Chapter II

LOCATIONS AND RESEARCH STRATEGIES

This chapter presents the conceptual framework, literature review and the methodology employed in this dissertation. Core concepts that guide this study are identified and available literature from different disciplines and authors that delineate these concepts have been reviewed. The last section on methodology elaborates the research strategy, which includes a detailed description of the research paradigm, research sites, participants and the procedures of data collection and analysis.

The overarching concept that forms the foundation of this study is politics. A major concern of this research is to look at the process of redefinition, broadening and diversification of politics on one hand and the apparently contradictory and conflicting social movements on the other, that force a hardening of boundaries, replacing old hegemonies with new ones. If in the 1970s, a ’common cause’ was supposed to unite the masses struggling to bring about social change, now the assertion of ’self’ or subjectivities—individual, group, communal, religious, ethnic and so on—appears to have come to the forefront, often imposing narrow/bounded identities, associations and memberships. Gitlin (1994) considers the rise of identity politics as the main force that caused the most significant fragmentation in the ’commonality politics’ of the Leftist political models based on class struggle, and led to the broadening and diversification of the concept and practice of politics in the postmodern, post-cold war contexts in the 1990s.

What began as a claim to dignity, a recovery from exclusion and denigration, and a demand for representation, has also developed a hardening of boundaries. The long-overdue opening of political initiative to minorities, women, gays, and others of the traditionally voiceless developed its own methods of silencing (Gitlin 1994: 152).

Redefinition of politics, obviously, is not a neat process, but a dynamic and organic one, which implies ongoing ’unfinished business’. In the realm of ’political cinema’,
this process of redefinition of politics comes in the form of appropriation of film texts by audiences, i.e., people from multiple constituencies, through their divergent readings of the text, upsetting the centrality of the `author’ (filmmaker and his/her ‘work’), treating it only as one reading/textuality among many in the web of intertextuality. Kristeva (cited in Flood 1999) considers all texts as reflecting a diversity of discourse or heterology, which is also termed as diversity of language or heteroglossia (other tongues/voices) by Bakhtin in his ‘dialogical’ approach:

At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth…. (Bakhtin 1981, cited in Allen 2007: 29).

To illustrate heteroglossia, Bakhtin (1981) takes the example of novel, which orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types (raznotecie) and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia (raznotecie) can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). The tendency in the intertextuality of discourse is towards unending diversity and fragmentation or heteroglossia, which Bakhtin describes as the ‘centrifugal force’ contrasted with the opposing tendency towards the centralisation of meaning, the ‘centripetal force’ (Flood 1999). Discourse is therefore riven with tension and contradiction inherent within it, the centripetal force tending towards unified, clear meaning, giving voice to a dominant, powerful ideology and social group, the centrifugal force tending towards difference, ambiguity and allowing other voices to speak, and other subversive ideas and subaltern social groups to be expressed.

This study explores the ‘Malayalam political cinema of the 1970s’ and the ‘redefinition of the politics of Malayalam cinema’ in the 1990s, looking at the different agencies and constituencies involved in the production and consumption of the cultural products and process in the Kerala cultural politics of this thirty year
period. We single out the constituency of religion and choose to limit the scope of the study of the redefinition of politics, by looking at the process of positioning religion in Malayalam cinema and Kerala cultural politics in general in the 1970s-90s. This multi-disciplinary study is framed from multiple perspectives incorporating diverse experiences of different people coming from different locations, and also by studying the situations and characters in the film texts relevant for this thirty year study. The main foundation and the building blocks of this research project are the ‘critical dialogue/conversation’ that the researcher had with the research participants and other people/resources related to the research concerns.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

While formulating and operationalising the conceptual handles that would guide this study in the field and later at the analysis stage, we attempted to understand the movement from static, unitary and essentialist ideas of politics in general and politics of cinema and religion in particular, to diverse, dynamic discourses from multiple perspectives, in the spirit of postmodernity. In sociological debates, postmodernism has been used to identify the emergence of a new economic and social order after the collapse of socialism in Europe and elsewhere.

Hill (1998) notes that in cinema, the postmodern polemicizing against ‘universalizing’ and ‘totalizing’ theory has led to a certain refocusing of interest on the local and specific, which may be detected in the turn away from the ‘Screen theory’ of the 1970s (Lapsley, Robert & Westlake 1988) towards historical research, cultural studies, and an interest in the social and cultural specificities of non-European cinemas (and a more ‘multicultural’ and ‘dialogical’ approach to their study). Shohat and Stam (1994) echo a number of postmodern themes, such as the breakdown of confidence in ‘grand narratives’ and problematisation of representation, in their discussion of how the ‘post-Third worldist’ films have moved ‘beyond’ the anti-colonial nationalism and political modernism of films such as Battle of Algiers (Algeria/Italy/1966) and Hour of the Furnaces (Argentina, 1973). The new politics interrogates the nationalist discourse from the perspectives of class, gender, sexual orientation, and diasporic identity, and

In this section of conceptualisation we examine what the three major trajectories of this study—political cinema, politics of cinema and positioning religion in the politics of cinema—mean in their historical and socio-cultural contexts and how the sacred-secular dyad could possibly bridge instead of alienate certain realities in the sphere of cultural politics that we apparently designate to compartmentalised divisions. In the section that follows, the same concepts and sub-concepts will be again traced in available literature.

2.1.1 Political Cinema

After the golden age of the ’political cinema’ in the post-revolution Soviet Russia, espoused by Sergei Eisenstein and others and its fading out, diverse praxis of political cinema again surfaced across the world in the 1960s. These new experiments sprouted out in response to the worldwide social and political upheavals and specifically in the context of emerging ’nation states’ in the post-colonial, post-World war II era. In Hollywood parlance the new genre was called ’political thriller’, but in many national cinemas of the Third World, ’political cinema’ had been conceived differently, in more of a revolutionary, avant-garde mode (Hill 1998). Two filmmakers, Jean-Luc Godard and Costa-Gavras, are generally identified as two stalwarts who spearheaded, though in different directions, the experiments of political cinema. Godard proposed a deliberate abandonment of the conventional linear narrative of the Hollywood and insisted on revolutionary content and form for the political cinema, whereas Gavras’ filmmaking sought to blend mainstream Hollywood conventions to radical political ends.

The mainstream Hollywood cinema and its models elsewhere does not easily yield as a medium for political discussions and possible actions and so the Gavras model of political cinema is forced to make compromises. Kolker (1983) discusses the reasons why hard-core political filmmaking cannot find a place in the commercial cinema of

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8 A detailed discussion on ’Political Cinema’, its historical and sociological perspectives etc will be taken up later in Chapter. III
Northern America or elsewhere. In Hollywood, financing is difficult to find for political works, indeed for any work which in form or content deviates from the standard comedic or melodramatic conventions of realism. Radical variations in form and content are condemned as being “unrealistic” and not entertaining. The mainstream cinema of Hollywood and elsewhere has always promoted the dominant ideology whereas the socialist, Leftist political models in Europe and in some developing countries till the 1990s tried to give voice to alternative discourses and political perspectives different from the dominant ideology of the ruling/influential class. But the socialist model also has its own baggage, of denying the realm of the subjective and the psychological in film, as vigorously as capitalist ideology denies the appropriateness of dealing with social and political issues.

The cinema movement in Europe that for the first time showed its explicit concern for the working class supported by a left-leaning socialist ideology was Neo-Realism that originated in Italy in the 1950s. Its thrust of politicizing the content was further taken forward by the French New Wave movement, particularly in the films of Godard that turned experimentation in film form into a political act. In the spirit of ‘counter cinema’ or ‘alternative cinema’ that the Godardian model popularised in Europe and in response to the tumultuous socio-political ambience of the 1970s, the Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino proposed a ‘Third Cinema’ valid primarily for the Third World and anywhere, where such a socio-political context existed (Chanan 2004).

The Third Cinema movement known by different names in Latin American soil such as ‘Imperfect Cinema’, ‘Aesthetics of Hunger’ etc positioned itself in opposition to the ‘First World Cinema’ (Hollywood) and the ‘Second World Cinema’ (European and ‘auteur’ cinemas in the Third World itself). Third Cinema, the way Solanas and Getino conceived it, was essentially a guerrilla cinema, in which questions about group production, distribution, and the screening event took precedence over aesthetic questions. The pervasive metaphor of cinema as a weapon, the linkage of ideological struggle with physical combat, clearly aligns the authors within the worldwide conflict between imperialism and Third World liberation (Nichols1993).
By the 1990s, the changed global economic equations and local political scenario in the Third World, in the Latin American context for example, have drastically changed the attitudes towards ‘political cinema’ and accordingly the new cinemas in this alternative mould are in a process of adaptation and realignment in view of survival. Shaw (2003) cites Nestor Garcia Canclini’s observations on the difficulties facing filmmakers in the Third World (Latin America) in the 1990s, including the decline in film going as a result of the privatization of culture, seen in the growth of home entertainment, the dominance of Hollywood distributors, and the fall in state funding. Now filmmaking throughout Latin America has only been able to survive by integrating within an international system of production and distribution. Shaw comments that the adaptations and readjustments as per the changed circumstances clearly jar with the advocates of ‘New Latin American Cinema in the late 1960s, who called for revolutionary filmmaking in opposition to commercial cinema and the monopoly of the Hollywood.

Political cinema, in general, is itself responsible to some extent for its decline. Hill (1998) criticises the political cinema movement as a unitary model that relied on certain aesthetic strategies (primarily Brechtian) almost exclusively and assumed that these strategies would automatically deliver a radically political cinema. Such a rigid model of political cinema proved to be inadequate to achieve the proposed goals that are diverse and the changed political circumstances across the globe do demand diverse forms of political filmmaking.

2.1.2 Politics of Cinema
Shohat and Stam (1994) explain how the concept of politics has changed in recent times from a few standard categories to multi-layered tools of analysis. Class and nation have not disappeared from view, but they lose their privileged position, being both supplemented and challenged by categories such as race, gender and sexuality. The radical nationalist politics has to now address the paradoxes of postmodernism that has changed and remoulded the contemporary political climate, where the all-pervasive global market culture has ushered in a new stage of capitalism in which culture and information become key terrains for struggle.
One defining moment for the film theories that guided the ‘political cinema’ movement of the 1960s-70s in Europe and in the Third World was the political upheavals in France, *les evenements*, during the 1960s. Lapsley and Westlake (1988) identify two emphases stemmed from that moment: one that film must be thought of in political terms; two, that theory was indispensable to the political task. There was no place outside or above politics; all texts, whatever their claims to neutrality, had their ideological slant. The formation of ‘Estates General of Cinema’ in 1968, comprising filmmakers, technicians and critics throws light on the almost one-sided thrust of politics of cinema of the 1960-1970s, a trend which eventually had to give up or broaden its monolithic idea of politics and ideology of film.

The new approaches to studying the politics of film evolved around 1990s adopts more of a dialogical approach to defining the politics of cinema, in which all experiences and all types of discourses generated by various agencies belonging to heterogeneous constituencies become important. Though there have been significant studies in the international circles concerning creation, consumption and appropriation of texts involving different agencies, it seems to take time for filmmakers and audiences in Kerala and in India at large to get on par with such developments. For us it might take time to learn from those experiences. It might take time for us to redefine and reformulate our perspectives on politics of Malayalam cinema in response to the explosion of new ideas and experiences happening at global-local levels. In this regard, attempts to redefine the politics of Malayalam Cinema from broader, diverse perspectives face many exigencies.

Instead of seeing a piece of art merely as a thing of beauty or a piece of entertainment, any art work, for example cinema, needs to be studied as a product or artefact with social, cultural, economic, political and psychological implications. The same is the case with someone going to a church or temple, to perform or participate in religious rituals, make payments/donations and receive favours/satisfaction. An artist or a priest (both creators/producers) is aware of their investment in cultural capital (symbolic/spiritual) and their training/special gifts (charisma) in the ‘trade’ and so they try to take control over the production and distribution by fixing restrictions.
Swartz proposes Bourdieu’s ‘political economy of symbolic power’ to explain the investment in cultural products and processes:

Bourdieu focuses on how these social struggles are refracted through symbolic classifications, how cultural practices place individuals and groups in struggle over valued resources, how actors struggle and pursue strategies to achieve their interests within such fields, and how in doing so actors unwittingly reproduce the social stratification order. Culture, then, is not devoid of political content but rather is an expression of it (Swartz 1996: 72).

Different systems of signification are in play in cultural products and processes that decide how meanings are built into a text. Arriving at the meaning/s is an exercise involving the text, readers (consumers), and the context/s, where the text is situated in time of production and consumption. In contrast to the earlier (economic) ‘production-oriented’ view, now attention is paid more to the symbolic investment in cultural productions and processes. Christian Metz treated cinema and cinematic texts as fields of signification in which a heterogeneity of codes interact with one another in ways that are specific, systematic and determinate at certain specified levels of cinematic discourse (Lapsley and Westlake 1988).

The ‘cinematic apparatus’, involving the technology of making (recording) images and viewing them has a strong influence on the politics of a film. Kolker (1998) considers that the physical presence of film constitutes only one aspect of its textuality: whether it is five or six reels of celluloid film or hundreds of feet of magnetic video tape or similar material/electronic signals, the conditions of viewing are not the same. As soon as a thinking and feeling person--‘consumer’/viewer-- is present, that person’s experience is brought to bear on the film’s images, sounds and narrative. People who created the film (‘producers’), their beliefs, their understanding of what a film should or should not be, the economic constraints that allow them to say and do only so much in any given film—these also become textualised. Referring to the complex structure of cultural production, Theodore Adorno (1991) uses the expression ‘culture industry’, involving questions like: Who produces? Who consumes? What meanings are produced and disseminated? What set/system of meaning making mechanisms is in place? Adorno holds that when one buys a cultural product, one consumes not only a commodity but also an ideology. The present study looks at the politics of cultural
products and production processes from the part of producers, consumers and other various aspects, including the money invested and money recovered.

*Producers:* Here we look at the ideologies and motives under the influence of which, a producer, i.e. an artist is trying to move her/his audiences to perceive social reality in certain ways. For example look at the filmmakers who made films to support and promote Soviet realism during the Stalin era or an ‘aesthetic of hunger’ in Latin American ‘Third cinemas’. In contrast to literary or fine arts, cinema from its very beginning has been a mass media, producing and mediating culture for the masses. With the arrival and omnipresence of Television, it is as if we do not produce or consume anything but mediated culture and no sphere (including religion) can escape from this. Here we investigate the role of producers of cultural products and processes in relation to how they become part of the cultural industry and how a mutual exercise of control is in place vis-a-vis the producers, the industry and the market.

*Consumers/Viewers:* Consumer is a term that automatically connects to a product and a market. If we agree that cultural production is ‘market-oriented’ or ‘consumer-oriented’, then the question revolves around the consumer: how active/passive is the role of a consumer (audience) in the consumption of cultural products and processes? Here there have been theories and heated discussions on how the dominant capitalist ideologies exert control over the consumers. For example it was the first and foremost question raised by ‘Estates General of Cinema’ in 1968 and later carried forward by ‘Cahiers du Cinema’ in France and ‘Screen’ in Britain (Lapsley and Westlake 1988). They asked: how does mainstream cinema contribute to maintaining the existing social structure? (i.e., what is its characteristic ideological operation and what are its mechanisms?).

Using media and specifically cinema for endorsing and perpetuating the dominant ideology was applicable not in capitalist cultures alone like the liaison between Hollywood cinema and the capitalism, but the socialist and leftists ideologies also had realized the potential of cinema for political propaganda. Seeing the wide appeal of cinema among a wide range of people (masses), Lenin had stated that cinema was the most important of all arts of the Twentieth century (Tarkovski 1987) since it was the
most efficient medium for propaganda. Whether it is art or religion, how do we know if the audiences (the believers/devotees in the case of religion) would buy the product and/or propaganda (ideology)? If they are aware of the hegemonic tone and content of the cultural propaganda, would they subject themselves to the hegemony or would they develop alternative/resistant modes of reception techniques? Here, moving forward from the formalist theories of how a text is created, insights from reception theories (Kolker 1998) would tell us how texts are to a great extent constructed and reconstructed by a wide range of consumers at different locations. If the Enlightenment reasserted the primacy of reason, objectivity and the written word, in the postmodern globalised world, creation of culture happens in realms and languages beyond words and reason, more in carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1981) kind of experience-based modes.

2.1.3 Politics of Positioning Religion in Cinema
Increased interest has been noticed recently in studying cinema from the point of view of gender, race, and ethnicity and so on. However, ‘religion’ and ‘cinema’ still appear as two separate domains which have not much in common. Mention of religion in cinema is usually viewed with suspicion for the cautious, moralistic and judgmental attitudes with which most organized religious institutions have been ‘distancing’ themselves from the ‘harmful’ effects and values of the commercial film industry. If at all institutionalised religions have showed any interest in cinema, usually it is with ulterior motives such as ‘how to use cinema for religious/moral propaganda’. Simon and Hendricks (2005) find ‘religious cinema’ only as interested in providing dogmatic answers to the big questions about life and living, like ‘Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?’ rather than helping their viewers in their individual journey through light and darkness.

On the other hand, the response of the film world to the question of religion has been very lukewarm, in general. Religion is part and parcel of people’s everyday reality, but when it comes to the portrayal of religious themes or the representation of religious identities in cinema, apparently ambiguous and ambivalent approaches are adopted to safeguard the interests of film as a commercial product that should appeal to all
sections of the audiences. Hence only in the ‘mythological film’ genre we might see an open and explicit treatment of religion and religious themes. This study looks into the strategy of Malayalam film industry, of ‘hiding and revealing’ religion in cinema, and the significant shift in that strategy after the 1990s, in the post-Babri Masjid period. Since 1990s, themes of religious revivalism, communalism and fundamentalism have been slowly entering the screen and also heating up discussions off the screen.

2.1.3.1 Religion: For an understanding of the politics of religion that is one of the important lines of inquiry of the present study, primarily we will borrow the basic observations and understanding on religion from anthropology, sociology and elsewhere. Before looking into the etymology and some working definitions of religion, we should remember, Gavin Flood (1999) reminds us, that ‘religion’ is a Western category that originated in late antiquity and developed in Christianity as part of that tradition’s self-understanding.

The origin of the term is in the Latin religio, which Cicero took to be from relegere, ‘to re-read’, with the implication of ‘tradition’ as that which is ‘re-read’ and so passed on; and with Lactantius from religare, ‘to bind fast’, with the implication of that which binds people to each other and to the gods in the Roman state. As the concept and institution of religion originated in the West, the same Western mind had the audacity to declare that the ‘savages’ did not have a religion at all. It followed from the ‘conclusion’ that since ‘savages’ did not have a religion (god) they can be conquered, because a nation without one’s own god does not deserve a state (territory). This weird justification served as the license for the European (Christian) colonizers to apply their ‘religious’ principle over Africans, Asians and Native Americans in South and Central Americas (ibid 1999).

Later, when the Western anthropologists took some interest in studying non-Western cultures, they began to inquire with curiosity if those people had a religion and if so what it was. An important question the Western scholars of religion have been asking is whether the term ‘religion’ has semantic equivalents in non-Western languages and cultures. Flood (ibid) identifies the following terms from the Hindu sacred texts that
could convey the basic characteristics of religion. They are: *sasana, mata, agama* and *siddhanta* all standing for ‘teaching’; *amnaya* as ‘tradition’, *darsana* as ‘critical world-view’ or ‘philosophy’, *vada* as ‘discourse, *sastra* as ‘science’/‘discourse’/‘discipline’ and *marga* as ‘way’/’path’. In the same vein of reverence to and desire for knowing other religions, Evans-Pritchard, the renowned British anthropologist, observed:

Statements about a people’s religion must always be treated with the greatest caution, for we are then dealing with what neither European nor native can directly observe, with conceptions, images, words, which require for understanding and a thorough knowledge of a people’s language and also an awareness of the entire system of ideas of which any particular belief is part, for it may be meaningless when divorced from the set of beliefs and practices to which it belongs (Pritchard 1972, cited in Bowie 2000:21).

The exceptionally respectful and empathetic attitude of Pritchard towards a people’s faith stands in contrast to an apathy or negligence towards religion among the so called ‘scientific’ and ‘artistic’ minds. The dogmatic hegemonies of religions and their political games need to be exposed and opposed, but not all religious experiences can be reduced to ‘dogma’ or ‘superstition’. A better attitude for a social scientist who is a professed secularist and non-believer could be treating religion or faith as a different ‘language’, which needs to be studied with respect and appreciation.

Ashis Nandy’s distinction between ‘religion as faith’ and ‘religion as ideology’ offers the best keys to understand religion and also to dispel misunderstandings (Nandy 2002). By ‘Religion as faith’, Nandy means religion as a way of life, a tradition which is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural. If a particular religion is geographically and culturally confined to a small area, religion as a way of life has in effect to turn into a confederation of a number of ways of life, linked by a common faith and with some theological space for heterogeneity. By ‘religion as ideology’ Nandy means religion as a sub-national, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socioeconomic, interests. Such religion-as-ideologies usually get identified with one or more texts which, rather than the ways of the believers, then become the final identifiers of the pure forms of the religions. The texts help anchor the ideologies in something seemingly concrete and delimited and, in effect, provide a set of
manageable operational definitions. Nandy further explains that ‘religion as faith’ and ‘religion as ideology’ are not mutually exclusive. An easy way he suggests to distinguish between the two is to conceive of ideology as something that, for which the individuals and people who believe in it, needs to be constantly protected and, faith as something that the faithful usually expect to protect them.

2.1.3.2 Politics, Religion and Cinema: The changing attitude towards religion in the Latin American cinema and specifically in the ‘revolutionary Cuban cinema’ around the 1990s could be a reflection of how ‘political cinema’ in the Third World and elsewhere is shifting its strategies in dealing with the politics of religion. A brief survey of recent films coming out from the earlier Soviet and East European bloc, Latin America and certain Asian cinemas (from Iran, Philippines, Indonesia etc) would reveal a significant fading out of the ‘iconoclastic/sacrilegious’ stance towards religions, which was a hallmark of the alternative/political filmmaking modes prevalent in the 1960s-70s, backed by the Leftist-Marxist/Socialist ideologies.

Chanan (2004) finds a sea change in attitudes and perspectives in the Latin American political cinema that began as a radical movement in the 1960s fuelled by Marxist revolutionary ideals. In the 1960s, the master Cuban filmmaker Tomas Gutierrez Alea and others stood firm by Fidel and the party in its opposition to a number of things, religion, classical art, homosexuality and the like. But Alea’s 1993 film Strawberry and Chocolate confronts the antipathy to religion, to different sexual orientation etc. Alea’s call for re-examination of the revolution’s absolute certitudes resurfaces in his very last film Guantanamera. Two recent films by Alea’s contemporary Humberto Solas, Miel para Oshun and Bario Cuba also acknowledge people’s innate aspirations, the solace they seek in religion, soothsaying and black magic.

In the Asian continent, it is Iranian cinema (Tapper 2002) that has been consistently dealing with issues of religion, politics and gender (patriarchy) in a very simple narrative style and in realistic treatment closer to documentaries. A cinema that is addressing a dominantly Islamic population and religious-nationalist government has shown the courage to raise voices of dissent in subversive ways. The situation in Pakistan may appear to outsiders as one-dimensionally tuned in favour of the religious
right. But we notice the dissenting voices in that country when we come across certain bold films like *Khamosh Pani* and *Khuda Keliye* showcased in international film festivals. Both these films examine how religious nationalism and fundamentalism in alarming ways are creating divisions, conflicts and riots in the South Asia region. Most interesting about these two films is that they reveal to us the heterogeneous religious and cultural expressions and stand points existing in a country like Pakistan, which is otherwise perceived as a homogenous culture with its insistence on Islam as its state religion and the Shariat Law as the basis of governance.

The waves of fundamentalism and communalism have been increasingly present in different parts of India predominantly since the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 at the disputed Ram Janam (janm) Bhoomi (Mangekar 1993) . The cultural and religious revivalism that sprouted out in the Hindu community in the 1990s in the zeal of building the `Ram Mandir’ (temple of Rama) had a rippling effect in the popular Malayalam cinema and on certain sections of filmmakers and the audiences as well on a personal level.

One could examine films like *Paithrukam* and *Desadanam* by Jayaraj and *Devasuram* (I.V.Sasi) *Araam Thampuran* (Shaji Kailas) to verify this observation. Now there are more such films coming up in the 2000s, films with regressive trends of promoting fear and superstitions. On the other hand, some leading filmmakers of the parallel cinema movement of the 1970s like T.V.Chandran, K.R.Mohanan, Lenin Rajendran and others have made films in the 1990s that draw attention to the growing tendencies of religious revivalism and fundamentalism. *Swaroopam* (K.R.Mohanan), *Anyar* (Lenin Rajendran), *Kathavasehan* (T.V. Chandran), *Deivanaamathil* (Jayaraj) and there are a few more films that fall in this category. T.V. Chandran’s *Padham Onnu Oru Vilapam* and its sequel *Vilapangalkapuram* are interesting works in that they both attempt to study the Muslim community in Kerala in depth and how the politics of religion functions in that community. Unfortunately there have not been many serious attempts in Malayalam cinema to look at the power dynamics inside the Christian community that is actively involved in the religious and community politics of
Kerala\textsuperscript{9}. One reason could be, as renowned writer Zacharia and others have pointed out, that the Christian hierarchy has often distanced itself from serious cultural politics and activities, including cinema; it has even discouraged the believers to keep similar distance in view of focusing better on their spiritual (read ‘other worldly’) goals.

2.1.4 Sacred-Secular

In the spirit of the postmodernism and the post-structural deconstruction, earlier tendencies of seeing reality as dualistic or dichotomous entities are being challenged and such a ‘black and white’ categorical outlook to life and politics is not seen as synchronous with today’s thinking and living. But unfortunately, the popular understanding of the dyad, ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’, still continues to be in binary oppositional categories. Now, with the primacy of reason and the so called ‘objectivity’ of empirical and positivist approaches to knowledge being questioned, there is a growing preference toward viewing different dimensions of reality as overlapping and not as compartmental.

McClaren (2010) talks about the coming together of head, heart, and hand (the intellectual, the experiential, and the volitional; the mind, the soul and the strength), where faith, reason, and tradition will come together too, and personal and social holiness become two expressions of one great love. The language of cinema is enriched more with a comprehensive vision of the material and spiritual, the secular and the sacred, because any art for that matter is attempting to address the multi-layered and complex facets of human existence and experiences. This study requires a studied approach to the interplay of the ‘sacred-secular’ in cinema.

The ‘sacred’ refers to the ‘transcendental’ or metaphysical dimension (Madan 1997) in contrast to the ‘immanent’ material realm. Sacred, which can be synonymous with ‘spiritual’ and broadly with ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’, is the realm where from many people believe to draw meaning and destination for their lives that people refer to as ‘the One above’ or ‘things above’ and hence superior (in contrast to the ‘secular’ or

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\textsuperscript{9} A recent film that fills this lacuna is \textit{Pranchiyettan and the saint}, directed by Ranjith, which portrays the protagonist as a member of the Syrian Christian community of Thrissur (detailed mention of the film elsewhere)
`profane' realm that the ‘inferior’ ‘things below’ belong). In contrast to the spatially and temporarily defined as secular realm, the sacred refers to ‘eternity’ where the ‘spiritual beings’, i.e. gods and goddesses, dwell and so is beyond time and space, as the Greek expression ‘kairos’ (god’s time) denotes.

The word ‘secular’ is derived from the Latin saeculum, which means ‘an age’ that corresponds to aeon in Greek. By extension the word also denotes ‘the world’, spatially and temporally located. After many ‘exchange of sides’ between the sacred and the secular authority, among the popes and the kings during the Middle Ages, it was in the Enlightenment period that the social scientists and political thinkers came to some consensus on defining what is ‘secular’ and what is not. Thereafter, many formulations and variations had been proposed, attempting to systematically define the sacred and secular in order to keep them as separate entities and branches of discourse. Thus we have a significant body of literature across the globe and in India, dealing with concepts such as secular, secularism, secularization and secularity, which in fact are multivocal words. Some scholars consider this polyvalence as the advantage of these words, while some others call it a disadvantage. The present study needs to look at what these concepts signify in various traditions, schools of thoughts and in different contexts.

The study reflects on this dyad in the context of Malayalam cinema and the larger context of Kerala cultural politics. Two film texts are chosen for closer analysis, Maargam by Rajiv Vijayaraghavan and Esthappan by G. Aravindan, which this study considers as films addressing the question of sacred-secular comprehensively. Maargam (2002) is based on a short story Pitrutharpanam by M. Sukumaran (a staunch leftist writer who later fell from the favour of the Communist Party). It presents Venukumara Menon, the protagonist, who was once a Naxalite, glued to his ‘idealized past’ and not being able to come to terms with the new value systems falling in line with the lure of capitalism. Towards the end, his wife and daughter find him disillusioned and ‘lost’, but his very last turn around baffles them all. He has, at least for once, embraced the comfort of the ritualistic religion, an option that would have been unthinkable in those old days of ‘absolute ideals’. In the place of a failed god
(ideology) is he trying to place the gods of the ritualistic religion? The beauty of *Maargam* is its clear deviation from the tragic ending in the original story and ending the film with a Buddhist fable borrowed from ‘Old Path, White Clouds’ by Thich Nhat Hanh (1991).

Aravindan’s *Esthappan* presents the central character by the same name as someone who ‘do not have a beginning or end’, so his reality is more of a ‘constructed’ reality, different ‘versions’ that people weave like a myth. Any rounded idea or conclusion one may try to arrive at regarding the personality of Esthappan is bound to fail, as he does not fit well with any fixed frame of ‘saint’ or ‘sinner’. The open ended but enigmatic status with which the filmmaker moulds the character of *Esthappan* leaves room for different interpretations (Wood 2009), underscoring the beauty of being ‘here’ and ‘there’ (beyond) and makes it the best option for discussing the meeting of the secular and spiritual realms in life and art.

### 2.2 Literature Review

In this section we are locating literature that deals with the three major trajectories of this study--political cinema in Malayalam, politics of Malayalam cinema and positioning religion in the politics of Malayalam cinema—and their meeting point in the overlapping realms of the ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’. Writings and discussions on Malayalam cinema have not yet gone beyond regional relevance, if not as profiles of specific filmmakers and their films. Certain articles on different aspects of the present study—Malayalam political cinema and its gendered politics for example—appear in journals as well as popular periodicals, like ‘Mathrubhoomi’, ‘Madhyamam’, ‘Bhashaposhini’ ‘Pachhakuthira’, etc. There are of course significant works available in the national and international academia in areas pertaining to Third Worldist and nationalist cinemas, sociology and anthropology of religion, secularism, state-religion relations, politics of communalism and so on and so forth. These resources help us place the present study in a wider context and to review the process of the redefinition of politics from global-local perspectives.

A search for earlier studies on topics like ‘political cinema’, ‘parallel cinema’ and individual filmmakers like G. Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, John Abraham and
others, did not yield very significant results as Film Studies specific to films in Malayalam is still in the nascent stage. There are plenty of books on Cinema published in Malayalam, but they are mostly reviews of world classic films and monographs on Masters of such classics. Vijayakrishnan is one author who has produced such tracts on world cinema in profusion and there are many others who tread the same road even today. Compilation of film reviews and printed screenplays are two other branches of film writing very popular in Malayalam. The film review books are usually the reproduction of what have already been published in popular periodicals. ‘Cynic’ (pseudonym), ‘Kozhikodan’ (pseudonym), Vijayakrishnan and a few others have been writing film reviews for periodicals like ‘Mathrubhoomi’ ‘Kalakaumudi’ etc, but that style is now out of fashion and the same periodicals are now promoting different aspects of film-based discussion.

Printed screenplays penned by stalwarts like M. T. Vasudevan Nair, and also by new writers and directors have been popular in Kerala like another form of literature, but they have not contributed significantly to film studies per se, if not as learning tools for budding screenplay writers and directors. The national film studies scenario till 1970s was also not very bright and prolific in terms of critical writings on cinema, points out Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1998). Until Satyajit Ray’s films became popular internationally and Ray and others (prominently Chidananda Das Gupta), began to write on cinema, the body of nationalist film writing addressed cinema through an often evolutionist notion of history.

The very few references available as critical writing on Malayalm Cinema pertain to the evolutionist style mentioned above and the writings on Malayalam films and filmmakers mostly form part of compilations on Indian Cinema. Interestingly two such books are written by Europeans, with a section on Malayalam Cinema, with brief profiles of major filmmakers and synopses of their films, but painted in bright tones of admiration for the ‘exotic other’. ‘The Cinemas of India 1896-2000’ by Yves Thoraval (2000) and the ‘The Essential Mystery-Major Filmmakers of Indian Art Cinema’ by John W. Wood (2009).
Unfortunately there had not been any serious attempts at critical writing on the so-called 'cinema of the seventies'. The 1970s is the period that many Keralites consider as a time of 'cultural and political awakening' when the discourses on the political and parallel cinemas thrived, connecting it to the discourses on modernity, national cinema and literary cultural movements of the Third World, especially that of Latin America. Take the case of two pioneers of the 'New/Parallel Malayalam cinema' of the 1970s, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and G. Aravindan, whose films had taken Malayalam films to the international film circuit for the first time. A full-fledged book on the cinema of Adoor came out only very recently (Mohan & Venkiteswaran 2006), while we still do not have such a book that documents the works of G. Aravindan. What perhaps compensates for the dearth of books on Malayalam Cinema are some monographs, tracts, and articles in periodicals, journals and publications of certain film societies spread across Kerala and also among the Malayalee diaspora in major Indian metros and elsewhere. To the advantage of the study of cinema, recently there has been increasing interest in the university academia in Kerala and elsewhere in India for in-depth studies on cinema and the initial steps taken for introducing cinema in the college and school curriculum.

We shall follow the same conceptual framework we used at the beginning of this chapter and find out, to what extent these concepts and sub-concepts relevant for our study are addressed in the available literature.\(^\text{10}\)

**2.2.1 Political Cinema**

Two important periodicals, 'Mathrubhoomi' and 'Samakaleena Malayalam', discussed 'politics of Malayalam cinema' from quite different perspectives in connection with the 13th International Film Festival of Kerala. Mathrubhoomi (Bharadwaj 2008) chose to celebrate the good old days of 'political cinema' before the 1990s with a cover story titled '1980, A Love Story! Film life those days was not as rosy as film festivals'. On the contrary, the Malayalam Weekly (Samakaleena Malayalam 2008) brought out a 'Cinema Special' with some 28 individual articles on World Cinema, Malayalam

\(^{10}\) I have used my own free translation of texts quoted or cited here, whose original text had been published in Malayalam language
Cinema and issues related to the emerging political imaginations on cinema and civil society. Bharadwaj’s article romanticises the ‘ideal Malayalam Cinema of the 1970s’ at the expense of Cinema in the 1990s, which to the author is a trivial child’s play. One may not agree with this nostalgic defence of a particular model of cinema and its politics, but the sharing of ‘those days’ (reeling under the Naxalite hangover) does help us visualize the aspirations, angst and despair that marked a majority of young intellectuals in Kerala in the 1970s and 80s.

On the other hand, the ‘Cinema Special’ of Samakaleena Malayalam showcases a wide range of articles connecting cinema to topics like ‘Conflicts in Family Space’, ‘Masculine Perspectives’, ‘Celebrations of the Body’, ‘What is behind Censorship?’ etc. This offering of diverse perspectives on cinema and society is symptomatic of the transitions that the politics of Malayalam cinema is undergoing now and the diverse directions that the new trends might take. Bharadwaj’s article is not the first of its kind, glorifying the so called ‘seventies’ period in the cultural history of Kerala. ‘What happened to our political Cinema?’ is a question that a significant section of the Kerala society is still grappling with.

Kleinhans (1998) writes about the evolution of Marxist politics and aesthetics of cinema in the context of the Russian revolution, which became a precursor to political filmmaking first in East Europe and later in different parts of the world, particularly in some parts of the Third World, where they embraced the Soviet model of communism and ‘progressive’ or ‘revolutionary’ art. With Marxism holding state power, questions of entertainment versus instruction, traditional versus radical form, drama versus documentary, literary versus visual communication, native versus foreign models (especially Hollywood), ethnic nationalism versus national culture, religious versus secular culture, urban versus rural, and popular audiences versus intellectual creators, were raised as practical as well as theoretical concerns. Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and others wrote as filmmakers while intellectuals from different disciplines participated in the highly political and polemic debates (Taylor and Christie 1988, cited in Kleinhans 1998). The state-party took control of information and journalism, as radio, the newsreel and the concept of
educational film evolved. Because many artistic innovators joined the early years of revolution, film experimentalism appeared in radical forms ranging from Dovzhenkov’s lyrical poeticism to Vertov’s rigorous montage of images (and later sound-image) and Eisenstein’s epic and operatic work. But after the imposition of formalist ‘Soviet realism’ by Stalin, the Marxist film aesthetics faced decline in Russia, but it eventually flourished elsewhere (Hayward 1996).

Neo-Realism, a movement sprouted out in Italy in the post-World War I era, provided a model of a humanist, socially committed film practice that eschewed the expensive entertainment and the star system of Hollywood, while validating matters of social justice, a sympathetic depiction of the lower classes, and vernacular expression in thrifty mode (Kolker 1983, Kleinhans 1998). This film movement that began roughly around 1942 as a reaction to the restrictions imposed during the fascist rule and also against the kind of cinema of those days which was very far from reality and only concerned about promoting a good image of Italy (Hayward 1996).

The films primarily produced then were middle class melodramas disparagingly called ‘white telephone movies’. As the fascist rule was coming to an end in Italy, it allowed for the truth to be told about the impoverished conditions of the working class and of urban life. The Neo-Realist filmmakers rejected the old cinema and its codes and conventions and went for gritty realism. The basic tenets of this movement were that cinema should focus on its own nature and its role in society and that it should confront audiences with their own reality. These principles had implications for the style and content of this cinema, such as ‘cinema as a slice of life’, ‘focus on social reality’, ‘raw realism in dialogue, rendered in regional dialects etc’, and ‘on-location shooting with non-professional actors’ in order to maintain the documentary feel/style (Kleinhans 1998). Neo-Realism influenced independent efforts in the capitalist world, and inspired directors in the developing world, particularly in Latin America and India.

If Neo-Realism focused more on the political content and a style suitable to drive home that content, the French ‘New Wave’ movement dared to politicise the film form and even subvert hitherto conventions. Godard, who along with filmmakers like
Antonioni, Alain Resnais and others, began this new, iconoclastic film movement, still continues his experiments even in 2011. It was Godard who stated that ‘it is not important to make political films, but to make films politically’. Kolker cites a scene from the film by Godard, *Wind from the East*, in order to show how Godard has always been exploring and debating in what does the crust of political filmmaking consist in. This is an interesting introspection meant for any filmmaker who thinks himself/herself a ‘political filmmaker’.

The late Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha is seen standing, arms outstretched, at a crossroads. A pregnant woman with a movie camera slung over her shoulder comes to him and says, “I beg your pardon for disturbing you in your class struggle. I know it is very important. But which is the way to the political film?” Rocha points in one direction and says, “That way the Third World cinema….A cinema of the oppression of imperialist consumption is a dangerous, divine, marvellous cinema, a cinema out to repress the fascist oppression of terrorism....” (Kolker 1983: 277).

In defining the directions of a true, political and revolutionary cinema through the Rocha character, Godard underscores the tenets of the Latin American Third World cinema and its predicaments too. The rise of national cinemas in Latin America has been sporadic, often repressed, but bursting with political vitality as evident in the Brazilian ‘Cinema Novo’ of the 1960s, of which Rocha was one of the pioneers. Shohat and Stam locate the evolution of the Third Worldist film in the unique political ambiance of the 1960s:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnamese victory over the French, the Cuban revolution, and Algerian independence, Third Worldist ideology was crystallised in a wave of militant manifesto essays—Glauber Rocha’s “Esthetic of Hunger” (1965), Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s “Towards a Third Cinema” (1969) and Julio Garcia Espinosa’s “For an Imperfect Cinema” (1969)—and in declarations and manifestos from Third World film festivals calling for a tri-continental revolution in politics and an esthetics and narrative revolution in film form (Shohat and Stam 1994: 248)

Compared to ‘Third World cinema’, the concept of ‘Third Cinema’ is more ostensibly political (Hayward 1996) in its conceptualisation since it both seeks to counter the ideologically unsound filmmaking practices of the ‘First World’ and ‘Second World’ cinemas, especially Hollywood, and to promote the cause of socialism. ‘Third World Cinema’ is more general term that refers to films made by countries other than the
developed industrial countries. These films are political both in terms of making political statements in relation to their own country and in relation to dominant film practices outside their country.

Coming to the Indian context, there has been the tendency to hold on to certain streams in the ‘Parallel/Art Cinema’ movement of the 1970s as ‘political film’ and some others as simply ‘art cinema’. In certain circles, the films of Mrinal Sen, Govind Nihalani, John Abraham and a few others used to treated as the ideal models of political cinema. Authors like Sumita Chakravarthi (1998) find the Indian parallel cinema movement neither revolutionary enough in content nor in form like the Italian neo-realist movement or the Latin American Third Cinema. This happened, some critics say, because the filmmakers of Parallel Cinema and their ‘art films’ were removed from the people, the common masses. Ashis Nandy rejects the large-scale social engineering projects of the state-sponsored social realist cinema during and after the glorious Nehruvian era, because he sees no emancipatory potential in them, but an uprooting of communities, by imposing standardization of modernity over a rich variety of traditional beliefs and practices (cited in Chakravarthy 1998). The Parallel or Art cinema and the typical ‘political cinema’ of the 1970s also shared this common ground of Nehruvian socialist romanticism.

Rejecting the binaries of tradition and modernity, Ravi Vasudevan (2000) recommends a critical analysis of the historical and institutional conditions during the transition from the colonial to the national governments, where the government representatives, intellectuals and interested public tried to shape cinema to nurture desires for a ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ India while fulfilling the imperatives of modern national identity. Those filmmakers who considered themselves as ‘political’ filmmakers in the 1970s, in line with the socialist analysis of the society based on class, perhaps failed in establishing a circuit of communication between their films and the popular audiences. The question, as Chakravarthy (1998) points out is if there was something in their films that can be called ‘local’ that is ‘unexportable’ to an outside audience in terms of aesthetics and politics in the same way as the Third
Cinema movement tried in Latin America, in Africa and even in some parts of the so-called First World.

Raveendran, writer and filmmaker\textsuperscript{11} critiques the ‘Cinema of the 1970s’ in Malayalam in terms of its artistic and political ‘commitment’. New Malayalam/Art cinema, like many other national cinemas around the world and particularly the Italian Neo-Realism, tried to present and analyse reality as it is, focusing on the denotative meaning than the connotative. Some filmmakers had felt the need to relieve reality from its exaggerations, but amidst the preoccupation with certain technical aspects, they failed to recognise ‘reality as such’ and analyse its essence. They got stuck with the portrayal of reality, only with its discourse and stopped short of a deeper analysis in terms of the influence that the dominant ideologies exert on reality. An important concern that the New Malayalam cinema raised was ‘commitment’, linked to dreaming about an ideal ‘political cinema’ in Malayalam. Commitment was discussed in Marxian terms and unfortunately in the local context, commitment was understood as loyalty to the Marxist party and thus the political cinema was perceived as ‘partisan cinema’. Some Marxist film critics contributed to this misunderstanding by presenting commitment as fidelity to Marxist ideology rather than to truth (Raveendran 2007).

Muraleedharan (2005) views the ‘New Malayalam Cinema’ movement and its ‘progressive’ political clout as a pretentious reaction of the upper middle class young intellectuals, in their attempt to come into terms with the economic and socio-political unrest they faced at the beginning of the 1970s. This had to do with the ‘land reform act’ implemented by the Leftist (Marxist) government led by EMS Namboodirippadu. It resulted in the disintegration of the feudal-agrarian system and robbed the upper caste and upper class communities of their property and privileges, the rise in unemployment rate and the resulting migration of young people to cities across India and later to Persian Gulf.

\textsuperscript{11} Raveendran, known as ‘Chinthu Ravi’ is the director of Ore Thooval Pakshikal, considered as one of the ‘political’ films. He also acted in Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol by P.A.Backer. Later he joined ‘Asianet Television network’ and became very popular with his travelogue series titled ‘Ente Keralam’. He died in August, 2011.
Among other inspirations behind the ‘political cinema’ (and Art/New Cinema) movement, Muraleedharan also includes the influence of Malayalee young film directors trained at FTII (Film and Television Institute of India), Pune and the Film Society movement widespread in Kerala in the 1960s-70s. Most of these film societies, he notes, prepared their agenda guided by Eurocentric tastes and preferences. Italian Neo-Realist cinemas, the French New Wave and the anti-imperialist ‘Third Cinema’ from Latin America created a great impact on the members of the film societies and the young filmmakers of the ’New/Art Cinema’ movement as well. He lauds the bold attempts of these ‘film activists’, who in general, appeared to revolt against conventions and orthodoxies, but they did not show the same openness and boldness to be ‘inclusive’ in terms of ensuring the representation of women and other people at the margins in all different aspects of filmmaking and viewing.

V.C. Harris (2005) film scholar and critic, also points to the ‘curious’ demographic profile of the sections of people in Kerala who happen to be opinion-makers and promoters of what is ‘political cinema’ and what is not. Most of these ‘serious film viewers’ represent people who come from the 1960s-70s film society background and or those who came through the film festivals by the end of the 1980s. Majority of them are semi-urbanised, middle class, who belong to the elite as well as upper caste sections of ‘Malayalees’. If such a cross section of Malayalees controls all opinion-making on ‘political cinema’ and ‘politics of cinema’, the first question to be asked is ‘what is their politics?’ If women, Dalit and others are getting entry into this space of ‘serious’ (political) cinema only recently then, whose interests are protected by these ‘intellectuals’ who try to have the last word on the ‘politics of cinema’ and politics of anything?

Raveendran (2007) takes issues with the arbitrary categorisation of some films as ‘political’ and some other as ‘a-political’. He says that even the models of ‘political cinema’ in other Third World contexts cannot become the yardsticks in the socio-political context of Kerala. An important fact that we who dreamed of a political cinema in the Kerala context failed to acknowledge was that our socio-political context and circumstances were quite different from those of Eastern Europe and Latin
America in the 1960s-70s that prompted the rise of a strong political cinema movement there. Even at the time of the independence struggle in India, we had not faced the political oppression and torture that people in Latin America or East Europe faced. And so discussions on ‘political cinema’ in our context cannot be in terms of an ‘imagined’ political oppression, torture etc., but should realistically address the hidden ‘politics’ of all cinema, of all streams, instead of terming some films as ‘political’ and some others as ‘a-political’.

In the changed circumstances of the postmodern era, when the whole world is exploring diverse options and opportunities brought home by globalisation and economic liberalisation, nobody would prescribe one ‘correct’ way or model of political cinema, which is universally applicable. What we may require today is an aesthetic diversity and a sensitivity to place, and to social and cultural specifics, wherein one begins to look at the politics of each cinema as a cultural product and a process of cultural production and consumption, rather than a film genre or political tool called ‘political cinema.

2.2.2 Politics of Cinema

Discussions on politics of cinema have been predominantly guided by the Marxian focus on ideology and how the state and the elite classes use cinema and all media to perpetuate the dominant ideology. Haywards (1996) looks at how Marx conceived ideology as the practice of reproducing social relations of inequality, where the ruling classes controls ‘meaning-making’ systems, because they want to make their right to rule appear as natural. From this ‘misrepresentation’ (that is, the ruling classes’ assumption of their natural right to govern and determine the status of other classes) comes Marx’s idea of ideology as ‘false consciousness’ that applies to the subordinate classes also when they accept their position as ‘subjects’ as natural. Althusser rejects the ’false consciousness’ proposition. His central thesis is that ‘ideology interpellates individuals as subjects’—i.e.; ideology constructs the subject, that the subject is an effect of ideology—has had profound implications for the theorising of spectator-text relations. Cinema is a typical example of what Althusser calls the Ideological State
Apparatus (ISA); we do not see how it produces meaning, seamlessly via editing, it renders ideological signifying practices invisible, naturalising it.

The positioning of the cinematic spectator as a ‘passive consumer’ of the dominant ideology was eventually challenged and the active role of the spectator as the ‘co-creator’ in a complex scheme of film textuality was recognized (Hayward 1996). Gripsud comments: “The significant positioning of the spectator in cinema is acknowledged; but until recently, very little is said and written about the politics of the film text, in terms of the contribution of the wide range of spectators of a film to its textuality and politics” (cited in Hills 1998). Robert Kolker (1998) notes that in any given film we witness to a rich and often conflicting structure of imaginative, cultural, economic and ideological events, in its attempt to appeal to the widest possible spectrum of people. But audiences respond to film in ways the filmmakers may not have expected. Thus the film text always lies at the nexus of expectation and response, of cultural beliefs and individual resistance. As a film is available to as many interpreters, these varied responses also become part of the textuality of the film.

Insights from a few recent essays on spectatorship such as ‘Negotiating spectatorship’ (Shohat & Stam 1994), ‘Viewership and democracy in the Cinema’ (Rajadhyaksha 2000) and ‘Icons and Events: Reinventing visual construction in Cinema India’ (Chatterjee 2005) are used in the present study. An important site that brought an imagined solidarity among diverse populations of India after Independence was the imagery of ‘nation’, notes Ashish Rajadyaksha (1998). The earlier nationalist notions of the state underwent a series of crisis in the 1970s: the emergence of the Naxalite movement, working class agitations culminating in the Nav Nirman movements in Bihar and Gujarat and the declaration of internal Emergency in 1975. With the entry of post-colonial theory in cinema and cultural studies a good number of works are now available, which reinvestigate the history of Indian nationalism. Two such works by Indians working in the Western academia, Sumita Chakravarty (1998) and Jyotika Virdi (2003), unearth the wealth of Indian (Hindi) popular cinema, and generate interest in studying popular cinema culture.
Ravi Vasudevan (2000) talks about the dominant intellectual discourse regarding different modes of cinema in India, namely ‘art’, ‘experimental/avant garde’ and ‘commercial’ premised on the notion of social differences among the audiences for these different streams of films. He questions the age-old considerations among artists in terms of ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ that prevent the opening up of all film texts to the audiences to appropriate. He comments that our understanding of form should avoid complicity with a hierarchical outlook on aesthetic sensibility and cultural consumption (high/low cultures) and focus instead on how audiences recognize and identify with particular codes of entertainment.

Once the focus is shifted from the author and his/her work, then politics of cinema becomes more a discussion on how different sections of audiences from different locations engage with different sites in a process of negotiation of meaning and significance. Analysing the Tamil film Kathalan, Tejaswini Niranjana and Vivek Dhareshwar (2000) show how the film engages and forces the audiences to engage in a politics of re-signification that centres around the body—the caste body, the class body, and the body politic. The film orchestrates very different, heterogeneous enunciative or signifying systems by spatialising the conflict or antagonism between them (Niranjana & Dhareswar 2000). Attempts at rearticulating the politics of cinema or any other cultural product or process, would have to examine how the different agencies involved in the signification and resignification processes—creators, consumers and gatekeepers—use the various sites and constituencies for engagement and negotiation.

Apart from some important essays appearing in academic writings, journals and periodicals, there have been only a few substantial studies on cinemas of India in the light of Gender and Sexuality studies and Queer theory. In this postmodern ambience propelled by the politics of identities and contested notions on political correctness, feminist studies can offer fresh perspectives to the rearticulating of the politics of cinema and cultural production in general. ‘Film and Feminism’, a collection of articles that discusses Indian cinema from feminist point of view has included an essay
by Bindu Nair, ‘Female Bodies and the Male Gaze: Laura Mulvey and Hindi cinema’; it analyses how far the ‘male gaze’ theory is relevant in the Indian context.

The stories played out on the screen are the men’s—their conflicts, their dramas, their aspirations, their tragedies, their revenge, their desire and their heroism. Women exist only in relation to the men, as their mothers, their wives and especially their lovers…. Women have been reduced to being a mere spectacle in the movies, pretty faces commodified for their beauty, with hardly any dividing line between beauty contests and acting in films (Nair 2002: 52).

Nair calls attention to the customary ‘item numbers’, the special song and dance sequence in Indian popular cinema and comments on how all forces of the cinematic apparatus (camera angles, lighting, editing etc.) are used in such sequences in particular to objectify and sexualise the body of the woman for the benefit of the male viewer. She cites Mulvey’s seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and demonstrates how woman displayed as spectacle in Indian cinema functions as an erotic object for the male characters within the story and also for the spectators in the movie hall:

In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact, so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey 1975, cited in Nair 2002: 54).

Apart from being ‘looked at’ (Mulvey) there are some exceptional portrayal of women on Indian screen, in contrast to the observation of Berger (1972: 46), “Men act, women appear”. In such instances women do ‘act’ like men instead of merely ‘appearing’ as spectacle. The following studies included in different compilations serve as examples: ‘Avenging Women in Indian Cinema’ (Lalitha Gopalan 2000), ‘Not quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia, Queen of the Stunts’ (Rosy Thomas 2005) and ‘Sexuality, Sensuality and Belonging: Representations of the ‘Anglo-Indian’ and the ‘Western’ Women in Hindi Cinema (Geetanjali Gangoli 2005). The main contributions of masculinity studies to Indian cinema so far have been in the areas of ‘Stars and Fan clubs’, ‘Fight clubs’ ‘Body politics’ and so on as some essays show: ‘Devotion and Defiance in Fan Activity’ (S.V.Sreenivas 2000), ‘The consumable hero of globalised India’( Sudhanva Deshpande 2005), ‘Narrating seduction: Vicissitudes

C.S. Venkiteswaran (2005) in a short essay, talks about the politics of the ‘Naxalite Body’, which he assumes was a body neglected by a life centred on the intellect. The politics of the radical Naxalite movement has been analysed predominantly from the perspective of class struggle and revolutionary liberation, which demanded the ‘martyrdom’, as exemplified at the end of the typical ‘Naxalite’ film Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol. What Venkiteswaran attempts in exploring the politics of body in the Naxalite period is a new, daring investigation in the spirit of the ‘redefined politics’ of cinema: bodies (beheaded and) mutilated in Naxalite operations, bodies of comrades tortured and killed in police encounter, and comrade Ajitha captured and exhibited in public. But the sign par excellence of that period is the body of the martyr, who sacrificed his/her body for ‘liberation’ in imminent future. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2005) extends this discussion on the politics of body in Malayalam cinema to include the question of ‘subaltern bodies’, taking the example of actor Sreenivasan, an actor who had unsettled the conventional expectations of the ‘Malayalee’ society and its upper caste, upper class, ‘white’ (‘pure’ or ‘superior’) biases.

Another aspect that emerges in the discussion of politics of cinema is negotiation of cinematic space by spectators from multiple locations. Raising the question of what is ‘women’s film’, Radhakrishnan (2002), discusses appropriation of the critical space of cinema by different marginalised populations as the emerging ‘politics of cinema’. Films that deal with the motif of ‘nation’ create a space between the ‘viewer’ and the ‘citizen’ (equal to ‘spectator’ in film theories). The subject position of ‘citizen’ is problematic because it is defined without any marks of identity. Radhakrishnan argues that the politics of a film consists in the contestation of the unmarked ‘citizen’ subject position by marginalised and subaltern groups, like women, Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities, sexual minorities etc. It is in the juncture between two subject positions—that of spectator and viewer—that the possibilities of political negotiation lies.
Bindu Menon (2002) takes stock of the number of women entering the space of film-viewing and filmmaking in Kerala and discusses the kind of agency that women who enter these spaces possess. The film society movement widespread in Kerala since the 1960s-70s unintentionally kept women at the periphery, because the evening screenings and discussions at the film societies even in the non-urban centres were ‘out of bounds’ for women given the social taboos of travelling alone in the night etc still prevalent in Kerala. With the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK, Thiruvananthapuram) completing fifteen years and more local or regional film festivals coming up across the state, the number of women attending film festivals has also increased significantly. But Menon says that by observing what goes on in different forums at film festivals meant for constructive discussions, it is difficult to say that women who enter these spaces possess any agency at all. The way these discussions are conducted keeps women away from them, except for being occasional speakers. Bindu Nair finds such discussions positive as they occasionally bring to the foreground the topic of ‘women’s films’. But that topic is drooped half way through because apart from some ‘women themes’ appearing in our films, still we do not see proper ‘women films’, ‘made by women’ in Malayalam. One reason for the discussions on the politics of Malayalam cinema to continue to focus around the ‘male gaze’ is that the majority of films here are made by men for predominantly male audiences (Nair 2002).

The present study proposes to foreground a ‘feminine perspective’ in discussions of ‘politics of Malayalam cinema’, to be understood and worked out in the typical Indian/Kerala context, which could contemplate woman’s alternative ‘equations and solutions’ in a world controlled by the power dynamics of patriarchy. A feminine perspective is proposed as an attempt to be comprehensive or holistic, integrating male, female and transgender experiences and viewpoints, in contrast to an ‘us-and-them’ positioning of competition and confrontation. Such an approach could go further beyond the boundaries of human society to include all living organisms, in other words, the Earth, the Environment and the entire Cosmos. A ‘feminine’ perspective could try to locate or create ‘cracks within the system’ to change the system from within through constant, subversive engagement with the system, aiming
at new models of productive, non-violent revolutions instead of unproductive, violent, head-on-confrontation models of hitherto revolutions.

Sharing the philosophy behind his master piece film *Amma Ariyan* in an interview (Chandran 2011), John Abraham explains how the feminine in the Indian thought is considered as ‘*shakti*’, as the source of energy and inspiration for both man and woman. For him this ‘adi shakti’ (primal force) is embodied in the mother figure. John believes that any progress of the humankind through evolution or revolution has to come in and through the woman or the mother figure. His film that records the experiences and memories of many young men in Kerala who in the 1960s-70s had left their homes and mothers and went after radical and mostly violent politics, because they believed that the ‘revolution was around the corner’! The leit motif of the film is a ‘return to the mother/s’.

Be it in the sphere of politics or cinema or religion or any other spheres controlled by hegemonic patriarchy, a feminine perspective could ‘claim/redefine spaces’ through effective strategies instead of waiting for ‘allotments’. Anyone, especially artists who use their creative works to cross over the fixed gender roles and restrictions, could also transgress the ‘man-made’ boundaries in order to enter into ‘fellowship’ with all living organisms of the cosmos. This is evident in the films of G. Aravindan. In *Kanchana Sita* the character of Sita does not appear on the screen but is conceived and visualized as ‘Mother Nature’ and her presence is felt in the wind, in the Sun, in the rain and so on. This study on the ‘politics of Malayalam cinema’ in the 1970s-90s, proposes the foregrounding of the ‘feminine perspective’, in view of incorporating ‘multiple voices’, particularly of all marginalised sections and constituencies, whose engagement with the existing realities do not often figure in our film themes/plots and their realizations.

### 2.2.3 Politics of positioning Religion in Cinema

B. Rajeevan (2010) writes against the tendency in some circles to read ‘revolutionary’ or ‘anti-revolutionary’ meanings categorically in art. He traces the foundation such tendencies and trends in the Western materialistic philosophy and reasoning, starting with the Enlightenment. Such a vision and reasoning function through binaries of
This model of ‘political correctness’ is preoccupied with controlling the ‘correct’ version or ‘truth’ and it fails to acknowledge that ‘right’/ ‘wrong’ and ‘true/false’ are not ‘there’(essence), but are constructed in each socio-political context. Rajeevan identifies such insistence on ‘one version of truth/political correctness’ in the Christian Inquisitions of the Middle Age, the Nazi concentration camps, in the ideological concentration camps of Moscow and elsewhere. He argues that the true nature of art, literature etc. is not to impose any versions of truth, but to remind us about the diverse values and concerns that play unique roles in the construction of `truth’ in every period and context. In this sense art, literature, cinema and all stand to remind humanity against forgetting of `being’. This study that explores the process of redefinition of `politics of cinema’, is primarily concerned about `being’, without any binary divisions into `matter/spirit’, `body/soul’, `sacred/secular’ etc.

The hegemonic political systems controlled by patriarchal values and reasoning, insist on and impose `one version’ of truth in the realm of politics, religion, morality, art and so on. In contrast to these `centralised’ systems, there do exist diverse, heterogeneous versions of politics, religion, morality, art and so on, where there is no insistence on `one true version’, but on the celebration of diversity, co-existence and understanding. This study, undertaken at the juncture of 1990s in the context of increasing religious, ethnic and political fundamentalism across the globe, wishes to pay keen attention to the `politics of religion’ understood from multiple perspectives and specifically how religion is perceived and positioned in the field of cultural politics. Literature, theatre, cinema and all works of art could play unique roles in constructing versions of `truth’ that challenge the existing dogmas and diktats in politics religion and even in artistic conventions.

In Hindi cinema, the major brand of Indian cinema and other regional cinemas of India, sensitive issues of religion were rarely allowed to steal the centre stage at the expense of entertainment and thus mar the populist pleasure (Ahmed 1992). But gods and goddesses always had a prime place in crucial turning points in the story, very much akin to how ordinary people in the subcontinent juggle between the natural and
supernatural in day-today life. It is interesting to note that if ‘Workers leaving the factory’ and ‘Train arriving at the station’ by Lumiere brothers were the very first films publicly exhibited in the history of world cinema and take around everywhere, in India the very first films produced and exhibited indigenously were the mythological films of Dada Saheb Phalke: Raja Harishchandra (1913) and Krishna Janma (1918). It is said that the audiences prostrated themselves before the screen, watching the sacred images on screen with reverence; they perhaps considered the visit to the movie house as a 'pilgrimage'. Analyzing the early mythological films, Gayatri Chatterjee elaborates the religious concept of darashan as an analogy to describe the film viewing habits of the Indian audiences in relation to the frontality of the iconic images (Chatterjee 2005).

Hindu mythology has always been the underlying symbolic universe of Hindi and other regional films in India (Ahmed 1992). The public wanted and got divine beings, invincible heroes and religious symbols in films. N. T. Rama Rao playing divine characters, wearing saffron robes, was a direct beneficiary of instilling cinema with religious imagery, his ‘divinity’ on the screen later helping him to head a major state government. Apart from this reverential dimension, popular Hindi cinema and other language cinemas had devised very tricky ways of dealing with the mundane aspects of religion in terms of particular stories and characters bearing Hindu or Muslim names (or any other religions) and the conflicting situations involving members of different religious groups (Benegal 2007). Love, tolerance and brotherhood were the favourite themes and message of post-Independent cinema in India, which was very relevant in those days after the Partition and the frenzied Hindu-Muslim killings.

With the fading away of the Nehruvian era, especially after the Indian victory over Pakistan in 1971 and later in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the ensuing communal tensions and riots, a new wave of religious polarization has encroached upon all spheres of life and in cinema too (Ahmed 1992). In the 1900s-2000s, after India’s victory in the Cargil war, Hindi as well regional cinemas, have begun to re-imagine Hindu-Muslim relationship in the new light of ‘us’ and ‘them’, with claims of loyalty and allegations of disloyalty to the ‘nation’.
Religion, which is supposed to make humans noble and loving unfortunately, has a dark history of intolerance, persecution, and divisiveness. We are acquainted with the European history of religious wars and religious persecutions in the Middle Ages and also of the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in recent times. Wars, persecutions and executions in the name of religion are still endemic worldwide. Religious beliefs address humanity’s greatest fears and, accordingly, may promote particularly strong attachments, and an accordant antipathy, toward those who would bring those beliefs into question in a manner that might re-excite this underlying fear (Marshall 2000). In the changed global-local contexts, we now look into the factors that work as the undercurrents of the process that turn religion into a political force and activity than a spiritual pursuit and in doing so provides the adherents an ideology to fight with and fight for, marks of identity, membership and more.

2.2.3.1 Politics of Religion: William P. Marshall (2000) explains four different ways that religion may present itself as a political force. First, religion may become involved in explicitly partisan activity, candidates campaigning from pulpits, temples and mosques and promoting political party candidates in different ways at places of worship. Second, religion may assume a prominent role in public policy debates removed from the furtherance of a partisan political agenda. Third, religion has its political aspects even when it is not explicitly involved in the political controversies of the day. Religion as a system of ideas competes with other religions and other ideologies to hold on to its adherents and sway others to its convictions by the power and force of its arguments. Religion like other ideologies is in a constant struggle of persuading others as to the merits of its values and beliefs. Fourth, religion is political even when passive. Religion comprises a part of the social fabric from which political choices are made. Religious beliefs even when not overtly political in themselves are potentially laden with profound political overtones.

Rajan Gurukal (2008) writes about the resurgence of irrational beliefs, fears and anxieties promoted by new age religions in Kerala and around the globe. He says that in many developing countries the way of faith is gaining upper hand over the way of reason. He contends that now religion is promoted more as a question of identity than
that of faith. The new religious identity politics is a result of an immature modernization process, he argues, where the advocates of the new religiosity try to present their religious practice under a pseudo-scientific garb. These trends are mostly evident in the newly rich middle class, as a symbol of their aspirations for aristocracy and also in the conventionally aristocratic middle class, in hope of regaining the past glory. The new age religions also promote futuristic goals and ideals. In place of the fallen communist utopia, which was also futuristic, now the religious fundamentalists are offering a futuristic philosophy. This new futuristic interest is career-driven and commodity-oriented, so is prevalent more among the educated youth and their parents. They resort to external exhibition of religious symbols in order to assert their identity, attaching pseudo-scientific merits to the use of these religious objects.

K. Sethumadhavan (2008) comments in the same issue of ‘Mathrubhoomi’ Weekly on the emerging ‘spirituality trade’ in Kerala, backed by ‘left-right’ ideologies. The advocates of the new age spirituality have been cleverly collaborating with the so-called progressive leftist forces, turning the situation to their advantage. The author accuses some of these new religious groups in Kerala of using the ‘leftist-progressive’ garb for them and get involved in new social movements and alternative politics. The Communist parties cooperate with these games as part of their parliamentary political game. Sethumadhavan reminds us that this new wave of religious revivalism is happening in the land of Sreenarayana Guru, who had introduced a new philosophy and politics of religion through the navothana prasthanam (Renaissance Movement), which was later taken up by the leftist political and cultural movements in its fight against feudalism, casteism etc. In that period Kerala had witnessed a detached and reactionary stand against religious structures and institutions among the progressive thinkers, writers and artists. The works of V.T. Bhattathiripad (‘Adukalayil ninnu arangatheyku’ and ‘Unni Namboodiri’) would be apt examples to represent the cultural politics of that period, a politics of revolt against orthodox religions and their inhuman practices. The same spirit of revolt had resurfaced in the 1960s-1970s and promoted a ‘culture of irreverence towards religion’ as a product of modernity and the conventional Marxist and the radical-Naxalite politics.
2.2.3.2 Religious Nationalism and Fundamentalism: The Enlightenment philosophers had made the separation of state authority from religion an essential condition for freedom. In the place of religion, person and polity then assumed sacred status. Religion was forced to function in the interior of the believer’s soul, within the walls of the family and not in public. Secularism, the disengagement and differentiation of the public sphere from religion, is equated with modernity. This led to an analytic neglect of religion. Even Habermas neglects religion’s role in establishing the cultural ground of citizenship, which he distinguishes from national identity, the distinction between the rights of man and the rights to protect a particular national culture (Friedland 2001).

Religious nationalists make politics into a religious obligation. It is obvious that they want to seize the state. With the patronage of Emperor Constantine, Christianity became a state religion in the Third century. Friedland argues that religions other than Christianity—Hinduism, Islam and Judaism for example—that began as faith without a state have been making greater political claim. Organised religions provide images and precepts for a ‘perfect society’ and presume that religion should have a role in the regulation of all of social life. Van der Veer (1994) observes that important in all types of Indian nationalism is the perception of a transcendental state that is modelled on “traditionalising” constructions, either of the “Hindu kingdom” or of the “Muslim sultanate”. He adds, “When a pluralist state can no longer project its transcendent, arbitralional image, conflicts can only be solved through violence” (der Veer 1994:23).

Religious nationalism represents the return to the text, to the fixity of signs, the renarrativisation of the nation in a cosmic context (Rudolph 1997 as cited in Friedland 2001). The Torah or Quran or Bible is not taken just as the basis of an individual’s relationship with God, but as the blueprint for a politically organised community. For example the Islamic fundamentalists look to the Quranic history of the community founded by Prophet Muhammad in the Seventh century as a template by which to gauge and goad the present order. The Hindu nationalists derive their reading of the Indian state from the Ramayana, and other ancient texts. Now with the rising wave of
religious nationalism, it is the middle class, the ‘learned’ class, that gets attracted to conservative religious movements that at times go to the extreme of religious fundamentalism and terrorism. It is this middle class that has initiated a new trend of ‘lay-leadership’ in almost all prominent organised religions, a movement for ‘renewal’ centred around the Text, for example the charismatic movement in Christianity. ‘Collective interpretation’ of the Text by people themselves has become the order of the day, which feeds a popular religious civil society that is very difficult for the state or the organized religions to control.

The resurgence of religion all over the world in the 1990s as political power centres is similar to the rise of nationalism after the World War II. Friedland (2001) argues that religion partakes of the symbolic order of nation-state and that the contemporary nationalisms are suffused with the religious. Religious nationalism calls into question the theoretical duality of the social and cultural, a divide variously identified with the material and the symbolic, class and status and economy and civil society. Religious nationalism offers a particular ontology of power, an ontology revealed and affirmed through its politicised practices and the central object of its political concern, practices that locate collective solidarity in religious faith shared by embodied families, not in contract and consent, but enacted by abstract individual citizens.

Jurgensmeyer (1999) views religious discourse as replete with martial metaphors, of battles and enemies, of position and siege. Originary histories of religions are filled with military conquests, for example, the battles of the ancient Jewish kings in the Bible, of Muhammad’s warriors and the tradition of jihad, of Lord Krishna’s sermon delivered on the battle ground (Gita), of the final Sikh master Guru Gobind Singh, commander of a huge army facing the Mughal invaders in Punjab. Jurgensmeyer says that religious terrorism is only the most extreme form of a general movement of religious nationalism, the reclaiming of religion’s inherent political powers. In contrast to the detachment of politics from religion in the West, the non-Western modern national identities and national movements are suffused with religious narrative and myth, symbolism and ritual.
Many political leaders in the `non-Western’ world now see the secularism of the West as the reason for the moral failures of their societies in the midst of modernisation (Friedland 2001). Religious nationalist movements, also known as the `religious rightists’ that draw energy from its antipathy to modern, secular state and its value system, are on the rise not only in the non-Western nations, but also places like the United States and parts of Europe. With the rise of middle class divorces, approval for gay and lesbian marriages and with the all-pervasive `absolute’ power of media, the religious Rightist forces in the West are forced to defend what is called `family values’. To fight the secularist value system, the religious nationalists across the world are reconstructing the social order based on religious precepts with family at the centre of the new value system.

The religious fundamentalism in the US, in Islamist nations and in reactionary campaigns like that of the `Ram Sene’\(^{12}\) in India and similar ones elsewhere can also be seen as a defence of patriarchy in a world where women have encroached steadily on male prerogatives, which is first reflected inside the family relations. The Islamic fundamentalists tend to restrict or curtail attempts at gender equality; they present the freedom and equality given to women as a threat to religious orthodoxy synonymous with male supremacy.

It is important to analyse some drastic changes happened in Kerala over a period of thirty years in terms of rise of the religious Right and restrictions they impose on women’s rights and freedom. In the 1970s-80s, Muslim women in Kerala mostly appeared in public without veil, many in very secular attire and pursuing secular ambitions and careers almost on equal par with men. The Christian community also had opened up to the wider society, inspired by the Liberation Theology and its praxis, marking a significant period in the Kerala cultural politics, paving way to some rare moments of meaningful sacred-secular encounters. But in the 1990s some regressive and revivalist tendencies spearheaded by the religious Right have surfaced in the

\(^{12}\) Ram Sene (Sena), literally `The Army of Lord Rama’ is Hindu Right Winf organization founded in 1960. But recently (2008) its campaigns involved vandalizing paintings of M.F.Hussein and `moral politicing’ against `Valentine’s Day’ celebrations( in pubs in Mangalore and elsewhere), which they allege is a Western custom (courtesy: Wikipedia).
Kerala society, upsetting the ‘progressive’ atmosphere of the 1970s-80s. Elias (2008) identifies the decline in the presence and popularity of scientific and political movements like Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), Purogamana Kala Sangam and so on as the stepping stones to the resurgence of religious and fundamentalist forces in the cultural scenario of Kerala. Religions and religious or community organizations have now begun to exert more control over people’s private as well as public lives. At present, an array of mixed responses and reactions are observed in Kerala cultural politics in terms of approaches to religion and its politics. They range from hard-core to opportunistic secularism on one hand and on the other hand open, unremorseful display of religious nationalism reaching the limits of fundamentalism and terrorism.

2.2.3.3 Positioning of Religion in Cinema: Jyotika Virdi (2003) calls attention to the surfacing of religious and conservative values in Hindi Cinema of the 1990s. In the context of globalization, when the nation is pitted against the transnational, a new trend of cultural revivalism has surfaced on the screen in the form of reinventing traditions and reinstating family values: Films released in the 1990s like Maine Pyar Kiya, Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge exemplify this trend very well. Ahmed (1992) notes that with the new wave of Hindu revivalism and reactionary movements against it, the image of Muslims in films has undergone drastic changes--from that of a ‘good Muslim’ (Amar, Akbar, Anthony’) or ‘absent Muslim’ to the ‘other’ equated with the ‘enemy’. Until the rise of a politicized Hindutva, war scenes involving Indo-Pak conflict were relatively rare in Hindi cinema, and if any, care had been taken to keep the enemy at an anonymous and indistinct distance both verbally and visually. Border (1998), Pukaar (2000), and LOC Kargil (2003) are examples of the recent reversal of this rule, enabled, so to speak, by the polarized political realities reflected in the ‘real world’ of the Babri Masjid, atomic tests, the Kargil war, and the ongoing separatist and terrorist turmoil in India occupied Kashmir.

A major contribution to examining religious discourses and representations in Indian Cinema came from the ‘Roja debate’ initiated by Tejaswini Niranjana with her essay

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13 KSSP, Kerala Sasthra Parishad, the unit of People’s science forum in Kerala, started in 1962; now has around 40000 membership in 2000 units, spread across Kerala (Wikipedia).
in the Economic and Political Weekly (15 January, 1994), which was then taken up by many scholars and critics like Rustom Bharucha (Bharucha 1998), Madhava Prasad (cited in Ravi Vasudevan 2000), and others. ‘Roja’, a film by the Tamil Director Maniratnam, released in the 1990s ran in theatres all over India and was discussed widely for the veiled Hindu nationalism under the guise of patriotism. The film, while building up the metaphor of ‘nation’ and its ‘enemy’, places the two major religions of India on opposite sides of the line. Here, loyalty to one faith is equated to loyalty to the nation and thus the hegemonic discourse of the right wing Hindu politics is indirectly endorsed. We see this trend repeated in many other films in different regional cinemas of India, stereotyping and branding the members of particular religious and ethnic communities and causing divisions in the fabric of the society.

In Malayalam cinema the initial trend of dealing with ‘religion’ was very similar to the approach in Hindi films, starting with (Hindu) mythological films and eventually portraying religion in social-realist films with all cautions taken not to hurt the feelings of any particular religion/community. Only difference was that Malayalam films, like Hindi films, did not have to maintain a ‘pan national’ identity by hiding the religious identity of the characters (and using only ‘neutral’ names like ‘Raj’). Malayalam films did not hide religious and communal identity of the characters, but most themes that dealt with religion had ‘communal harmony’ as a common thread and so any conflicts between communities was conveniently kept away from the silver screen. As in the case of Hindi cinema, a specific film genre of ‘Muslim socials’ had been introduced in Malayalam too. Muslim socials, like Ummachu, Kandam Becha Kottu etc., urged for renewal in the Muslim community. Thoraval (2000) comments on the cultural specificity of Malayalam films connected to its religious/community contexts.

It (Kerala) is also a region in India where the concept of ‘secularism’ is more enduring than elsewhere—even if freedom of worship is complete and they still produce films celebrating Hindu ‘revivalism’, the ‘specificity’ of local Islam or Christianity—a fact, which probably explains why quality cinema, despite generally modest budgets, distinguishes itself here by being rooted in local, social, political and cultural realities (Thoraval (2000: 378)

Perhaps Nirmalyam (1973) directed by M.T.Vasudevan Nair was the first instance of a Malayalam film critically addressing religion, faith and the life of people around the
temple. Madhu Iravankara (2010), critic and filmmaker, comments: ‘This film has become a landmark in Malayalam cinema history. Today M.T. or anyone can imagine such a film, where even ‘gods’ are criticised under poetic license. Today we cannot imagine a shot, where a non-Hindu actor (P.J.Antony in the 1973 film) enters the ‘sreekovil’ (inner shrine of temple) and spits on the face of the goddess (idol). Those days, religious fundamentalism, caste consciousness and communal conflicts were not as rampant as today. Somehow this film Nirmalyam, which we have chosen as one of the key texts of the study, has achieved such a status that the history of ‘positioning religion in Malayalam cinema’ can perhaps be divided into two distinct stages of ‘before and after Nirmalyam’. The film is seen as representing the ups and downs in the socio-economic conditions in the Kerala society of the 1970s and also the ‘irreverent’ or ‘sacrilegious’ attitudes of the leftist/radical/progressive young people of Kerala in the 1970s towards religion, faith and in general against the ‘world of gods and goddesses’.

Both sides of this coin, namely ‘for religion’ (devotion and promotion) and ‘against religion’ (criticism/critical stand) later found many expressions in Malayalam films ‘after Nirmalyam’. Commenting on the socio-political relevance of Nirmalyam in the 1970s and now, Chithran Namboodiripppad (2010) observes that the issues we face today are not the decline in religion or any revolt against religion, but the opposite, the problems arising from the excessive presence and pervasiveness of religion in all realms of religion and the way people in general and members of particular religions react to such trends. When we examine the politics of positioning religion in Malayalam cinema of the 1990s and beyond, we may find such all-pervasiveness of religion reflected in the life of ‘Malayalees’ portrayed in our films today. Some films may themselves take religion too deep into the core of the film (theme, plot, conflict etc) and some other films would take a critical stand against this pervasiveness that apparently turn people ‘mad/fanatic’ for the sake of religion. A range of films came up in the early and mid-1990s that were accused of promoting religious ‘revivalism’ (Venkiteswaran 2010) represent the former; examples are Aaram Thampuran (Dir. Shaji Kailas), Devasuram (Dir. I.V.Sasi), Ravana Prabhu (Dir. Ranjith) and the like. On the other hand, a few exceptional films like Swaroopam (Dir. K.R.Mohanan),
Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala (Dir. Sreenivasan) and Deivanamathil (Dir. Jayaraj) represent the other approach of ‘critiquing the excessive religion’.

The last scene of the film Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala yields for different interpretations and so is interesting to our study of politics of religion in cinema. In the scene the protagonist, Vijayan, is walking with his wife and children along the village road, enjoying peace and love after returning from his idiosyncratic ‘journeys’ after religion, devotion, spirituality and sanyasa (ascetic life). They encounter two sets of people: a procession of the ‘revolutionary’ political party with red flags and slogans and another group of ‘ayappa bhaktanmar’ (devotees of Lord Ayyappa) going on a pilgrimage. Some critics asked Sreenivasan14, ‘did you put juxtapose these two contrasting processions in order to hint that all these—religion, devotion, politics all—are the same or similar kind of madness, only that people call them by different names?’ Sreenivasan evaded the question by saying that juxtaposition happened simply ‘by chance’ and was not pre-planned. The answer to that question-- if religion, pilgrimage, politics and all are just some madness-- is important to this study because the way people and even some scholars keep these trajectories of religion, politics and cinema in separate, watertight compartments might be one major reason that makes these entities appear as ‘madness’ and as cause of division in the society.

2.2.4 Sacred, Secular and SacredSecular

The two perspectives on religion that Nandy (2002) proposes to view religion as `ideology’ and as ‘faith’ provide ample scope for analysing and theorising on the politics of religion, The branch of studies that usually addresses ‘religion as faith’ is ‘theology’, a subject not included in the spectrum of social sciences because it functions with different modes of ontology, epistemology and logic. This is one major reason why religion and the study of religion evoke only minor interest among social scientists and that too in specific quarters. In Christian circles, till recently, the study of religion (theology) has been set apart as `sacred disciplines'/‘ecclesiastical studies’ (related to ecclesia =church). In the wake of postmodernism, post-structuralism and other new horizons of thought, theologians have begun to insist on an interdisciplinary

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14 Sreenivasan in an interview by Jineshkumar (2010)
study of religion, where the ‘sacred’ and secular’ would meet often, influence and enrich each other (Flood 1999). Even today, the scope of studying religion has been looked at sceptically in the ‘secular’, ‘scientific’ circles; with such an attitude, there is no need to explain why the age old ‘sacred-secular’ divide or dichotomy still continues in our thinking and acting.

2.2.4.1 Sacred: The idea of two domains surfaces in many religious texts, for example we read in the Bible (in the New Testament, Gospel of Luke 20:25) about things that belong to God and that are Caesar’s. During his trial before Pontius Pilot, Jesus tells him that his kingdom was not of this world (Gospel of John 18:38). Madan (1997) explains how in the course of time the two worlds were sought to be brought together by the Roman Emperor Constantine I, who became a Christian in the Fourth century and attempted to make Christianity the official religion of Roman Empire. It was now the turn of popes, claiming their mandate from Peter, to characterize earthly government as a mere instrument subordinate to the ‘City of God’ (Augustine). We find a celebrated formation of the sacred-secular dichotomy in Augustine, at the beginning of the fifth century, ‘two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of the self’.

2.2.4.2 Secular and Secularism: Madan (1997)^15 in ‘Modern Myths, Locked Minds—Secularism and Fundamentalism in India’ briefly outlines different approaches to ‘secular and secularism’ in different traditions/schools of thought.

a) In the Judeo-Christian tradition: Drawing from Evans Pritchard and others, Madan presents the three concepts in their Christian context as: i) secularisation refers to socio-cultural processes that engage the areas of life—material, institutional and intellectual—in which the role of the sacred is progressively limited ii) secularity is the resultant state of social being facing secularisation; and iii) secularism is the ideology that argues the historical inevitability and progressive nature of secularisation

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^15 For the discussion on ‘sacred, secular and secularism’ I have mainly depended on Madan (1997 and 2006).
everywhere in the public sphere. Some Christian scholars have written about secularisation as the will of God, but denounced secularism as ungodly.

b) In the sociological and political thought from the time of Enlightenment: The foundations of the sociological thesis of secularisation were laid by August Comte in a massive body of work. One may recall his evolutionary paradigm of intelligence, or knowledge, progressing from the ‘Theological or fictitious’ to the Metaphysical, or abstract, and finally to the ‘Positive, or scientific’ stage. He committed the new branch of social science that he named as ‘sociology’, to a secularist rather than any available religious view of social reality. All historical religions in his judgment were theological, but religion in principle was associated with feeling or sentiment and was therefore potentially useful. Emile Durkheim looked forward to a purely secular but moral education to take on some of the social functions or responsibilities that religion had been performing for so long. But he was against complacent views of secularisation of morality, which he cautioned, would turn out to be ‘impoverished and colourless morality’. Max Weber was less confident about the future of a secularized world. In his view, the motifs behind secularisation were i) a valorisation of the means-end relationship and ii) an exercise of reason as such on ‘the image of the world’, the religious primacy eventually being replaced by an economic primacy. Karl Max considered ‘the criticism of religion’ as the ‘the premise of all criticism’. His vision of the future is of a secularized world, pushed forward through economic and social development towards a classless and non-alienated society.

c) Secularism in India: Writing on ‘Religion, State and Civil Society’ Asghar Ali Engineer (2005) refers to the notion of ‘secularism as religious tolerance’ enshrined in the Indian constitution quoting two famous verdicts in 1994 after the Babri Masjid incident. “Our Constitution”, the judges reminded, “does not prohibit the practice of any religion either privately or publicly” (Engineer 2005). Rustom Bharucha (1998) identifies two versions of secularism outlined in the Indian Constitution; *dharmanirapeksata*, that is impartiality to religion and *sarva dharma samabhava* that is equal respect to all religion. He argues that the latter contradicts the former, *dharmanirapeksata*, which upholds the separation of religion and State. He takes his
argument forward and concludes that the Western concept of secularism cannot be translated or transferred to Indian context. Ashis Nandy pinpoints ‘equal respect’ to all religion as the proper non-Western understanding and experience of secularism. The other sense of secularism, in which we speak of ‘secularising the state’, has been used in the West for the past 300 years; this model demarcates ‘public’ and ‘private’ territories and confines the practice of religion to the private. Supporting the non-Western idea of secularism, Nandy says while public life may or may not be kept free of religion, it must have space for a continuous dialogue among religious traditions and between the religious and the secular (Nandy 2002).

2.2.4.3 SacredSecular: Nandy’s contention makes it easier for us to imagine and speak about a new category ‘SacredSecular’, a compound word coined by Lata Mani, which in her words implies the indivisibility of sacred and secular (Mani 2009). She explores the inextricability of the sacred and secular realms of existence, the interconnectedness of the sentient and the apparently non-sentient and the inseparability of spiritual philosophy from the practice of everyday life. She suggests that the ethical and liberatory dimensions of sacred and secular frameworks can fruitfully invigorate each other and strengthen collaborative projects and interventions in favour of justice, peace and harmony.

Madan (1997) is critical of the way secularism is applied in India after the model of the West, because its dualistic character imposes separation of the domain of the sacred and the secular everywhere and in the same manner. He points out that non-Christian religious traditions do not make this distinction (e.g. Islam) or do it hierarchically (e.g. Hinduism), subsuming the secular under the sacred. Even George Jacob Holyoake, who coined the word ‘secularism’ in 1850, advocated a form of secularism that could accommodate religion, one that would emphasize diversities and coexistence in the matter of faith (Holyoke cited in Madan1997). But the confused status of secularism continues in our country as a vestige of colonisation and the intellectual servitude (still ‘looking West’) of the Indian middle class cultures and the state machinery and bureaucracy. Ashis Nandy considers the lure of secularism in India as farcical and not doing justice to the pluralistic cultures. This import from the
nineteenth century Europe, he holds, has little to say about cultures, it is definitionally ethnophobic and frequently ethnocidal. The orthodox secularism has no clue to the way a religion can link up differential faiths or ways of life according to its own configurative principles (Nandy 2002).

The present study wishes to interrogate the Indian model or models of secularism, to see how much it is a lived reality among different classes and ethnic populations in India. If it is only a superficial rhetoric in the line of political sloganeering and opportunism, it disrespects the sentiments underlying in our popular culture, where the sacred-secular dualism does not seem to exist or is in constant negotiations. Even in the postmodern environment, if the public-private boundaries continue to be still strictly cordoned off, not letting the discretion of mature citizens to negotiate and deal with, it amounts to a hegemonic imposition of the `progressive’ `secular’ ideology of a few on all.

Religious pluralism to the extent of agnosticism as an option has been an integral part of the lived culture of people in India. SacredSecular or sacred-secular is nothing new for a people for whom hyphenated or multiple identities are what they are and what they live with. If these multiple or overlapping experiences, like that of sacred and secular, can form part of an ongoing dialogue, in place of the rigid and monolithic modernity, the immense possibilities of multivalent positioning can be unearthed. In fields like cinema or any other art for that matter, complex and compound options, like that of `SacredSecular’, would help incorporating many voices (heteroglossia in Bakhtin’s term), and meanings into the content and form.

### 2.3 Objectives of the Research

The study has one broad objective and three subsidiary objectives. The broad objective presents the major thrust of this study and covers all important concerns/trajectories related to this study, whereas all three subsidiary objectives are focusing on the aspect of religion and the interface of religion, politics, cinema (and cultural politics in general).
2.3.1 Broad Objective

To critically look at the status of the ‘political cinema’ and the transitions in the ‘politics of cinema’ in Malayalam from 1970s-90s. To examine how and to what extent Malayalam Cinema in the postmodern 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.

The broad objective sets the historical context of the study and the specific juncture in time, the meeting point of 1970s and 1990s, where this study assumes its special interest and relevance. The interest and involvement on the part of the researcher in the ‘political cinema’ movement became the inspiration to study its evolution and the present status. The broadening of this interest that led to look at the shift from ‘political cinema’ to the ‘politics of cinema’ as an ongoing process was spontaneous. The researcher shares with many participants of this research the air of certainty and immediacy that people in the 1970s-80s assumed about ‘political cinema’, which had appeared like a concrete and almost realised idea and ideal those days. Many unexpected and decisive events and transitions in the social, political, cultural and economic scenarios at global-local levels prompted a rethinking on the very idea of ‘politics’ among people who had imagined ‘political cinema’ as static and almost a single-dimensional entity. The ‘commonality politics’ based on class struggle seemed to wither and fade out (Glitin 1994), while the politics of identity from the margins brought in diversity and apparent fragmentation and forced a redefinition of ‘politics’ in different realms of life and different branches of art and academics. The broad objective of the study acknowledges the broadening and diversification of politics happening around and investigates how and to what extent the multiple constituencies of class, gender, sexuality, race, religion, ethnicity etc. are influencing this process and effecting a redefinition of the politics of Malayalam cinema.

2.3.2 Subsidiary Objectives

1. To study the politics of religion and analyse the presence and positioning of religion in Kerala cultural politics from 1970s-90s, using Malayalam Cinema
as the specific site of reference. This objective is directly connected to the broad objective of the study as it separates religion from other categories and investigates the significance of religion in the process of redefinition of the politics of cinema in the given period. It helps to open up the study to different possible perceptions on religion (pro and for) in our society and if and how these different perspectives are represented in cinema.

2. To study the surfacing of `religious nationalism and fundamentalism’ in the 1990s, at global-local levels and its repercussions on the creators and consumers of cultural products and discourses addressed to the `Malayalee’ audiences. The researcher has embarked on a study of the broadening of politics precisely in the present context at global and local levels, where many streams of political imagination and activity are narrowing down their perspectives and priorities leading to `ghettoisation’. In the place of political dogmas disappeared with the collapse of communism in Europe, new dogmas, especially those of conservative religion, are emerging raising concerns.

3. To rethink the `sacred’ and `secular’ and explore possibilities of an ongoing sacred-secular dialogue in Kerala cultural politics, mediated by cinema, and art in general. This final subsidiary objective is part of imagining the `shape of things in future’, the shape of ‘future revolutions’. The researcher is examining if the possible negotiations between the sacred and the secular remain only as individual aspirations or wishful thinking or if such overlapping perspectives/visions have become part of the collective imagination in Kerala. If so, it gives hope in an otherwise depressing conditions of communal tension, conflicts and divisions, where even art (cinema) stands as helpless observer or onlooker. If such negotiations could be easily imagined and realised in cinema, it can ignite further collective imagination on inclusive, broad sense of politics, which goes beyond the boundaries of the `man-made’ universes.

2.4 Research Questions
The research questions formulated on the basis of the broad and subsidiary objectives of the study are the following:
1. What significant changes can be observed in the sphere of cultural politics in the last 30 years (1970s-90s) among the creators and consumers of cultural discourses and artefacts meant for ‘Malayalee’ audiences? What are the specific circumstances and/or elements people refer to as having effected those changes?

2. What processes/movements in 1970s-90s have been instrumental in moulding and modifying the content and form of the Malayalam New/Political cinema?

3. How do ‘Malayalee’ filmmakers of different generations, 1970s-90s, look at politics in general, ’political cinema’ and politics of cinema?

4. How do different generations of ‘Malayalee’ audiences (1970s-90s), belonging to different constituencies (class, caste, religion, gender etc), understand the politics of a work of art, and specifically, the politics of cinema?

5. What prompts people to invest in art? In religious/spiritual beliefs and practices? Are there any common grounds for these investments?

6. How do ‘Malayalees’ of 1970s-90s and beyond, of all hues and colours, creators as well as consumers of cultural products and processes, position themselves with regard to the question of religion in the ’public’ and ’private’ domains?

7. Among ‘Malayalees’ of 1990s and beyond, what are the emerging trends or tendencies or movements, reactive or proactive, in addressing the question of religion? Are there attempts of bringing religion to dialogue with cinema and other dimensions of life?

2.5 Research Design
This research project is an exploratory study undertaken within a social constructivist paradigm. This is a combination of diachronic and synchronic study that looks at the evolution of the concepts of ‘political cinema and politics of cinema’ in Malayalam from 1970s-90s and its implications to the contemporary cinema. These two notions come from linguistics (Haywards1996), where diachronic linguistics is the study of language over time, its history and synchronic linguistics studies language at a specific moment in time. The diachronic studies language as an evolving process and the
synchronic does it as a structured whole, whose internal relations must be examined. A
diachronic approach in film studies would examine film as an evolving language and
industry. A synchronic approach would examine a particular film in relation to its
contemporary cultural context and would also view the film as a structural entity. This
study traces the shifts in the concept and practice of `political cinema and politics of
cinema’ and also the `politics and positioning of religion’ in Malayalam cinema, in the
period 1970s-90s and beyond. Hayward says that nowadays these two approaches,
diachronic and synchronic are not seen as mutually exclusive but indeed as well worth
combining to give a full reading of the film as text and context.

The objectives of the study demand the use of qualitative methods for data gathering,
and accordingly, multiple methods of in-depth interviews, textual analysis and
discourse analysis were used in the field study. The main component of the field data
consists of micro-narratives that reconstruct the `1970s-90s’ period and/or project the
‘beyond 1990s’. Fifty five participants from the primary research site (‘inside Kerala’)
and the secondary site (‘outside Kerala’) have created these narratives, comprising
memories, writings, conversations, discussions/analysis and so on.

2.5.1 Research Sites
In order to include a significant cross-section of the ‘creators and consumers’ of
Malayalam cinema and other socio-cultural products/discourses, including religion in
Kerala state, this study chose `inside Kerala’ as the primary site. The choice of the site
is justified for such a context-specific study, as `Malayalam Cinema’ is still restricted
to a great extent to the geographical boundaries of the Kerala state and the majority of
people connected to other research concerns of the study also resides within those
boundaries.

Three district headquarters, namely Kozhikode (Calicut), Thrissur (Trichur) and
Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) were chosen as the anchoring points of field study,
for practical convenience and more over in view of regional representation in terms of
`northern/central/southern Kerala’. It became clear in the first phase of data collection
that many participants of this study, `the creators and consumers’ of the cinematic and
other discourses, are living and moving in a `scattered’ manner across Kerala as per
the demands of their work/profession, without sticking on to a very ‘specific location’ in Kerala; for example a filmmaker like ‘T.V.Chandran’ is available at Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Kozhikode and he does not ‘belong’ to any particular place in Kerala. This is the reason why the researcher changed his original plan of ‘region-specific’ data collection and fixed ‘inside Kerala’ as the primary site of this study. A large cross section of the ‘creators and consumers’ of the cinematic and other discourses was available around certain cultural production or performance or dissemination institutions situated in the three centres that we chose as the anchoring points of the field study-- Thiruvananthapuram (as the state capital and seat of the Chalachitra Academy and the State Film Development corporation), Thrissur (known as the ‘cultural capital of Kerala’, as the seat of Academies-- Literary, Fine Arts etc) and Kozhikode (as the seat of ‘Calicut University and also as an easy access point to ‘Wayanad’, which was the hub of the ‘Naxalite movement’ of the 1970s, an important aspect in this study).

‘Outside Kerala’ was chosen as the secondary research site in order to incorporate data from ‘creators and consumers of cinematic and cultural political discourses’ living outside the geographical boundaries of Kerala state in different parts of India and abroad. This becomes important because of the significant presence of ‘Malayalee diaspora’ (especially those living in the Gulf countries) in Malayalam cinema and other art forms. This diaspora has contributed to Malayalam cinema through production support (we have many NRI producers) as well as creative input. In the beginning of 2000s it had become a trend on the part of some NRI Keralites to get involved in filmmaking in Kerala. We have included the interviews of a couple of Keralites residing outside who have now become part of the ‘cinematic and culture-politics discourses in Kerala’.

As part of sampling, the participants have been divided into three ‘Contexts/Junctures’ that represent three major phases of the period of study, ‘1970s-90s and beyond’. The data from the ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sites have been coalesced in order to fit into this ‘Three Contexts’ scheme.
2.5.2 Research Participants

The participants of this study are `creators and consumers of cinematic and cultural-politics discourses in Kerala’ 1970s-1990s and beyond. This includes on one level Malayalam filmmakers, film technicians, producers, distributors, and exhibitors, cross section of audiences of Malayalam cinema, film society activists and critics. On another level, we have included cultural-political analysts, media analysts, media teachers/scholars, and journalists, writers, performing artistes, students, religious leaders, believers and non-believers. Care has been taken to get the maximum diverse sample in terms of gender, age group, religion/no-religion and profession/ area of activity (representatives from different spheres of cultural politics and on another plane, people directly connected to filmmaking, writing and those who are not directly connected).

Three sensitising concepts that are at the core of this study are ‘political cinema’, ‘politics of cinema’ and ‘positioning religion in cinema’. ‘Political cinema’ refers to a particular film genre/movement that surfaced in Malayalam cinema in the 1970s under the influence of the European and the ‘Third World’ political cinemas. ‘Politics of cinema’ is concerned with broadening the definition of politics of a(any) film, considering all different elements that shape and influence its text, content, form, multiple readings and the relationships among all infrastructural and technological aspects that control the production, distribution and exhibition of that film. The third concept looks at the politics of positioning religion in Malayalam cinema of 1970s-90s and beyond and also at ‘cinema as the site of negotiations between the sacred and the secular’. These three concepts form the basis for the inclusion-exclusion criteria of research participants of this study.

There are certain individuals—filmmakers, technicians, critics, film society activists, social activists and others—who have shaped and who have been shaped by the ‘Cinema of the 1970s’ and the cultural politics of that period. A ‘purposive sample’ of such individuals was chosen (twenty two participants) as representatives of the ‘Context/Juncture A. 1970s’ (people who were actively involved with the cinema and cultural politics of the 1970s). Another twenty three participants chosen from
`Context/Juncture B 1970s-90s’ (not active in the 1970s but active in the 1990s) represent those who have influenced and have been influenced by the redefinition of ‘politics of cinema’ and ‘cultural politics’ during this period. An apparently small sample (ten participants) was chosen as `feelers’ of the period, `beyond 1990s’ (not active neither in the 1970s nor till the 1990s). Theirs is an `already-not yet’ situation and they in a way represent the present condition of youth, cinema (facing technological and other challenges) and the very concept of `politics’, a condition that we can only describe as `in constant flux’. (Please refer to `Table of Participants, Context A, B & C’ in the Annexure).

In-depth, face-to-face interview/dialogue was conducted with fifty participants across Kerala, who pertain to any of the three Contexts/ Junctures mentioned above. In addition, five online interviews were conducted with participants, living outside/inside Kerala, who were unavailable or inaccessible for in-depth, face-to-face interview/dialogue.

The `purposive sampling’ technique was used to select the research participants, on the basis of their typical representation of the three Contexts or Junctures in the cultural politics of Kerala and specifically in the field of cinema or religion, from 1970s-90s. Morse (2007) explains purposive sampling as that in which participants are selected as indicated by the initial analysis of interviews. These interviews reveal how participants themselves partition the emerging phenomena. Participants may be speaking for themselves (`we’) or others (`they’). The researcher will then proceed to sample according to the way this scheme sorts the phenomenon. The participants chosen using this sampling method will be the ones who are ‘going through’ particular stages of a general trajectory or process. This enables confirmation of the trajectory, a rich description of different stages as they are experienced. Points between changes or stages are called critical junctures. When describing an event or phenomena, the participants may place themselves with a class like them, that is the generalised self, or unlike them that is the generalised other. These categorisations provide significant groupings in which further sampling should occur.
2.5.3 Research Strategies/Methods

The study uses comparative method as its overall strategy, which consists in comparing film texts (textual analysis), discourses around certain film texts and other discourses (discourse analysis) and life stories/oral history (In-depth Interviews) of around fifty research participants.

2.5.3.1 Textual Analysis: Key film texts and secondary texts were analysed from the point of view of the three sensitizing concepts—‘political cinema’, ‘politics of cinema’ and ‘religion and cinema’—and also as representing particular contexts/junctures of this diachronic-synchronic study. Instead of studying the texts in themselves, this study is more interested in looking at the web of intertextuality connected to each text, woven through multiple readings including that of the ‘author’ and also enriched by various discourses around particular film texts that were generated at different times in history.

*Kabani Nadi Chuvannapol* (Dir. P.A. Backer) is the key film text studied in the analysis of ‘political cinema’ movement in Malayalam in the 1970s (Chapter 3). Reference is made to the Argentinean political documentary *Hour of the Furnace* (Dir. Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas), *Chuvanna Vithukal* (Dir. P.A. Backer), *Aswathatmavu* (Dir. K.R. Mohanan) and *Uttarayanam* (Dir. G.Aravindan). Where the redefinition process of the ‘politics of cinema’ is discussed (Chapter 4), we use two key texts: *Amma Ariyan* (Dir. John Abraham) and *Susanna* (Dir. T.V. Chandran). In this section, *Strawberry and Chocolate* (Dir. Thomas Alea), *Kathavasheshan* (Dir. T.V.Chandran), *Mukhamukham* (Dir. Adoor Gopalakrishnan) and *Maranasimhasanam* (Dir. Murali Nair) are also analysed as secondary texts. In the discussion on ‘positioning religion in Malayalam cinema’ in Chapter 5, three key texts are used, namely, *Nirmalyam* (Dir. M.T. Vasudevan Nair), *Paithrukam* (Dir. Jayaraj), and *Maargam* (Dir. Rajiv Vijayaraghavan). Here reference to a couple of secondary texts—*Swaroopam* (Dir. K.R.Mohanan), *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (Dir. Sreenivasan), *Desadanam* (Dir. Jayaraj), *Anyar* (Dir. Lenin Rajendran) and *Deivanamathil* (Dir. Jayaraj)—are important in the analysis. In the last chapter that discusses the ‘negotiation of sacred and secular’, we use G. Aravindan’s *Esthappan* as
the key text. Reference is made to _Nandanam_ and _Pranchiyettan and the Saint_, both films directed by Ranjith.

### 2.5.3.2 In-depth Interview/Dialogue:
The second unit of analysis for this study is _narratives_, (re)constructed by research participants during the course of in-depth interviews or critical conversation with the researcher or other participants. These participants have been chosen in terms of ‘those who have gone through’ the particular junctures of the 1970s-90s period related to the concerns of this study or those who are ‘in’ the present stage, i.e., ‘beyond 1990s’. Interviews were conducted in the format of ‘life-story’ narratives, each individual reconstructing portions of oral history of a period of time from respective perspectives and contexts. Filmmakers, film society members and all those who belong to the ‘creators of the cinematic discourse’ have ‘gone through’ the actual processes of the evolution of political cinema of the 1970s and so their accounts help us reconstruct a sensible oral history of that period and those processes. So too are individuals, who have gone through the direct experience of the radical (Naxalite) political movement of the 1970s and those have indirectly have been part of it by being a sympathiser/observer/critic of the movement.

The question of ‘positioning religion’ in the cultural political scenario of Kerala, especially in Malayalam cinema was not framed in view of addressing particular individuals or groups who profess to be ‘religious’ (‘believers’). The question of ‘religion’ was treated as an extension of the question on the ‘politics of Malayalam cinema’, in terms of significance of ‘religion’ in the broader scheme of ‘politics’. Accordingly almost the same participants were asked to include the question of ‘religion and/in cinema’ in their ‘oral history’ of the ‘1970s-90s and beyond’ that was constructed through interviews/conversation. As such, no interview has been conducted with persons who had no direct connection with the cultural politics of Kerala and direct/indirect connection with Malayalam cinema.

### 2.5.3.3 Discourse Analysis:
Three discourses connected to three film texts (used in our study) are briefly revisited and analysed in the study; they are the discourses around _Nirmalyam_, _Desadanam_ and _Susanna_. Research participants recalled the discourse generated mostly by (print) media around _Nirmalyam_, before and during its screening.
for public in 1974. Muraleedharan (participant, Context B) remembers that it was Mathrubhoomi daily and some film magazines (‘Nana’ etc) that had built up the discourse of Nirmalayam as a path-breaking and ‘iconoclast’ film. The crust of the discourses was the propriety/impropriety of the last scene, where the Oracle spits on the face of the idol. But years after, when the 25th year of Nirmalayam was celebrated, another ‘hidden’ agenda of the text was brought into serious discussion: it was the question of why did such a ‘progressive/iconoclast’ film chose to show a Muslim (money lender) as the villain who disgraced the Oracle’s wife and family. Desadanam discourse consisted of ‘for’ and ‘against positions regarding the alleged Hindutva politics ingrained in it. Another section of the audiences argued for Desadanam as a ‘film that touched’ their hearts. The discourse around Susanna was multi-layered, in which mainstream feminists challenging it as `an anti-woman’ film, Leftist critics and conventional moralists pitching for their typical views and the filmmaker coming up with his ‘version’ etc. The sex workers in Thrissur claimed Susanna as a film that represented their reality (Radhakrishnan 2002). Filmmaker, T.V.Chandran allowed the discourse to grow further by including allusions to ‘Susanna as a fake feminist film’ in his next film Danny.

Three other discourses revisited in the study are not connected to any film texts but to specific episodes in the Kerala cultural politics and they surface in our discussion on the ‘politics of religion’. These discourses are: ‘mathamillatha jeevan’ (life without religion) based on a lesson in seventh grade, ‘Mathai Chacko anthya koodasa sweekarichuo? (if Mathai Chacko, the CPM politician received last rites’) and ‘kraisthavarude kuttikal kraisthava vidyalayangalil’ (Christian students only in Christian schools), a controversial argument raised by Bishop Powathil. There have been other discourses connected to ‘religion and secular state’ relationships and also episodes that became milestones in the question of `religious/communal harmony’ in the state. But we have chosen these three discourses because the discussions around these episodes evolved into full-fledged public debates, in which common people, political and religious ideologues, party politicians and media took sides. The popularity tactics of the media (especially electronic media) apparently play an
important role in generating and promoting such discourses, in contrast to earlier discourses that did not have a strong media back up.

2.5.4 Research Paradigm

This study conceives itself as falling within the constructivist paradigm with focus on intertextuality and dialogism. As described by Guba and Lincoln (1994), a constructivist paradigm assumes relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. Among the various constructivist approaches, the study locates itself within the social constructionist approach to knowledge creation.

Social constructionism is understood as an account of knowledge creating practices—both scientific and otherwise (Gergen 2004). In either approach, it is contended that people’s (the social scientist and an individual’s) account of the social world or people’s knowledge is not determined in any principled way by what is there or “by a simple imprinting of sense data on the mind” (Ibid: 197). Thus objects and events do not have a universal meaning and people’s perceptions are not a matter of internalizing a truthful representation of the world (Burr 2004). Rather people are actively engaged in the construction of their own subjective world through concepts, models and schemes.

There is a socio-cultural dimension to this construction: these interpretations are not constructed in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth. Thus knowledge of the world can be understood as social artefacts, products of historically situated interchanges (dialogue) among people. Such an understanding of reality (and knowledge) as is espoused by social constructionism is adopted by the research in its understanding of the meaning made by research participants as culturally and historically embedded as well as created and changed in interaction in the story telling to the interviewer (researcher). This ordinary sense of constructionism is also called perspectivism in contemporary epistemology, which constructionism opposes a naïve realist and empiricist epistemology according to which knowledge simply reflects what is “out there”. Social scientists of such a persuasion are concerned with how an idea achieves the status of the real and natural through social practices, and the “rhetorical strategies in play in particular kinds of
discourse” (Gergen 2004: 197). They also make a useful distinction between weak and strong forms of social constructionist research. Both these forms acknowledge the ideological, political and value permeated nature of knowledge. However, the weak form, even while rejecting such positivist notions as objective knowledge, verification, justification, evidence etc., recasts these notions in a different epistemological framework that still allows for a way of distinguishing between better or worse interpretations. On the other hand a strong or radical social constructionist perspective is often nihilistic in its stance, which may endorse the view that the meaning of a particular event or social action is embedded in the particular meaning system of a culture or society so that they can be understood only against this system and cannot be compared with events and actions embedded in other meaning systems.

The current study proposes to take a middle ground—it positions itself within the perspectival and weak form of social constructionist approach. In the spirit of dialogism, the underlying methodological thrust of this study, the epistemic subject (researcher) is defined in relation to other subjects. The subject or observer is not imagined as a disinterested observer ‘outside’ the historical and cultural situations, attempting to arrive at a ‘pure description’ of reality without evaluative judgements. De Certeau (1997 as cited in Flood 1999) holds that ‘however scientific it may be, an analysis always amounts to a localised practice that produces only a regional discourse.’ This view recognizes the contingent nature of interpretation and that knowledge is always from a perspective. In a study like this that explores people’s perceptions and perspectives on ‘political cinema’ (as concept and as history) and on ‘religion’ (as experience or as viewpoint), the observations of Flood (1999:143) are significant, “In dealing with living persons in the particularity of their lives, a social scientist is thrown into a situation in which she/he not only interrogates but is interrogated, even implicitly, by that tradition and those people who are the objects of the research.”

This study on the politics of Malayalam cinema and the positioning of religion in society and cinema is conducted through the interaction of the situated observer (researcher) and people and the study of texts--cinematic, religious and other. The
dialogical nature of enquiry highlights the diversity of narratives and the different ways of understanding a cultural formation, combining ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ accounts. Any ‘distanced’, analytical account of the researcher can become only one among other, competing insider accounts. This kind of approach moves away from overarching theories to micro-social description in which the researcher reflexively understands the process she/he is engaged with. Knowledge is contextual and the embodied nature of positioned subject means that she/he will inevitably bring to the analysis not only questions stemming from the research programme, but also questions stemming from personal biography (Flood 1999).

Though this study recognizes the ‘embedded’ nature of research, it does not take a ‘strong’ form of ‘social constructionist’ approach (Gergen 2004), ruling out the possibility of comparison and application of the findings with events and practices in similar contexts in other cultures and meaning systems. The present study has been triggered by an interest in ‘political cinema’ in Malayalam, which was not exclusively a ‘region-specific’ reality in the Kerala context, but was part of a larger movement that originated in Latin America and elsewhere in the ‘Third World’ and also in parts of the so called ‘first’ and ‘second’ worlds. Also the question of ‘resurgence of religion’ and its positive and negative implications to cultural politics is not simply a local issue, whose understanding is contingent upon the Kerala community, but is the reflection of larger global phenomena. Because of these exchanges between and mutual influence of cultures that we experience as a concrete reality, we cannot take a ‘strong’ social constructionist’ approach to this study, limiting it only to the particular meaning system of the Kerala culture and a region-specific context.

The study is social constructionist in its understanding of the kind of knowledge it seeks to *construct* (not “discover” or “unearth”). The study takes an approach very similar to the ‘constructivist grounded theory’, which contrasts itself with the ‘objectivistic grounded theory’ that assumes an objective reality to be “discovered” or “unearthed” unfettered by the biography of the researcher. A constructivist grounded theory recognizes that the researcher’s values and biography enters the research process at every stage—the selection of the research questions, the creation of
categories, the integration of the constructed theoretical framework etc. (Charmaz 2000). A constructivist grounded theory also recognizes that interpretations are co-constructed. The value-mediated, co-constructed nature of theory means that, the research products are not seen as constituting only the reality of the participants; knowledge reflects the viewed as well as the viewer. Thus a constructivist grounded theory does not seek a single, unidimensional, universal truth. Evolving theoretical assumptions are seen as one possible interpretation among multiple interpretations.

2.5.4.1 Dialogism: This study, in the line of qualitative research methodologies, has made use of the 'dialogical method' of Mikhail Bakhtin, since the two major trajectories of our research—political cinema and politics of religion-- demand an interactive and contextually and historically 'situated' approach. Rather than the disengaged reason of the social scientist observing, recording and theorizing data, we have a process in which research is modelled on critical conversation (Flood 1999). This is to argue that all explanations are situated; there is no 'view from nowhere' and there are competing narrative accounts which might be totally incompatible, being based on wholly different presuppositions. Critical conversation also means that there can be no ethical or value neutrality and divergent accounts of any cultural practice will contain divergent value systems. The dialogical model has been operating for some years within anthropology and has produced ethnographies which significantly contribute to social scientific understandings of cultures and the people who comprise them. It has also operated successfully as regards texts within literary studies and social scientific studies of texts, a development whose source is the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin.

Although Bakhtin did not actually use the term, dialogism is a discourse which focuses upon dialogue, utterance and heteroglossia (other voices). At the heart of dialogism is the concept of 'dialogue', the idea that every utterance or thought enters into relationship with other utterances and thoughts not only in the present but stretching into the past and future. Flood (ibid) traces precursors of dialogue in Kant and others in the Verstehen tradition, which placed lived experience (Erlebnis) over cognition as the centre of cultural inquiry. The distinction between natural sciences
whose methods entail objectification and the identification of causes, and the social or human sciences whose methods entail understanding subjectivities, is one of the bases from which dialogism develops. Dialogism is a focusing on intersubjectivity and communication, articulated by Bakhtin as the understanding of the ‘I’ in interrelationship with other persons that is I and the other, I and Thou. Dialogism (dialogizm) is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981). Everything is understood, as part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue.

All research is situational, from a dialogical perspective (Flood 1999). Rather than any proclaimed value-free, monologic investigation, we have a dialogical situation in which preconceptions, as well as the epistemic subject of research, are inevitably changed and challenged in the process of dialogue. The situated nature of research has long been accepted within anthropology because it is defined by field work. The traditional model of sociology and ethnography as found in Weber and Radcliffe-Brown, for example, has been that detached, value-free observation at a critical distance from the material creates an objective account of the society or aspect of culture. While it is certainly possible to do research at a distance in this way, its results are only partial and can just as equally conceal aspects of culture as reveal them.

The dialogical method that this study has chosen as its course also deals with the question of objectivity and the multi-dimensionality of interpretations in a way very similar to the constructivist grounded theory. Objectivity is understood in terms of interaction or dialogue among participants within a social field, where one of the participants is a situated observer or social scientist (Flood 1999). This kind of dialogue is critical in so far as different narratives and accounts are placed under critical scrutiny; indeed each is subjected to the critical scrutiny of the other and social analysis becomes a relational form of understanding in which both parties actively
engage in the interpretation of cultures. Specifically to this study, those aspects of culture that we label as ‘religion’ can be analysed both from within by the questioning insider (a ‘believer’) as well as from without by the social scientist. The researcher in the present study concerning cinema and religion happens to be an ‘insider’ in both fields and therefore a dialogical method of critical conversation is all the more justified in such a case.

This research project on the politics of cinema and religion is envisaged not as an individual exercise in isolation, looking at texts, cinematic as well as religious, and attempting various possible interpretation using tools of hermeneutics. We adopt a rather ‘communitarian’ strategy of situating the research around the community of all possible stakeholders of the cultural productions and processes, pertaining to cinema and religion, listening critically to their diverse and interwoven narratives and thus letting the data generated in dialogical or ‘polylogical’ contexts evolve into theoretical assumptions.

2.5.5 Research Procedure

This section provides a brief report of the research procedure, of how the researcher worked out the research design in terms of gathering data from the participants (interviewing) and other sources (texts/discourses) on the basis of the research questions, finally leading to the analysis of data.

2.5.5.1 Gaining Access to the Participants: As clarified in the introductory chapter and elsewhere, myself as the researcher, is an ‘insider’ to the fields of the study, i.e., politics, cinema and religion (traditions, beliefs and practices) of Kerala. Like many participants of this research, I have been ‘going through’ all the three ‘juncturescontexts’ of this study in varying intensity. For this reason, I did not have the usual difficulties in identifying and gaining access to the participants of this study, filmmakers, technicians, film society activists and others, representing the three different junctures of ‘Malayalam Cinema, 1970s-90s and beyond’ that form the major trajectories of the study. Participants, who are not directly related to cinema are also persons previously known to the researcher. In such circumstances, it becomes important to be reflexive during all these steps described (Holliday 2007). Reflexivity
refers to the researcher’s understanding of the manner in which his/her identity, both personal (his/her biases, presuppositions) and social (what he/she appear to the world) interacts with the research setting and participants, who come to the study with their own socially and culturally based suppositions. In this section I describe research procedures, at the same time demonstrating the reflexivity I engaged with during these procedures.

Choice of the research sites, as explained earlier, was directed by the context-specific nature of this study, which is situated in the ‘cinema community’ and ‘religious community’ in Kerala. It is primarily ‘confined’ to the geographical boundaries of Kerala, though I am aware that this ‘community’ is not confined to any geographical boundaries, as the ‘creators and consumers’ of Malayalam cinema could be anywhere in the world. The scope of this study is again limited to the ‘creators and consumers of Malayalam cinema’ related to ‘political cinema’ in some way and to the process of redefining the ‘politics of Malayalam cinema’ in the primary site (‘inside Kerala’) as well as the secondary site (‘outside Kerala). In this regard, to study ‘all streams’ of Malayalam cinema was beyond the scope of this study and so we used a ‘purposive’ sampling. Sampling the cross section of ‘Malayalam cinema community’ within Kerala and anchoring the field work from three points—Thiruvananthapuram, Thrissur and Kozhikode—were rather easy. I have lived and worked (as Video Editor at Chitranjali) in Thiruvananthapuram and still maintain regular contact with activities connected to film, media, cultural politics etc there. Thrissur is my hometown, where I have my permanent residence and office (Media Training Institute). Common friends helped me contact participants in Kozhikode and also those whom I interviewed online.

The very first interview was done in May 2009 and the last was done in October 2010. Three interview sessions were conducted as ‘conversation/discussion’ involving two/three participants and the researcher. This was followed up with more intensive session with certain individual in those ‘conversation’ sessions because of the subsequent focusing of interview areas, which required some areas of investigation to be revisited. Initially, this had been conceived as a thirty year period study, 1970s-90s.
But later, the significance of the projection ‘beyond 1990s’ became important, and it was conceived as the ‘Third juncture/Context. C’; this emphasis evolved from the main thrust of the study, i.e., to look at the redefinition of politics of Malayalam cinema as an ‘ongoing process’ and not as something that started in the 1970s and ended in the 1990s. Eventually a few more participants than planned earlier were identified to represent the trajectory in this juncture, and interviews were conducted with them.

My identity as a ‘film person’ (Being a FTII alumni and a media activist, I already had contacts with most participants. This eased my way to the research participants. However my identity as a ‘priest’ (distinctly representing a particular religion) created some mental blocks for me in the context of the third sensitizing concept of this study, ‘positioning religion in cinema’, to the extent that I took extra caution to be ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’. My identity as Christian priest might have created mental blocks to some participants that prevented them from completely opening up, even though they did not express any reservations in answering any questions.

Even though the study presupposes ‘three distinct’ junctures, ‘the 1970s’, ‘the 1970s-90s’ and ‘the 1990s and beyond’, the same people who have lived through these periods can differentiate them as different periods only by certain changes in their own and others’ attitudes, common trends etc. The participants in these three contexts are thus not separated by drastic geographical or sociological distance, but by changes in political climate and attitudes. This typical ‘overlapping’ nature of data (into all three junctures) has influenced the data analysis process too, in that the analysis is done ‘as a whole’ and not ‘context by context’. It was easy for me to establish contact and communicate with the participants of the first two junctures as I share similar wave length and common experiences with them. But I had difficulty in connecting to the third group, the participants in the ‘1990s and beyond’ juncture, whose ‘idiom’ and pace are apparently different from mine, so I relied more on the Interview schedule than a loose frame. Most of the participants from Context A and B are well known figures in Kerala cultural politics and their opinions carry weight only when attached to their names. So it does not make sense if I hide the identities of the participants.
Regarding the ethical dimensions, I mentioned to all participants in all the three contexts that with their presumed permission I would use the data as per the requirements of the research. I have not taken any formal consent in writing.

I did 22 interviews with the participants from Context A (1970s), out of which 14 were used for analysis. 23 interviews were done with the participants from Context B, out of which 14 were used for the final analysis. 10 interviews were conducted with the participants from Context C and 7 interviews were used in the final analysis. Most interviews were conducted in one full session.

2.5.5.2 The Process of Interview/Dialogue: I introduced my research to the participants as a study of ‘political cinema and politics of cinema’ and as the discussion on ‘politics’ progressed, ‘politics of religion and its positioning in Malayalam cinema’ was introduced as a sub topic. Some participants, who were not directly connected to filmmaking, expressed ‘lack of expertise’ in cinema, but then I clarified that my research was not restricted to the technology of filmmaking, but to the socio-political aspects of cinema. I used the Interview Guide (please see Annexure) only for the online interviews. For all other participants I used the guide only as a frame work for orchestrating the face-to-face dialogue/interview I had with them. As the conversation/discussion evolved, I had to improvise ways in order to encourage spontaneous responses from the participants, at the same time anchoring their answers along the major thrusts of the research questions.

The topics discussed and the experiences shared by the participants did not have any ‘confidential’ nature, though the way the interviews were structured prompted many participants to shape their responses in the form of ‘narratives’/life stories’ especially those references connected to the 1970s period. The question of signing an ‘informed consent’ did not become necessary and also I thought such formalities would have affected the spontaneity of the dialogue; moreover, all the participants were people known to me in some way or other. Most interviews worked out as ‘conversations’, where the participants felt free to present their observations, views and arguments from relatively subjective perspectives. This freedom in approaching the issues from different perspectives is what I tried out in the conversations and I think it has
succeeded to a great extent. This is the reason why we have not included any participants who represented any ‘official’ party version or ‘dogmatic’ versions of any religion/faith. We somehow got even those participants committed to certain political parties or organisations (CPM for example) to speak out their mind rather than speak on behalf of the party/organisation that they are linked to.

Most interviews were conducted in people’s homes or at ‘public joints’ like media institutes/film clubs where they were comfortable. Very rarely did I conduct interviews at anyone’s work place, where unexpected interruptions barred the interviews from evolving into spontaneous ‘dialogue’. I used a digital recorder to record the conversations and none of the participants expressed any discomfort with it. In all cases, the place and time of interviews were fixed through mutual agreement.

I used broad open-ended questions to introduce different interest areas of the study; interest areas were also spontaneously explored as the interview progressed. Nearly all interviews could gather responses connected to all major interest areas, with a few exceptions. As I went ahead completing a good number of interviews, some areas in the original plan received lesser emphasis; these areas were pushed to the background during analysis. One specific area of interest that had not been included in the original set of research questions but emerged into prominence during the process was the question of the ‘absent feminine’ in Malayalam film industry (in almost all aspects/departments) and also at the power centres of religions and spiritualities. As this was a trajectory that emerged half way through, it did not get sufficient attention in the initial set of interviews, especially in those with filmmakers and technicians who have been working in a ‘male only’ film industry with ‘male only’ ‘serious audiences’ for long.

2.5.6 Data Analysis

In this section I describe how the practice in the field intertwined with the process of data analysis. Instead of trying to fit in participant responses to the ‘conceptual frames’ that had evolved in the Objectives of the study and the Research questions, in the field I decided to record participants’ narratives with minimum interruptions and to
allow them emerge as ‘double/multiple voices’ in the final theoretical assumptions to be formulated at the stage of data analysis.

There occurred some shifts in the emphasis we had originally placed on the broad and subsidiary objectives of the study. An additional ‘post-Cold War (post-Marxian)’ context was incorporated into the Broad objective. Originally it was 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. The experience in the field convinced me that the 'Malayalam political cinema’ of the 1970s should be discussed in the Third World context rather than its broad ‘world cinema’ context, since the Kerala (party) politics and the cultural politics of the 1970s had shared a lot in common with the Third World politics and the (Marxian) aesthetics based on class struggle and total liberation. As a second layer of influence, we still studied the politics and aesthetics of Russian and East European cinemas as per the original design.

The fact that the Leftist Marxist political model, even after its collapse across the world, still holds its sway on the Kerala cultural politics and to a great extent on the ‘creators and consumers of Malayalam (political) cinema’ augments interest in the present study. The Leftist-Marxist political model in Kerala did face challenges around 1990s, and they came from the post-modern and post-structural philosophies and the ‘polycentric politics’ of the New Social Movements, based not on class struggle but predominantly on the ‘politics of identity’. There were resonances of the need for a ‘Third Way beyond Marx’ in the responses of some participants who already are involved in ‘post-Marxian’ experiments in aesthetics, political/cultural activism etc.

A specific area of interest of this study, included in the original design as a subsidiary objective, was to look at the possible ‘sacred-secular’ negotiations happening in the Kerala cultural politics, using cinema as the site of reference. The yearnings and concerns expressed by many participants for a ‘Third Way’ reinforced the relevance of that subsidiary objective, and in the process its significance increased. Many of these participants who tried to elaborate on the ‘Third Way’ come from a strong leftist-
Marxist (CPM) or Marxist Leninist (Naxalite) background. The shifts occurred in their political positions and the broadening of their politics are what this study took for closer analysis as 'specimens' of the process of 'redefinition of politics' happening in Kerala cultural politics around and after the 1990s. The concept of a Third Way or ways critiques the earlier 'class-based' political model on the basis of what other categories it included and excluded and the implications and impact of those inclusions/exclusions.

The binary positioning in the orthodox Marxian model, of separating the 'material' and 'spiritual' (secular-spiritual), is critiqued in the discussion of the 'politics of religion'. What was perceived as 'iconoclasm' (as an outcome of the revolutionary political spirit of the 1970s) in the earlier stages of the study was revisited during the field work and an attempt was made to look at the question of religions from broad perspectives, in contrast to the binary oppositional concepts. The material gathered from the field—participant responses, the film texts and discourses-- prompted me to approach the question of 'religious fundamentalism in Malayalam cinema' (the second subsidiary objective) with more caution. Data showed justification for interrogating the 'religious/cultural revivalist' tendencies than 'fundamentalist/religious nationalist' trends. The latter trends may be prevalent in the Kerala society in general in the post-Babri Masjid period (many participants shared that concern), but this study did not point to any planned agenda of religious fundamentalism and/or nationalism operating in and through cinema.

Rather than fundamentalist trends or formations, what is happening in Kerala society and in cultural politics in particular in the 1990s, is a shift from inclusiveness to 'ghetto'/ 'club' mentality, which many participants consider as a complex phenomenon involving caste-community hierarchies and interest groups and their political and economic equations. Unfortunately we do not see significant opposition to this trend towards 'exclusion' in contrast to the 'open, secular' spaces and meeting points that were the hall marks of Kerala society in the 1960s-80s. A major argument that evolves in this study reinstates alternative, subaltern and secular spiritualities (as diverse, multiple voices) as 'meeting points' in the place of divisive religions and
attempts to locate traces of such yearnings in Malayalam cinema. To study the
growing exclusive tendencies in the Kerala society in the name of caste and
community should be part of another elaborate study as this study cannot exhaustively
address such complex socio-political issues and do justice to it. Some positive signs of
hope that came up in the participants-researcher discussions are the resistance
movements emerging from the margins, initiated by women, Dalits and other marginalised. Why many such groups and their diverse identities and voices were
excluded or suppressed in Malayalam cinema is the most important question that came
up in the critical conversations; the question of the `absent feminine, Dalit and the
subaltern’ in the so called ‘serious cinema’ of the 1970s was raised by many participants.

Three major trajectories crystallised through the interviews were retained for the final
analysis: the `absent feminine’ trajectory that evolved as a critique of the 1970s political cinema, the `revolt and revival’ trajectory in order to address the positioning
of religion in cinema and the `secular-spiritual’ trajectory as a possible answer in the
search for ‘Third Ways’ in politics and religion. The ‘absent feminine’ trajectory helped to look at the influence of the conventional and radical (Naxalite) Left political
movements of the 1970s on all art forms including cinema and to critique what was
missing or being sidelined. This trajectory also influenced the choice of Amma Ariyan
(Dir. John Abraham) and Susanna (Dir. T.V. Chandran) as the key texts for analysis
related to the ‘redefinition of politics’ in the Kerala cultural political scenario. Nirmalyam and Paithrukam had been chosen in the early stages of the research as the
key texts for the analysis of ‘positioning of religion’ in Malayalam cinema; but four
other texts were proposed as supportive to the main argument of ‘revolt and revival’
and also to examine the traces, if any, of religious fundamentalism or nationalism.

Initially we had thought of focusing on the films of T.V. Chandran as a case study of
the shift from ‘political cinema to politics of cinema’. But the politics of religion in
cinema and the meeting of cinema and spiritualities (as many alternative voices) in
contrast to the unitary, ‘secular’ (read ‘material) politics of the 1970s’ cinema got
prominence in the process of research. Accordingly two films Maargam (Dir. Rajiv
Vijayaraghvan) and *Esthappan* (Dir. G. Aravindan) were chosen as the key texts to discuss the `secular-spiritual` trajectory in cinema. Initially Chandran had been seen as a `bridge` between the `political` cinema of the 1970s and of the 1990s and beyond; but the research process with its specific concerns and objectives revealed Aravindan as one possible bridge between all the three trajectories of this study and the films of Aravindan and his political and spiritual visions were given a prominent place in the last chapter, where we more or less sum up the views and arguments of this study.

In terms of practically managing the data, though I had planned to use data analysis software I dropped that plan. When I started working with the data it became clear to me that my data analysis and thesis formulation was going to be more of an organic process than a mechanical analytical strategy. After translating and transcribing all the data myself (which helped me familiarise and `own up’ the data), I followed the coding system of the grounded theory method (though not in its entirety) to help me identify and formulate categories or patterns.

The analysis started with a single unit (interview with Sunny Joseph), where I did line by line coding, attaching labels to the concepts identified from the data, what in grounded theory is called `open coding`. As further cases were considered, I arranged the categories or labels on a common grid in view of comparison. Though I had planned one grid each to each context/Juncture (like `1970s’), soon I decided to merge all three contexts on a common grid of comparison and marked concepts and categories emerged from each context with different colour codes. This study is predominantly diachronic, spread across a time period of 30-40 years. One of the guiding questions for comparing the patterns from the three different contexts was “what ideas are similar and dissimilar across these extracts?”. As interview areas became more focused, or when relations between categories emergent, participants whose interviews were done in the beginning were revisited I order to probe deeper. The manner in which the categories developed and the way they are linked in formulating the main arguments of this study is outlined in the following four chapters.