims regularly attending temple rituals or the namaz at mosques is a testimony to this fact. If we do a random survey among young members of the Left wing parties in Kerala, we may find four out of ten subscribing to some religious beliefs and practices and also openly displaying personal religious artefacts. Rustom Bharucha brings in an interesting observation by Mircea Eliade. It was Eliade who posited the sacred in binary opposite relationship with the secular and thus influenced the secular perspectives on religion in social sciences circles. But interestingly Eliade notes in the conclusion of his book that ‘the great majority of the irreligious are not liberated from religious behaviour’ (cited in Bharucha 1993: 16).

Bharucha presents another category of people, a big majority, whose faith is either ambiguous or is so very much part of their worldliness that they are unable to differentiate between ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ categories (Bharucha 1993: 17). It

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4 Two participants of this research, Anwar Jhan and Basheer Mechary, who have started attending religious services attest to the fact that number of young Muslim men and women showing active interest in religion and rituals have increased significantly in the 1990s-2000s.
is possible that some of the filmmakers whose works we choose to study in this project may fall under the `religious or `non-religious’ category and many others may pertain to the third, the `ambiguous’ category. We find the quest for the transcendental in the films of Andrei Tarkovski, Robert Bresson, Krzysztof Kieślowski and others. G. Aravindan, who many critics consider as one of the pioneers of the `New Malayalam Cinema’ movement of the 1970s, openly and candidly had expressed his angst about the basic human predicaments. His ambiguous or unarticulated stand on and pursuit after spirituality is clear from his response to questions by a critic on `mysticism’.

I have not done anything consciously…. How is it like that, I don’t know I was interested in the kind of issues that you are talking about quite early in life. Though not very seriously, like a lot of youngsters, I thought of becoming a Sanyasi; perhaps I could have (interview by Chandrahasan nd: 25).

Aravindan’s characters, from his first film Uttarayanam to his final Vastuhara, searched for answers, not much in the rational and scientific, but in the mystical and magical (Sunny Joseph 2008). A very special Malayalam film that attracts our attention in the post 1990s period is 5Maargam (2002), directed by Rajeev Vijayaraghavan, which presents the moral dilemma (I call it `spiritual dilemma’) of the protagonist, Venukumara Menon, who was a Naxalite in the 1970s. In the changed circumstances of neo-liberalisation Menon finds himself stuck in time, while most of his colleagues have changed the course and have embraced new `gods and goddesses’.

The present study aims to re-imagine the concept and politics of religion and the positioning of religion in the cultural politics of Kerala, using Malayalam Cinema of 1970s-90s as the specific site of engagement and interaction. The major lines of inquiry will be the intra and inter dynamics of religion and politics that have been shaping and reshaping Kerala culture and society in this period. The larger focus of the study will be the process of ‘redefining the politics of Malayalam cinema’ during these thirty years (1970s-90s), examined through an exercise of ‘rethinking religion’ and by looking at possible meeting points of these three, namely, religion, cinema and politics. What are the prevalent or emerging attitudes towards politics and religion

\[5 \text{maargam may mean `way of life’, `ideology’, a particular `religious faith’, and more}\]
among Malayalees residing in Kerala and outside, especially among the audiences of Malayalam Cinema of 1970s-90s? Are there any new trends or movements, proactive or reactive, as attempts to address the question of religion and as strategies to position it decisively in the discourses of cultural politics? Are there common cultural spaces where politics, cinema and religion can meet and dialogue?

1.3 Scope and Purpose of the Study

For me, the starting point of this research comes out of what I am by vocation, a Christian priest, supposedly immersed in full time activities of institutional religion and what I am by profession, a media activist, making films, teaching film, curating film festivals and workshops. The theoretical and practical dimensions of both religion and cinema have always interested me. But the interface between these two spheres, cinema and religion, has not been a very smooth blend for me and for many others whom I interact with from both spheres: Why does religion in our times, instead of fostering bonds of love, divide people and even ‘poison’ art, politics and other spheres? Why does the politics of cinema or politics of art in general resort to fragmented or compartmental approaches to life instead of artistically and intellectually addressing all facets of human existence and experiences including the ‘spiritual’, the ‘beyond’ dimension? Such concerns arising out of a desire to negotiate the dichotomies and disparities operating in one’s areas of interest and involvement have led to the choice of the topic of the present study.

To narrow down the scope of the research, I have chosen to study the shifting political undercurrents in the cultural politics of Kerala, my home State in South India, critically looking at the interface of cinema and religion over a period of thirty years (1970s-90s). In order to analyse the transition in the politics of Malayalam cinema over thirty years, a comparative textual and contextual study of key film texts from the ‘parallel/new’ cinemas, the ‘middle stream/middle of the road’ cinemas and ‘main stream’ cinemas of the 1970s-90s is undertaken. This textual analysis complements the in-depth dialogue on ‘political cinema and politics of cinema’ with a cross-section of the creators and consumers of cultural products, processes and discourses in Kerala.
A quick overview of the socio-cultural, political and economic scenarios of the Kerala society over a period of thirty years reveals a strong influence of the Marxist-socialist ideology, reflected in people’s attitudes, choices and preferences in Kerala’s literature, performing and fine arts, print and electronic media and other spheres of life. In Kerala, important debates and discussions are usually centred on the socialist model of politics, between those who subscribe to the Leftist politics and those who do not.

The Marxist-Socialist ideology still holds its sway in the Kerala politics even after almost two decades since the collapse of the socialist model in former Soviet Union and elsewhere. But on the other hand, we wonder why the inner contradictions and hypocrisies in the Kerala society still continue without much difference in kind or degree, in spite of Kerala’s projected image of a highly literate and egalitarian society. Such contradictions unearth the casteist-feudal hangover of the Kerala society, which many ‘progressive’ writers, artists and political leaders have not yet been able to part with, even after decades of Leftist political presence and indoctrination. Raveendran, a filmmaker and critic (known as ‘Chintha Ravi’ after Chintha, the Marxist publication) points out that the so-called progress in Kerala spearheaded by the Leftist cultural movements, to a great extent has only served to perpetuate the rightist, feudal values with unarticulated partisan agendas (Raveendran 2009).

A distinct juncture of transition in cultural politics is evident in the 1990s, a new political process seems to be emerging, a process of engagement with the divergent socio-political realities, effected through a politics of negotiation instead of confrontation. Thanks to the apparent ‘transparency’ brought in by the new political ambiance in Kerala merrily fostered by the all-pervasive electronic media, all institutions and ideologies are now thrown open to scrutiny, discussion and debate. Today, rarely do things go unquestioned, as evident in the recent debate over religion (or ‘no religion’) in the school curriculum (‘mathamillatha jeevan’ = life without faith)⁶ and the row over the last rites offered to late Mathai Chacko, a staunch

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⁶ This lesson Mathamilla jeevan in the social studies text of VII grade was later withdrawn. Catholic church authorities claimed that Mathai Chacko had received last rites before he died. But his family and the communist Marxist party disputed that claim.
Communist party activist. The polarisation in the name of religious identity and affiliation happening in the Kerala society is nothing particular to Kerala, but could be seen as the repercussions of a worldwide tidal wave.

Any attempt to rethink religion in view of the broader project of redefining the politics of Malayalam Cinema has to acknowledge the socio-economic and cultural history of Kerala, influenced by the different streams of the Leftist and the Rightist politics. Rethinking and redefining will be possible only if we keep ourselves open to the emerging diverse cultural and political processes, many of which are happening now at the margins, which may question and uproot our conventional ideas on politics and culture itself. A starting point for this study would be listening to the divergent voices vibrant in our popular culture, where the sacred and secular divide is rather easily integrated and becomes part of daily living and acting. To the bring stories of ordinary people’s lived experiences of religious pluralism and their innovative projects for communal harmony to limelight is one of the important intentions of this study. This, we hope, would call attention of the mainstream academic and artistic circles to the validity and viability of such experiences in the popular culture.

If the different disciplines of social sciences and in a special way the practitioners and students of media, pay more attention to the various ways that religion and spirituality function in the lives of ordinary people, it could help to develop healthier and holistic approaches to those important dimension of reality. Our usual practice today is to address the question of religion only when crises like religious fundamentalism, violence, riots and some strange situations that we find difficult to deal with. Compared to the main stream feature film (fiction) industry, the non-fiction sector (documentaries, short films, animation etc) seems to be better equipped and oriented in engaging with the question of religion and its diverse issues and concerns in relation to the general fabric of the Indian society.

This study also stems out of a felt need to incorporate a comprehensive understanding of the politics of cinema and media in general in school and college curriculum that

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7 The initiative of ‘Dharavi Mohalla Committee’ for religious harmony in Mumbai is a commendable example (ref. ‘Naata’, a film by Anjali Monteiro & K.P. Jayasankar)
takes into account the different aspects of media production, distribution and consumption, involving different stakeholders. The present study, closely linked to the cultural politics of Kerala 1970s-90s, could come up with significant contributions to different modes of academic, artistic and activist initiatives that combine aesthetics and ethics in view of addressing the basic human yearnings for truth, love and beauty.

1.4 The Thesis Layout

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter One, ‘Introduction: Of God’s and Men’ presents the background and the specific geographical, cultural and political contexts of the study. It explains what the study sets out to address as its important concerns and the possible contributions to the field of academics and arts. Chapter Two, ‘Locations and Research Strategies’ reviews available literature, identifies the gaps and then frames the objectives of the study, the research questions and the research design and strategies.

Chapter Three to Six are evolved from the analysis of data collected through in-depth interviews/dialogue, analysis of film texts and of discourses generated in media or elsewhere. Chapter Three, ‘Political Cinema in Kerala, 1970s-90s’ explores the concept of political cinema, emerged in the 1960s and 70s across the world and looks at the specific socio-cultural context of Kerala in the 1970s, which seems to have triggered experiments in ‘political cinema’ in Malayalam, against the backdrop of the Emergency and the Naxalite movement. Chapter Four, ‘Politics Redefined: Implications to Malayalam Cinema’, examines if and to what extent the transitions in global-local politics have influenced and reshaped the politics of Malayalam cinema in content and form and raises the important question linked to one of the major thrusts of the study: why the ’feminine’ and the ‘politics of the feminine’ have almost been ’blacked out’ from the trajectories of production, distribution and critical viewership of Malayalam Cinema, 1970s-90s? Chapter Five, ‘Screening Culture, Hiding Religion: Positioning of Religion in Malayalam Cinema 1970s-90s’ attempts to capture the changing attitudes to religion in people’s lives and in the socio-political and cultural spheres in Kerala, in terms of ‘hiding/displaying’ religion and religious signs and symbols as conscious or unconscious strategies. The sixth chapter, titled ’Negotiating
the Sacred and the Secular: Malayalam Cinema, 1990s and Beyond’ takes stock of the post-secular context since the 1990s, after the collapse of communist-socialist models of politics and governments. More people, including many ‘progressive’ Leftists, are found to consider ‘spirituality’ as an alternative option in their attempt to address the uncertainties and insecurities in an extremely individualised, privatised and decentralised world. The chapter proposes ‘secular-spiritual’ or ‘SecularSpiritual’ as a bridge between the believers and non-believers, where creative, peace-loving people could meet for dialogue/polylogue and strategise ‘joint action’ for justice and peace.

Taking insights from the key film texts and from other material, the dissertation argues that a shift or movement is visible in the politics of Malayalam cinema in the 1990s and beyond. This shift appears to be a movement from ‘a politics of certainty’ to the ‘beauty of uncertainty’, from ‘macro politics of grand ideologies’ to ‘micro politics of small/little things/actions’ and from ‘politics of confrontation through armed revolution and annihilation’ to ‘politics of negotiation through peace, love and compassion’. The study proposes the ‘foregrounding of a Feminine Perspective’ in order to represent the diverse and multi-layered constituencies of people at the margins and their multiple voices (Heteroglossia). The study looks at the possibility of ‘future revolutions’ in politics, religion and cinema in ‘Kerala beyond 1990s’, being conceived, framed and propelled from a Feminine perspectives through an ongoing secular-spiritual dialogue or polylogue.