CHAPTER 6
READING LEGENDS THROUGH FILM: A REREADING OF
THREE FILM ADAPTATIONS

Legend into Film: a reading of the legend of *Perunthachan* in Kottarathil Sankunni’s *Aithihyamala* through the adaptation/screenplay of M. T. Vasudevan Nair from the Malayalam film *Perunthachan* directed by Ajayan.

Legends are part of any folk culture. The foremost among the recorded legends in Malayalam literature is Kottarathil Sankunni’s *Aithihyamala* (1909-1934) in 7 volumes with 126 legends related to history, religion and the supernatural. Sankunni records the legend of *Perunthachan* (master craftsman), already popular in the oral tradition/folklore under the title *Parayi pettu Panthirukulam* (twelve kulams/clans born of a paraya woman) in his mammoth compilation of legends.

The legend of *Perunthachan*

The story of Perunthachan has to be traced back to the story of Vararuchi (mentioned in the legend of *Parayi pettu Panthirukulam*) in order to foreground it in a social and historical background. Vararuchi, a brahmin scholar in the Vikramaditya court (circa 4th century AD) was fated to marry a woman from a lower caste, after which Vararuchi set off on a pilgrimage with his wife in the course of which she gave birth to 12 children. Vararuchi ordered the abandonment of all the children saying that, “if god has given them a mouth, they will be fed” (Sankunni, 46). All of them lived in different places in Kerala and is believed to have given rise to the various castes and
tribes in Kerala from brahmin down to the lowest rung in the caste hierarchy. In course of time they came to realize that they are siblings. Their divinity and powers came to be known throughout the land. Since Perunthachan was taken up by parents who belonged to the carpenter caste, he mastered the art and science of carpentry and architecture. He read the sacred texts and mastered the ancient intellectual tradition. He was commissioned for many a great architectural project to build temples and palaces. In course of time he became known as a reincarnation of the chief architect of the gods.

It is believed that there never was an expert carpenter/craftsman in the entire land of Kerala like Uliyanoor Perunthachan. He is famed to have made a pond which initially sparked of a dispute when some people asked for a circular one, others for a square, while a third group clamoured for a linear one. He ended the controversy by making one which by the power of optical illusion pleased all. Perunthachan had a son who also had divine powers.

Once Perunthachan made a bridge and to amuse people fixed a puppet on one end. It was devised to dive into the river when someone stepped onto the other end of the bridge and start rising up as the person walks towards the other end and spit water on the person once he/she is near. This led to a lot of mirth among the onlookers till Perunthachan’s son fixed another puppet, a “smarter one” at the opposite end of the bridge which slapped the father’s puppet across the face just when it is about to spit. The father could not tolerate the son’s insolence. By then people had started talking about the son’s skills. They began to say that the son excels the father in workmanship. The father slowly grew jealous of the son’s skills and fearing threat to
his fame decides to do away with the son. One day while at the construction of a
temple he dropped the chisel from the ceiling aiming at the son who unaware of this
was busy at work. Perunthachan’s aim which was never off the mark severed the
son’s neck killing him at once. This is how the legend goes (Sankunni 69-71).

M. T.’s adaptation of the legend of Perunthachan

M. T. Vasudevan Nair (popularly known as M. T.) threads these episodes from the
original legend as narrated by Kottarathil Sankunni (already popular in folklore) into a
screenplay (brilliantly directed by Ajayan) which is a period film but given a
contemporaneous treatment. From a mere father-son feud he raises it to subtly
question the caste hierarchy. New characters are brought in/created making the plot
dynamic. He brings psychological dimensions to the theme thus transforming an
ordinary tale into a unique cinematic experience. As a director and scriptwriter for
several good films, M. T. remains a strong presence of the middle path cinema of
Malayalam.

M. T. says that in cinema’s history, the scriptwriter has only had the third position
after the director and the producer. But over the time, the writer has wrested a place of
importance. In the beginning the screenplay only had the importance of notes which
merely guided the making of the movie. But with the growth of cinema, the
screenplay has also grown and become an indispensable factor. Adaptations require
exquisite craftsmanship to change the written medium to a cinematic experience. It is
the responsibility of the scriptwriter to place the story within the framework of the
cinema with all its limitations and possibilities. In the process there have been serious
departures from the original versions. M. T. himself mentions (Nair, *MTyute Thirakathakal* 9) Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood*, with its daring departure from the original Shakespearean story, *Macbeth*.

M. T.’s adaptation of *Perunthachan* is not totally a deconstructive representation. M. T. interestingly works within the existing framework of the story/legend and attempts to read through the gaps in the original legend. In the process M. T. leaves more gaps for the viewer to participate in the cinematic debate.

According to M. T. (Nair, *MTyute Thirakathakal* 10), scriptwriters should give their own dimensions to the character. If the story is not one’s own, then the screenplay writer should plumb the depth and feel the spirit of the theme he is dealing with and make it his own. He should be able to transform flat characters into round ones going by E. M. Forster’s (Forster 69) distinction. A bond with the director is essential to the film. He should let silences speak in the movie and leave gaps for the viewer. M. T.’s entry into the field of cinema helped Malayalam cinema to escape from the clutches of the forms used for stage dramas and find its own language as an independent media.

M. T.’s *Perunthachan* is a postmodernist retelling of an ancient tale. Postmodernism in cinema paved the way for a film culture that was a rejection of high modernist austerity and elitism. Writers interested in the popular cinema have been less interested in explicit representation of postmodernity than they have been in the metaphorical representation of its socio-political, psychological and intellectual manifestations (Peterson 147). M. T.’s adaptation of *Perunthachan* falls into the
category of "mainstream"/popular Malayalam cinema, a genre which was seen as
distinct from the parallel/"art" movies even in the early nineties during the making of
_Perunthachan_. It was cinema practitioners like M. T. who made an attempt to break
the slots by creating popular narratives on screen. Legends and myths have earlier
been treated in Malayalam cinema (_Guruvayoorappa_ and _Thacholi Othenan_ for
instance) but not with the dimension that M. T. gives it. Even in the treatment of the
heroes of vadakkan songs (which sings the paeans of the warrior class), M. T. departs
from the usual storytelling and makes the villain/antagonist the protagonist/hero of the
piece with ample justification in the film _Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha_. M. T.'s skill in
weaving tales from the ancient world into powerful and contemporaneous scripts is a
model that can be emulated by the present day Malayalam cinema which suffers the
ignominy of sloppy stories and contrived plots.

The adaptation of a novel to film rests on the absurd assumption that there exists a
content which can be transferred or transformed, from one form of expression into
another. A change of form therefore results in content. In short, in adaptations, you do
not express the same thing differently but you express a different thing (Roberge 60).
M. T. follows a similar pattern – a postmodernist rewriting/retelling in _Perunthachan_
and true to his style, leaves gaps for the audience to read new meanings into the age
old tale.

We do not know the exact period in which Perunthachan lived and it is also difficult
to calculate the period of Vararuchi. We can only assume that Perunthachan was a
brilliant and well known sculptor carpenter who lived in an age which cannot be
specified. The carpenters of those days were scholars and adept in the art of temple
building, sculpture and astrology. Perunthachan’s story is told in two pages in the Aithihyamala, as part of the story of the twelve offsprings of Vararuchi with a paraya woman. Perunthachan is also mentioned in the legend of the Chenganoor temple. In Aithihyamala the story of Perunthachan closes with Perunthachan throwing the chisel at his son and killing him because he was jealous of the skills displayed by the boy.

The Perunthachan in Aithihyamala was a rajashilpi, a master sculptor adept in making temples and palatial houses for the rich. The Aithihyamala also mentions how Perunthachan began to build a temple and how his son predicted that the nearby river would change its course. This is regarded as one of the main events/reasons for Perunthachan’s jealousy towards his son. G. Shankara Kurup, the renowned Malayalam poet has written a poem about Perunthachan’s penitence in a famous poem. In the poem Perunthachan is heard lamenting “It was unawares, unawares that the chisel slipped down...” and these words sound like a sorrowful attempt to convince his guilty mind in his last days that it as an accidental happening. Vailopilli, another celebrated poet says the father is not guilty; he has been simply misunderstood (Nair, The Master Craftsman Afterword).

Perunthachan’s story is a legend, a folk tale that does not lose its power to captivate when handed down through generations. Although Perunthachan was a native of Uliyannoor according to the legend, M. T. mentions (Nair, The Master Craftsman Afterword) that there are many stories about him in M. T.’s village. There is a story about how he erected a slab of stone to screen a flame against the wind in a place near Thirunavaya. The temple of Varahamoorthy in M. T.’s village is believed to be the unfinished Panniyoor temple of Perunthachan. An old carpenter, it is believed had come to a spot where the temple was being built during lunchtime. He was
Perunthachan in the form of a wayfarer. The workers gave him a meal and the happy Perunthachan blessed the carpenters saying that they will never be out of work and hence the temple work is always going on, with the temple remaining unfinished. M. T. discovered that besides being the story of a human being, it had great strength, beauty and relevance as well. M. T. says (Nair, *The Master Craftsman* Afterword) that the sons’ affair which he has mentioned is not a “colourful diversion”. He says that it was a story that used to be told in his village. Maybe the son had grown to a stature when he felt that he could defy the caste barriers which his father so dearly upheld. M. T. believes that Perunthachan could not have killed his son merely because of a professional rivalry because even if he envied him Perunthachan would have realized that he, indeed, was their livelihood. In this regard, the challenge against the blind orthodoxy that his father adhered to could have posed as a bigger challenge for Perunthachan. M. T. is believed to have studied various manuscripts and *granthams* (books) which are a treasure house of knowledge about architecture, sculpting idols and *vriksha puja* (worship performed before felling the trees).

**Form, style and ideology in MT’s *Perunthachan* - a reading of the narrative through the film adaptation**

M. T. brings the Raman thachan (Perunthachan as he is referred to in the movie) out of the legend and presents him in a feudal Kerala context (a society prevalent in the pre-independence period). An attempt has been made to recreate an ancient Kerala society, feudal in character and sans all symbols of modernity – electricity and even modern means of transport. There are *illum* (Nambuthiri houses) temples and *palaks* (palanquins), symbols of the opulent upper caste life. The life of the lower castes like
the thachan’s are glossed over and the thachan is presented as a wayward nomad with seemingly no family ties and no material possessions. This contrast is accentuated with the light and shade technique in the film, alternating scenes in darkness with scenes in light. An obvious attempt at universalizing the Brahmanical tradition can be seen through the movie. Perunthachan utters Sanskrit slokas and his scholarship in astrology and craftsmanship is attributed to his study of the ezhuthollas (palmleaf writings). There are references to him having studied Sanskrit with the thamburan. Later in the movie the thamburan volunteers to teach Sanskrit to Kannan, Perunthachan’s son. Perunthachan is also seen wearing the poonool (sacred thread) while at work, a privilege accorded to him by the brahmin overlords. K. M. Panikkar (113) says that the Brahmanical – textual view of tradition overlooked the existence of multiple traditions even among the followers of Hinduism. A majority of the Hindus were outside “the great tradition” which in essence was the ideology of upper caste domination.

The class distinction is seen in the costume - kuduma (long hair tied into a bun) hairstyle of the upper caste male, the bedecked nambuthiri (upper caste/Brahmanical) women or the topless torso of the “adiyan”, the subservient lower caste male. M. T.’s setting seems to lack historical validity. He does not give us an authentic picture of the Brahmanical/nambuthiri (upper caste) hegemony in the social framework of the period. With royalty losing its stronghold and villages around temples becoming self-sufficient units under the patronage of the brahmin overlords who were also the priestly class, the nambuthiri class was prominent in the feudal structure. Historians have described the caste hegemony in Kerala society (Gopalakrishnan 294-295) as a worse form of oppression than the ‘apartheid’. Historical evidences speak of the
costumes of the time which are different from those seen in the film. The namboothiri men and women of the time wore no upper garment (Edamaruku 118). Unlike Sankunni’s legend where there is no mention of a specific place or region, M. T. in an attempt to gain an authenticity to the story, has imagined a community and a locale. Places and names of temples in northern Kerala are referred to in the film.

M. T.’s is a leisurely Brahmanical society whose only interest seems to be in constructing temples and safeguarding their feudal interests. The serious political overtones of the day are absent. The only mention is a court constituted by the namboothiris for the inquisition of the younger Thamburatti (played by Monisha Unni) for her alleged affair with Thachan’s son (played by Prashant). But no inquisition happens. They are entertained with food and end up delighting themselves in vediparayal (gossip).

In actual society, it was a powerful court symbolic of the Brahmanical hegemony, excommunicating many a namboothiri woman who had dared to fall for a male from the lower class or who defied tradition. The government report of the Malabar Marriage Commission published in 1894 talks about the customs connected with Hindu marriages in Malabar (in Fawcett 225). The custom which permits the man to cohabit with a woman lower in the social scale than him prohibits the woman from exercising the same liberty. This is called the rule of anulomam and pratilomam. According to this, a nair woman, consorting with a man of a lower division (clan) or caste, is guilty of pratilomam, and if the difference of caste were admittedly great, she would be turned out of her family to prevent the whole family being boycotted. Menon (Cultural Heritage of Kerala 210) mentions a famous instance of trial by fire.
as the *kaimukku* (dipping the hand) in boiling ghee in the Suchindram Temple intended for namboothiri women who were found guilty of sexual offences. But in the film there is a mockery of the court where they are shown as an indulgent group of nambuthiris interested in food and revelry, a stereotypical representation of the Brahmanical class. This is also in marked contrast with the life of the Thachan and his son who are always seen working. The sound of chopping and chiselling in the background which almost becomes a dominant background score is significant in emphasizing this contrast.

There is a slight dialectal variation in the Malayalam spoken by the feudal class and the lower class. But there is a doubt about the authenticity of this in the film. The Thachan and son speak in the standard dialect of Malayalam which is a glaring flaw as far as authenticity is considered while the nambuthiri dialect (feudal class) is not typical either. Perhaps it was made contemporaneous for its popular appreciation.

The intonation of the thamburan is interestingly one of helplessness. So is the comical tone of Neelakandan Nambuthiri in contrast with the defiant tone of Kannan, the Thachan’s son. M. T. in his characteristic style, presents a crumbling feudal society or one in transition in an attempt to justify the excesses of the feudal class with representatives like the helpless thamburan (Mampetta Thamburan), shown as a nincompoop/weakling in the *marummakathayam* (matrilineal system) or the comical, eccentric thamburan (Neelakandan) falling for the charms of Kunjikavu Thamburatti and even deciding to dismiss the court of inquisition that he had summoned to judge the Thamburatti’s sexual offence.
Politics in the telling of a tale: caste/sexual politics

In the film *Perunthachan*, one finds a two-fold struggle between orthodoxy and the new wave. One is within the framework of the family/the personal which on a superficial level can be termed as a “generation gap”. The older generation as represented by the Thachan (played by Thilakan) and the Thamburan (played by Nedumudi Venu) are seen admitting to the changing times after battles in their home front with their children. The defiant Thamburatti refuses to accept a conventional marriage and wants time to decide, meanwhile engaging in literary and creative pursuits and secretly loving the Thachan’s son. In a conversation with her father on the question of marriage she argues:

*Ksunhikkavu: (in a mocking tone) And do the namboodiris who establish sambandham relationships usually accompany their partners as travelling companions? Once they've tied the thali (sacred thread tied by the groom during marriage) around a woman's neck, they have to wait on the front verandah for the sasi to come and summon them, lamp in hand! That's the only duty they have, isn't it? (138).*

*Kunhikkavu: Generally, all that thamburattis are destined to, is to carry babies in their wombs and produce heirs. Generally (pauses) of course, that too is necessary. But after some time (138).*

After the “puppet episode”, where the Thachan’s son makes a puppet which literally slaps the father’s puppet, people start saying that fathers have to start learning lessons
from the children. This brings into focus the divide not just between generations but ideologies. Though the story is ancient, the treatment is contemporaneous. The story from the legend is enlivened with new characters borne out of M. T.’s creativity. The young Thamburan, Neelakandan (played by Manoj K Jayan) standing against orthodoxy can only be seen in the light of the new wave of thoughts/ideological shift. However, he is not consistent and his liberalism is seen only as a patron of arts by opting for the younger and unconventional Kannan as the architect while appearing selfish and conservative by calling for a trial by the caste votaries in the matter of deciding the Thamburatti’s chastity. The Thamburatti, Kunjikavu of the second generation, is a strong character emboldened by the matriarchal system, with more rebellious and nonconformist views than the senior Thamburatti (played by Vinaya Prasad). So is Perunthachan’s son, Kannan, defying the caste hierarchy and all the limitations imposed on him by a repressive Brahmanical/upper caste society. The implications of caste are not presented with its true impact. It is a more romanticized version. It seems that a mere defiance can cut across the caste hierarchy. In a scene when the Thachan’s son (Kannan) crosses the boat in which the younger Thamburatti was cruising past, the defiance of the boy makes them think that he is an eligible nambuthiri youth. Kuhikkavu, the younger Thamburatti defends the youth by saying:

*Kuhikkavu: (smiles as she walks on) he’s a thamburan too, in his own profession. Didn’t you see the astounding skill evident in everything he’s done? (114)*

But the defiance is not translated into a movement or a subaltern voice against the oppressive caste system. Perunthachan conforms to the social order and silences the
son’s defiant “voice”. The other and more significant struggle is seen in the social scenario/the political.

Here is where the contemporaneous “secularist” angle comes in. The Thamburan (landlord/feudal lord) and the Thachan are shown as childhood friends enjoying old jokes and pranks seemingly breaking the caste hierarchy. It seems to be breaking even with the Thamburatti (the wife of the Thamburan) with a sexual dimension given to it, by bringing in her infatuation for the Thachan. Ironically enough, the Thachan too falls into the pattern of accepting the feudal hierarchy. So does the Thamburan where they suddenly forget their friendship and become the master and the slave. There is an episode where the Thachan who in his over enthusiasm rushes to give the finishing touches to the devi idol taken for the installation puja. He is stopped by the Thamburan saying that the idol should not be polluted by the Thachan who belongs to the lower caste. The Thachan is left to comment that “once the stone becomes the devi then the maker/craftsman is kept at a distance with a measure of untouchability.”

Perunthachan: (to a carpenter who comes that way) The stone has become a devi.
Now if the carpenter does not keep his distance, it will get polluted. (63)
Perunthachan: Thamburan, once stone and wood become gods and goddesses, the carpenter’s touch cannot pollute them. (79)

However the Thachan does not defy the system. The caste politics is even reflected in the movements and body language. He even suppresses his sexual feelings towards the Thamburatti who is in fact his model for his devi idol. The controlled movements of the Thachan shows his poise and in the longing yet furtive gaze of the Thamburatti.
watching the Thachan at work we find the Thamburatti’s suppression of her instinctual feelings. The long shots show the distance between them, a distance that is symbolic of their aborted intimacy. To put an end to the rumours about his illicit relationship with the Thamburatti which even unnerves his friend, the Thamburan, Perunthachan burns his hand before the Thamburan to prove his innocence. Even the Thamburatti says about the Thachan that he follows rules religiously so he will never go wrong. M. T.’s Thachan upholds the rules/conventions, be it in the matter of making idols, with the intricacies down to the radius and diameter of the features of the idols, to the caste restrictions imposed by the feudal system. He accepts the impositions of the system which at times even delimits his creativity.

However, the pent-up frustration and resentment is sometimes expressed though in a controlled manner, for instance, when the Thachan says to himself that “the Thachan becomes an untouchable once the stone becomes a devi”. The cynical/ironic comment is heard again when the Thachan confesses to the Thamburan about his innocence when he is asked about his alleged affair with the Thamburatti. The Thachan is aware of his social status and the dialogue is self-revelatory. But the son is defiant and this is echoed in his talk. He even questions his father’s divinity saying that “When the panans and pariahs (lower castes) exhibit their skill, the brahmin/feudal lords sceptical of their birth hasten to validate this by attributing it to a divine/Brahmanical origin” thus spelling out a social commentary.

Kannan: Someone asked me a very serious doubt. The same thing they asked before, whether you are the son of some divine brahmin, Achan? (120)

Perunthachan: (calmly, with a hint of amusement) Oh...and what did you say? (120)
Kannan: What I said was...with a gentle smile) I answered with a question. Wasn’t this story deliberately fabricated so that a brahmin could lay claim to the fame and prestige an ordinary carpenter had achieved? (121)

Kannan: (while working) What I think is, when the paraya and panan did well for themselves, people were suspicious. They voiced a doubt. Is not the seed a brahmin’s? (121)

The Thamburatti of the younger generation says about the Thachan’s son that “he is a thamburan in his craft” subtly hitting at the caste hierarchy. M. T.’s dialogues are powerful yet subtle, especially in episodes like the earlier mentioned one where the characters are hitting against the social system.

M. T.’s female lead characters in the screenplay/film are strong and this has more to do with the matriarchal system in existence. Even then it is daring for the younger Thamburatti, Kunjikavu to declare before her father, the thamburan that the job of thamburatti is not just to bear kids and be enslaved within the walls of the illam (nambuthiri house). She bears no caste distinction. According to her the Thachan’s son Kannan is a thamburan (feudal lord) in his job. The senior Thamburatti, the mother, is not able to reconcile to her husband the Thamburan who is a “weakling” but at the same time is not daring enough to express her sexual feelings towards Perunthachan. It is interesting that whenever the Thachan is seen working frenzily on his devi idol, those shots are interspersed with shots of the Thamburatti with a forlorn look (as if yearning for the Thachan) in her bedroom. The background score is subtle and unobtrusive, an exception being the scene where the senior Thamburatti is seen playing the veena and Perunthachan working on his devi idol synchronizing with it.
and creating "music" out of the rocks. There is an underplay of music. There is the
pervading presence of silence. But music (the drum beat for instance) heightens the
emotional intensity of scenes like the last scene where the Thachan kills his son by
dropping the chisel on him. The other instruments used in the film are veena, flute and
drums in the classical style. There are no songs and dance sequences like in the
mainstream Malayalam movie. However, one cannot ignore the absence of folk music
altogether, folk being a powerful expression of the lower castes.

The daughter, Kunjikavu Thamburatti is seen as a sexually liberated woman. She is
not willing to accept Neelakandan chosen by the elders as her proposed husband. The
Thamburatti is bold enough to pose for the son Thachan, recreating a devi idol in
stone, in his workplace but they are seen by the Perunthachan in a passionate moment.
In the dim light of the workplace, the Thamburatti embracing the Thachan's son
suddenly sees through the chink in the wall, the staring eyes of Perunthachan. The
camera through a close up shot captures this and the scene is suddenly viewed through
the Thachan's point of view. An instinctual feeling between the genders suddenly
acquires a caste perspective. The father asks the son to leave the place and forget the
Thamburatti. It is an emotionally charged scene, boldly enhanced by the play of light
and shade, showing the power relations. The father strikes the defiant son. But he
daringly says that if the Thamburatti is excommunicated then she would always have
a place in the humble house of a Thachan.

The father and son start walking but the son walks ahead. The camera zooms in on the
father and son cutting through the pervading darkness, and in the available night light
the audience is able to gauge the tension between the father and the son through their
facial expressions. But while the Thachan is quick to deny any involvement with the
senior Thamburatti, even proving his innocence by burning his palm by the fire of the
lamp, the Thachan’s son affirms his love for the younger Thamburatti. Here we find
the clash, not a personal/familial one, but one that has a larger social dimension. It is
only the younger generation, the Thamburatti Kunjikavu and the Thachan’s son
Kannan, who are able to defy the rigours imposed by a caste ridden society. The
Thachan’s son comes across as a striking character, one who is vocal against the
system, the hierarchy of caste. He does not regard it a blasphemy to defy the sastras
saying it is made for one’s convenience. The son who is equally skilful and gifted has
no aura of divinity like the father. The father believes that when you defy conventions
one becomes just a carpenter, not divine. The son even questions the father’s
“divinity” by saying that it is just an attempt to validate the Brahmanical hierarchy
that they claim a divine origin for the craftsmen of the lower castes who come up by
their own effort. The father basks in the feudal patronage. The father is content to be
known as the one who created music in the rocks even at the cost of his “subaltern”
status. The soft lighting used blurs the contours and textures and brings in a gentle
contrast, between light and shade. This technique brings into focus the power relations
between the Thachan and the Thamburan and even the feud between the father and
the son.

The Thachan is certainly the most dominant character and this is seen in the way he
has been placed within the frame. From the first scene where he is seen stepping out
of the river after his ablutions till the end where he is engulfed in flames (when he
kills himself) he maintains his poise. The camera is able to capture it well with shots
which are low angle and close ups and taken in natural light. His skill/craftsmanship
is emphasized in the living and workplace. The Thachan at work is always shown at a height, working on the spire of the temple. In such frames, the low angle shots are used which psychologically heighten the importance of the subject. No one is able to read the thachan’s feelings. It is camouflaged by his rough exterior. He believes in seeking permission from the trees before felling them. The setting of rocks, stones and wood around him become a metaphor for an entrapment. The Thachan’s personal life is unveiled through his brother-in law who comes to inform him about the Thachan’s son who is left in his custody after the death of the Thachan’s wife. There is one instance where the Thachan talks about the loss of his wife as “the fall of the chisel cutting through his chest”. The metaphor he uses, is again one from his trade and there is also an echo of the impending killing of his son.

In his first meeting with his son he fails to recognize him. But he quickly makes an impromptu toy to amuse the child, a subtle expression of his tender feelings. In such instances, the non verbal expressions reveal more about characters than words can. His subtleties come through only in stray instances, for instance, when he explains to the Thamburatti the gender difference in rocks from the sounds produced when hitting on it. He describes the feel of the rock surface as “the gentle heat of the belly of beautiful women”. Even his sexual advances are subtle as if struggling to keep within societal norms.

The Thachan’s humour and prank is brought out in the episodes where he is seen teasing one of the nambuthiris by scaring him about an impending danger that might befall him. Even in the episode where he drops the chisel to kill his son the Thachan is nonchalant. The camera zooms in to capture the younger Thamburatti’s eyes full of
rage, like the devi’s/samhara durga’s (the goddess of destruction) made by the Thachan and this haunts the Thachan later. The devi motif recurs in the film: the repetition, variation and development unifying the film. It is interesting that Perunthachan who is an expert in making devi idols is tormented by a devi in human form. This intensifies the intervention of some kind of “divine vengeance” in the death of Perunthachan. The Thamburatti shown as a devi, an annihilator of evil, heading for the Thachan is actually an external manifestation of the fear and guilt which was tormenting the Thachan’s soul. It is also accentuated by the crowd scene where the mob heads for the Thachan’s house. Instead of facing the angry public, the Thachan kills himself. This last scene with the background sound – the noise and angry abuses of the crowd and the flames that engulf the Thachan is a fitting dramatic climax to the movie.

Legend into film: A reading of the legend of Chandu Chekkavar in Vadakkan Pattukal (folklore) through M. T. Vasudevan Nair’s screenplay adaptation of the legend for the Malayalam film Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha directed by Hariharan

The legend of Chandu Chekkavar

The film Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha (A Northern Ballad of Valor) is based on a legend about Chekavars, the famous warriors of Northern Kerala. Vadakkan Pattukal are popular songs in the oral tradition. It is a collection of Malayalam ballads of medieval origin. The oldest compositions that are traced belong to the period around the 16th century but their idiom and vocabulary seems older. These northern ballads exemplify the heights of folk-poetry. Almost all these ballads show strong
connections with kalaripayattu (traditional form of martial arts), although some of them are sometimes associated with deities. The Malayalam used is devoid of Tamil and Sanskrit and so it is probably closest to the spoken idiom. This speaks for the populist nature of the ballads as contrasted with the Brahmanical Sanskrit texts. The Vadakkan pattukal sing praises of heroes like Aromal Chekavar, Thacholi Othenan, Kannappa Chekavar, Aromalunni and heroines like Unniarcha. The society and the state apparatus in Kerala during the medieval period seem to have patronised hero worship.

Based on the singer’s intuition, interpolations in the form of additions and deductions have been made while transmitting these songs from generation to generation. For instance, the thacholi songs in William Logan’s Malabar Manual and the Thacholi Othenan Ponniyam Padakku Pokunna Pattu (the song of Thacholi Othenan setting out for Ponniyam battle) popular in folklore are different, although the basic plot remains the same: how the legendary hero Othenan fights a duel with Mathiloor Gurukkal and how he is shot dead when he goes back to Padanilam to retrieve his lost weapon. Although Logan’s account begins with Othenan’s challenge after Gurukkal sits under the peepal tree, the later versions talks about Othenan having already decided to humiliate Gurukkal even at the sight of his coming, more so because Gurukkal belonged to a lower caste (Nair, Oru Vadakkan, Int).

Aromal Chekavar is a legendary hero praised in the Vadakkan Pattukal (northern ballads). It is believed that this warrior lived in the 16th century. A well-known warrior and trained in the martial arts of kalari, he belonged to the famous Puthooran Veedu (house), a chekavar family of Malabar in northern Kerala. He is the brother of
another legendary warrior figure of the same ballads, Unniarcha. His legend lives in 
the songs and chronicles that have been written about him.

According to the legend, he lost his life after a duel in which his sword broke off at 
the hilt during the fight. It is believed that the metal rivets holding the blade to the hilt 
had been replaced with wooden ones by Chandu, his trusted ally and cousin. Chandu 
has been portrayed as Chadiyan Chandu (betrayer Chandu) in the ballad. Chandu is 
said to have betrayed his cousin because he was jealous of Aaromal's popularity and 
abilities. This episode has been hugely popularised in Kerala folklore through the 
Vadakkan Pattukal (ballads). Although the legend of Chandu does not find mention in 
Aithihyamala directly, there is a passing mention in some of the legends related to the 
chekavars (especially Vadakkan Aithihyamala).

Unniyarcha is a popular lady in Kerala folklore. Her beauty and valour is praised in 
the Vadakkan Pattukal, the old ballads of north Malabar. Her name has become an 
epitome of beauty and empowerment. According to the folklore, Attum Manammel 
Unniyarcha is from the famous Puthooram Veedu, a chekavar (thiyya) family of 
Malabar. She is the sister of Aromal Chekavar and Unnikannan, another famous 
warrior. She is trained in the arts of kalari, and is an expert at wielding the Urumi, a 
waistbelt-like weapon used in kalaripayattu. It is mentioned that she saved the women 
of her village from being forcibly kidnapped by the rival community.

Born in the wealthy and valiant family of Puthooram Chekavars, she had undergone 
all the ceremonies like ear-boring, at an early age. She also went through traditional
ceremonies like hair tying and talikettu kalyanam. She was married to Kunhiraman of Attum Manammel, a teacher of Putusseri Kalari.

One night, inspired by a dream of the temple festival at Allimalar Kavu (or Lokanar Kavu) she is determined to attend the function alone. Her father-in-law, mother-in-law and even her husband tries to dissuade her from the decision, as the way to the place was through Nadapuram which was notorious for some Jonakar hooliganism. They feared that the hooligans would do some mischief as Unniyarcha was young and beautiful. The mother-in-law even tells her that she would get her son killed. But she remains firm in her decision and says: "... Born in the famous Puthooram house, as the darling child of Kannappa, born with valour and courage, I can't stay back like a coward."

After finishing all domestic duties and taking her bath, she wears her beautiful dress and glittering ornaments. She also wears the Urumi (long flexible sword that can be tied round the waist) for self-defense and proceeds to the festival. Reluctantly her husband also follows her and both of them reach the notorious bazaar at Nadapuram. Unniyarcha had already decided to bring an end to Jonakars' indecent behaviour towards women and she thinks of taking rest for a while on a platform constructed around a banyan tree. Now the Jonakars who find the lady on the platform begin to whisper to each other about her dazzling beauty. They decide that she must be captured and presented to Mooppan, their headman. By taking strong sticks and wooden weapons they surround the platform. Seeing the scene, Kunhiraman accuses her of disobeying the words of his parents. She bravely retorts:
"... I being a woman don't shiver, while you, a man doth shudder to see these hooligans.

I don't care even if they're thousands as I belong to Puthooram family. For, Puthooram women have never sent their men to be killed."

At first the Jonakars show respect to her by placing some presents, but suddenly they change their attitude and proceed to tie down Kunhiraman and capture Unniyarcha. She confidently tells them that if they wanted her ornaments she was ready to hand them over to them. She also warns that they should not step further or touch her. Inspite of her warning, the Jonakars move forward with the evil intention of capturing her. Then she takes a long, wet towel and challenges them to face her. By brandishing the wet cloth, she intercepts the enemy pool and moves to and fro with lightning speed using kalari techniques. Most of the Jonakars fall down by the power packed action and she somersaults to stand up on the platform, again. If she had used the deadly weapon Urumi, the situation would have been fatal. It appears that she wanted to merely teach them a lesson. Then she challenges them to face her again and reveals her identity as the sister of Aaromal Chekavar. She warns that she would destroy them completely.

When they hear the name of the great and famous exponent of kalari, Aaromal Chekavar, they flee to their Mooppan and tell him everything. On hearing the incident he faints out of fear. On regaining consciousness he arranges to send his wife and the wife of the naduvazhi one after another with rich presents to pacify Unniyarcha and to apologise for the incident. But none of them succeed in pacifying her. Then, they send for Aaromal Chekavar requesting him to intervene. On hearing that Unniyarcha is
furious at the disrespectful behavior toward her by the Jonakars he personally goes there. He sends for the Mooppan who comes and apologises by falling at Unniyarcha's feet. Aaromal Chekavar pacifies her to accept the innumerable gold coins, ornaments and gifts placed by the Mooppan and other Jonakars. She accepts her brother's advice and accepts the presents. Then she goes to see the festival and returns home happily. She gives away the ornaments and presents to her mother-in-law and tells her that she has brought her son back, alive. Although this is a story of social conflict between localities and groups, it highlights the heroism of a woman and her independent character. It also reveals the importance of kalari training for men and women in the medieval society.

The Vadakkan Pattukal also says that Unniyarcha spurns Chandu Chekavar's love for her, which leads to the murder of her brother Aromal by Chandu. Later, Aromalunni, the son of Unniyarcha, takes revenge against Chandu. This is the tale that M. T. Vasudevan Nair (M. T. as he is popularly called) chooses to retell.

**M. T.’s adaptation of the legend of Chandu Chekkavar**

M. T. is foremost among the writers who mark a radical departure from the romantic–revolutionary spirit that dominated fiction till the advent of the sixties. There was a shift of focus from society to the private dreams and a personal sorrow of the individual. M. T. indulges in the psychological probing of his characters. Even in the treatment of the legendary character Chandu, M. T. attempts to lay bare the inner life of the characters, with its torments and conflicts.
M. T. has attempted to rewrite history by turning Chadiyan Chandu (betrayed Chandu) of Kerala folklore into a modern day hero through the film *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha*. In *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* (A Northern Ballad of Valour), M. T. makes a thematical shift, from his characteristic chronicling of life in the *matrilineral tharawad* (joint family) in Kerala and its crumbling feudal status. In the process, he brings down characters from their legendary heights and presents them in a familial/familiar setting. M. T. displays no moral problems in this “irreverent” task of presenting the legend from an unorthodox point of view.

Vadakkan ballads are the popular/populist songs of the period. They are not records. According to M. T., the imaginations and humanism in them have been the inspiration for the recasting that he has done. But departures from the original are not justified by M. T. Only circumstances are explained. M. T. has convincingly reinvented the legend, subtly subverting its realm of values and making it accessible to and contemporaneous with the modern imagination. He has tried to add not a mere supplement, not an appendix tagged on to the original text, but a set of original elements that would reinvent the heroic legend (Nair, *Second Turn* IX). But interestingly enough, after trying to fill in the gaps, M. T.'s narrative throws open newer gaps.

**Form and Ideology in M.T's *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* - a reading of the narrative through the film adaptation**

The film *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* consists of flashbacks showing the incidents leading to the death of Aaromal Chekavar. It opens with two young men, Aaromal's
son Kannappanunni and his nephew (the son of his sister Unniyarcha) Aromalunni seeking revenge for the death of Aromal, the legendary hero. They learn through their mother Unniyarcha and others at Pothooran Veedu about how Chandu’s treachery resulted in Aaromal’s death. Unniyarcha (played by Madhavi) had vowed to set his son on this mission after the “treacherous” death of her brother, Aromal (played by Suresh Gopi), believed to be at the hands of Chandu (played by Mamooty).

Unniyarcha: It will only be my son who will encounter the traitor Chandu. He will challenge his uncle’s treacherous death. I swear! I swear on my father, my dead brother and the kalari tradition. This I swear! (105)

Unniyarcha: The one who tricked and killed my brother....My tongue repulses to even utter his name.(21)...When you slay his head, you should say that this is a trick taught and blessed by your grandfather...Traitor Chandu. (24)

The young men set out to take revenge on Chandu. To Chandu’s sniggers about Unniyarcha’s advice to the son, Kannappanunni valiantly replies that his mother’s parting words were that it is an honour to die in the duel fighting for the honour of the puthooran family. Chandu says:

There is only one Unniyarcha who can talk like that! Her words are sharper than the sword. (28)...And much more is said. She always says enough heroic phrases for the bard Panan to sing ballads. (29).
The society and the state apparatus in Kerala during the medieval period patronised hero worship. When the hero departed for a fight, his mother or sister usually reminded him: "If you are killed in the duel or in the battle field like a hero, then your dead body shall be brought covered with veerali silk and in a palanquin. The funeral ceremonies shall be conducted with pomp and splendour. If you are killed through deceit by the enemy or in a foul encounter by his sword, then your dead body shall be carried, covered in green palm leaves."

Chandu is enraged and asks the boys what they have heard about him. With words replete with sarcasm, he describes himself thus:

Chandu... the one who bribed the blacksmith with 16 gold coins to weld the sword with bamboo nail instead of iron nail. Chandu... who struck the stem of the lamp into the hero who was lying on his lap tired after the duel. What other treacherous deeds of Chandu have Pannan been singing about in your region? (29)

Vadakkan Pattukal follow the trend where the bards portray the antagonist in dark shades while making the hero a paragon of all virtues and add embellishments. This is also what Pannan, the bard has done.

Undeterred, the youngsters challenge Chandu to a duel, which he refuses because they are young and inexperienced in duel. But they are adamant and seem determined to uphold the dignity of their grandfather Kannappan Chekavar (played by Balan K. Nair) who had blessed them before they had set out on this mission. Chandu is overcome with emotion and says:
...My stepfather, guru, my kalarigod, everything is him. The ones who are waiting outside for my slain head have come with his blessings! (29).

Here we find the frailties and subtle feelings of the otherwise bold and valiant hero, Chandu. M. T.'s Chandu is a victim of the power structures in the family which he does not defy in order to uphold the social order.

Chandu now begins to narrate his version of the incidents to the servant girl of the house. He tells how he had become an orphan and how his uncle Kannappan adopted him. Chandu was born into a poor family. First, his mom died and then his father died in a duel. It seems the celebrated uncle and fighter of Chandu, Kannappan Chekavar later regretted giving his sister Vamakshi in marriage into Ilanthalar Madom. Chandu was then adopted by his uncle and taken to his home, Puthooram Veedu. He taught all training and tricks to his son and nephew alike. Puthuram Veedu was wealthy and used to give money to people on interest. In such a home it is but natural for a Chekavan like Chandu, orphaned and poor, to feel ignored. This must have also created a rift between Aromal and Chandu.

Kannappan's son and Chandu's cousin Aaromal used to humiliate Chandu. However, Chandu excelled at kalarippayattu (a martial art that chekavars excelled in) which had made Aaromal jealous. To make things worse, Aaromal's father loved Chandu like his own son and was proud of his skills in kalari. This increases Aaromal's dislike of Chandu. Chandu is hurt and saddened when Aaromal decides to marry off his sister,
Unniyarcha to a wealthy man even though he knows that Chandu loves Unniyarcha dearly.

In their childhood, Chandu and Aromal’s sister Unniyarcha must have considered each other as bride and groom. But when she grows up, she forgets her love and under her brother’s insistence marries Attum Manammel Kunjiraman. Unniyarcha is reported to have said later that he is a coward and lacked masculinity. There is a verbal exchange and a physical fight between Chandu and Aromal about this. He chooses to retract from the scene rather than fight for his love. Aromal claims:

*Aromal: I have only one sister. I only decide for her good... Five plantations, 6000 measures of field. Only one heir. What more do you want?* (55)

Soon Chandu feels that he will never get the respect he deserves for his skill in kalarippayattu as long as he remained in the shadow of the famous warrior dynasty of his uncle.

During the medieval period, the kalari system was a major sociopolitical institution in medieval Kerala. The decadent political and administrative set up made everybody learn defense. It is to be assumed that kalarippayattu emerged through a long process, as the result of a synthesis of an indigenous physical culture with the martial system, imparted through the brahminical institution called Salais. The argument that kalari was derived from Sanskrit is questionable, as the word 'kalari' is seen repeatedly in early Tamil anthologies. The number of kalaries (schools of kalaripayattu) increased and each community, with the permission of the respective chieftain and naduvazhi,
established their own kalaris. The northern Ballads sing about Tacholi Othenan obtaining permission from Kunhali Marakkar of Kottakkal, sometime around the 1590's, to start a kari in the latter's jurisdiction.

Chandu decides to join the martial arts school run by Aringodar, another renowned master of kalarippayattu martial art, so that he can make a name for himself. Before long, Chandu becomes Aringodar's chief student. Nowhere in the Vadakkan Pattukal it is mentioned that Chandu has studied weaponry skills from Aringodar. But M. T. makes this digression by making Chandu a disciple of Aringodar. Chandu couldn't have possibly learnt it from him in the interlude at the padipurra where he goes to sharpen/hone the shield.

Once when Chandu visits Puthooran Veedu, he meets Unniyarcha again and she extends her amorous advances.

_Unniyarcha: You can come here sometimes. If you stand in the backyard you can hear the voices of boatmen who go past...(in whisper) Kunjiramettan is in Puthuserry four days in a week. (69)... There is not a day when I don't think of you, Chandu brother! My misfortune! (69)_

This prompts Chandu to pay her a clandestine visit when her husband was not there. But in the throngs of their passion, they suddenly hear the husband's arrival. Unniyarcha does a volte-face.
Unniyarcha: (angry) Get out, you cheat! Did you think there are no men in this house, you bloody! (71)(throwing the spittoon towards the shocked Chandu and pretending to be sad and crying) ....Thinking it is Kunjiramettan, when I opened the door...(71)

M. T.’s Unniyarcha is daringly different from the legendary heroine of the northern ballads. She is strong and bold yet resorts to her charms to defeat the enemy or meet her ends than actually getting into the forefront of a fight. It is a shrewd and cunning Unniyarcha that we meet in M. T’s characterization. It is only in one stray episode that we see her in a duel. However, in the ballads of Puthuram Pattukal, Unniyarcha’s weaponry exploits are also awe-inspiring. Chandu is also devoid of a hero’s dignity and self respect and is shown to be falling an easy prey to the womanly viles of Unniyarcha. Later Chandu remembers this ignominy, while narrating his story:

Chandu: That night Chandu got one more name. What would Chandu who crossed the Kumarom river to enter the bedroom of a chaste woman when her husband was away be called? The whole world gave the verdict. Womaniser Chandu! (71)

Soon dispute arises between two brothers of a royal family in Kerala, which is to be settled by a duel between the chekavars that the brothers employ. One of the brothers hires Aringodar as his champion, and the other hires Aaromal.

Aromal also attached great importance to wealth. This is seen when money is offered for the duel as mentioned in the Vadakkan Pattukal. He slightly says it is only enough for writing invites or not even for the ganapthi puja. He is later reported to
have told his younger brother that it was for to increase the wealth of Puthuram Veedu, even if he dies in the duel.

What one fails to notice is a chekava kulam’s (clan/caste’s) pitiful state and enveloping sadness. Their sustenance is at the eye of the sword. They fight duels and lose their lives for others. M.T. says (Nair, *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* Introduction) that they truly deserve our sympathy. The money was shared as duel money by the fighter chekavan, by the family and by the feudal lord. Sometimes the duels were for ridiculous reasons. Even the bards who sang the ballads mock duels fought to settle ridiculous disputes about jackfruit or mangoes on the adjoining lands.

M. T. has tried to study the psyche of Aringodar. For M. T., Aringodar becomes the representative/symbol of chekavar caste/clan destined to fight battles for others. M. T. has brought Aringodar (Nair, *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* Introduction) from darkness into light and has made an attempt to study the psyche of the chaver pada (suicide squad) comprising of the chekavars. Aringodar is invited to fight a duel over a trivial reason, namely to decide who is the early-born among the two sons of a feudal lord.

*Aringodar (exclaims): In short, I should become the duel fighter to settle their quarrel (74).*

*Messenger of the feudal lord: A duel is better than people killing each other and innocents dying. That has always been the tradition of the land.*

*Aringodar: That is the job of a chekavar. Either he kills or he dies (74).*
Aringodar (played by Captain Raju) wants Chandu to be his second in the duel, but Chandu is forced by family obligations (owed to his uncle) to be Aaromal’s second. This is accentuated by his love for Unniyarcha which helps her to make Chandu accept it. Chandu is invited back to Puthooran Veedu by his uncle Kanappan Chekavar. Chandu meets Unniyarcha who comes as an emissary to make Chandu accompany Aromal.

Unniyarcha: You should accompany my brother to the duel and bring him back safely...This is my request. For that I will do anything... If you come back victorious after the duel...I’m Chanduettan’s girl, from that day. Promise! (86)

Unniyarcha: I wanted to bear your child secretly and raise the kid. Otherwise why would I leave the bedroom door open? (86)

Unniyarcha: I can say that I had given my word to you to accompany my brother to the duel. I can say that emphatically. Let my father and brother revoke the thread ceremony return the sacred thread...At sometime Unniyarcha’s words should have some value. (88)

Aromal resents this and also says that Chandu might betray him because it is at his behest that Unniyarcha was given in marriage to someone else. This is mentioned in the Vadakkan Pattukal too. Chandu’s love for Unniyarcha has been an overpowering emotional feeling. Later he meets Thumbolarcha but he also hears that Aromal had an illicit relationship with her. After Unniyarcha and Kunjunooli, it was Thumbolarcha who was the prospective suitor. When Chandu comes home, Unniyarcha promises to
be Chandu’s girl. It must have been Chandu’s genuine passion for Unniyarcha that made him accompany Aromal for the duel. Vadakkan Pattukal says that Aringodar had sent his daughter and niece to lure Chandu into the house and then replace metal nail of the churika (sword) with bamboo nail. Here M. T. has deviated from the original story. He feels that only the touch of a feminine intelligence/cleverness could be behind this. Chandu is in a crisis. On the one side there is Unniyarcha waiting to come back into his life. For that Aromal has to win the duel. On the other hand, he cannot let his strong guru lose and die in the duel. At this juncture M. T. feels Thumbolarcha has hatched a plot.

During the duel, the blade of Aaromal’s sword breaks. He asks for another but Chandu says he hasn’t brought another one. When Aromal asks for Chandu’s churika (sword), Chandu says, “I am also a chekavar of your stature, I need my churika!”

Duels those days used to happen in front of a huge crowd of feudal lords and rulers and traditional supervisors who knew the rules of duels. Therefore, it is improbable for Chandu to have uttered those childish words. It seems Aromal killed his opponent Aringodar with the broken churika (sword) that he had.

“It was not the blacksmith but Chandu who betrayed” Aromal is heard saying as he leaves the duel. In such a case there are two possibilities: challenging Chandu to another duel or walk without even looking at the betrayer. The song says that when the tired Aromal rested his head on Chandu’s lap and breathed his last, the latter killed him with a kuthuvillaku (traditional lamp). M. T. feels there must have been a heated verbal duel and then an encounter. Chandu must have told him about Unniyarcha’s
promise. Chandu wouldn't have wanted Aromal to be killed to keep intact the promise given to Unniyarcha. Therefore M. T. feels it must have been a fatal mistake.

In the movie, as Aaromal rests in a room after the duel, he accuses Chandu of bribing the swordsmith to use wooden plugs instead of steel rivets to fix the blade of the sword to the hilt, causing it to break during the duel. This causes a fight to break out between Chandu and Aaromal. When Aromal checks the hilt of the broken sword, he is suspicious. He gets up and checks the part of the hilt that is welded. When he bends the head of the sword it breaks at the hilt where it was welded. He looks at Chandu.

Chandu: (surprised) The blacksmith cheated us. We were saved only because of the blessings of the kalari gods. What a treachery! (99)

Aromal: Is it the blacksmith or is it my cousin himself who committed this treachery? (Aromila rises) Tell the truth (99).

Chandu: (sadly) Aromal, winning this duel was more my need than yours.

Aromal: I had always said that Chandu would betray us. (100)

Chandu: I had given my word to Archa... Cousin, You don't know that Archa had promised that she would be my girl if I come back victorious from this duel. (100)

Aromal: If anyone asks why I killed the one who accompanied me to the duel, these broken swords will give an answer to the world. (100)
Aaromal accidentally trips and falls on a spike during the fight with Chandu, but utters *Chandu Chathichu* (Chandu betrayed me) to people who rush into Aaromal’s room hearing the commotion. Chandu flees from the place and later discovers that the swordsmith was bribed by Aringodar’s daughter, Kunji.

The film returns to the present time where the two young men (Aaromal’s son and nephew) are adamant about fighting Chandu. Chandu defeats each of them in turn, and asks them to return. They refuse.

*Chandu:* At first, my father who fought the tribal and lost his life failed me. My guru whose hands swerved while dividing love failed me...When my love was measured against money and gold, the girl who I longed for also failed me...finally...finally...my friend who did not believe my truth also failed me....now my life still remains to receive more failures.... (angrily) go back....there is no man who can defeat Chandu through kalari (weaponry skills) ....There is no one. Go back! (107)

Subsequently Chandu stabs himself saying "let the traitor Chandu’s story end here. I don’t want you people to lose..."

*Chandu:* (to Aromalunni) The saga of traitor Chandu is over. Let the saga of the hero Aromalunni who will cleanse the stain of Puthooran Veedu begin from here. (108)...You should slay my head and place it on your mother's feet and get her blessings. Get the silk and gold from the king. Let everyone sing praises about your name and valour....You are my unborn. Let everyone praise you. (108)
The ballad says that the sons of Aromal beheaded Chandu and were rewarded by feudal/land lords. M. T. wishes to believe that Chandu allowed them to kill him. Chandu, he feels, had been a loner and therefore existence was a torture for him. Therefore he might have waited for this opportunity to kill himself. There was nothing he could gain by defeating or killing those boys who were not destined to be his own sons and who came with a one sided challenge. He must have also visualised with disdain the sight of Unniyarcha looking at his slain head with joy.

**Reading through the gaps in M. T.'s *Oru Vaddakkan Veeragatha***

M. T.'s Chandu and all other chekavars are presented in an elitist ambience. It is true that there were aristocratic chekavar/ezhava families in Kerala like the Puthooran Veedu. Some of the chekavar families were even responsible for supplying infantry and light cavalry for the army of the Maharaja of Kayamkulam and Travancore. Thiyyas often served as footsoldiers under the command of brahmanized upper castes such as nayars, kurups and nambiars. It is also mentioned that ezhava houses were referred to as *illams* (house of ilavar), a name which later became a prerogative for the namboothiri houses in Kerala.

The chekavar, also referred to as chekavan and chon was a warrior section belonging to the ezhava/thiyya caste from Kerala in southern India. The title of chekavar was also given to exponents of kalaripayattu, the martial art form. They were the militia for the local chieftains and kings. Vadakkan Pattukal describes the exploits of chekavars. As the saying goes, an ezhavan/thiyyan became a chekavan only after the
fight of an *ankam* (quarrels between local rulers were resolved by fixing an ankam, a duel to the death) and that 'a chekavar's bread was on the tip of the sword'.

According to the English-Malayalam Dictionary of Hermann Gundert, chekavan means servant, militiaman and warrior. The Tamil dictionary Peyarakaraathi, published from Jaffna, gives the meaning of the word chekavan as aiyan, that is, respected person or teacher or ayyappan or sansthaa, *peyullipanividaiykarai* (war hero) and veeran. Some believe that this word might have derived from the Sanskrit word *sevakan* or *sevaka*. It could also have been derived from the local Malayalam word *chavuka* means ready to die as these warriors were like a suicide squad. References to the word chekava have also been found from inscriptions dating to 14th century. They worshipped *pithrukkal* (ancestors) and deities like muthappan, ayyan, ayyappan and shiva. Chekavars were considered to be skilled assassins in the deadly art of war and were actively seen in mamankams held at various places in Kerala, and in particular at the famous mamankam at Thirunavaya in the Valluvanad taluk of ancient Kerala.

It is mentioned in sangam literature and hero stones found in Tamil Nadu that chekavars were engaged in combat often on behalf of a lord and in this hero stone chekavars generally bear an image of an armed man along with a Shiva Linga. It was a tradition during sangam days to build hero stones for these men who had fallen in battle on behalf of lord and villagers or cattle raids. Elamkalam P. N. Kunjan Pillai’s *Studies in Kerala history* contents that chekavars had descended from villors or villavar or billavars who were warriors and bravos. However, they were degraded after arrival of brahmins and after establishing the chatur varna system.
According to other historians, chekavars/ezhavas came originally from Ceylon where they belonged to the military caste. Some folk songs say they were natives of ezhavathu nadu (land of ezhavas, a local name for Ceylon) and another folk song about Puthooram Veedu says their ancestors were one of the eight fighter families sent by the king of ezhavathu nadu to help the local rulers of Malayalam. The chekavars of Malabar were involved in ankam between two ankachekavars, each ruler being represented by one ankachekavar. The ruler represented by the surviving ankachekavar was considered the winner. These types of ankams between two chekavars were not common in Travancore or Cochin.

It is surprising that M. T. has left out dance forms like theyyam which is a powerful form of folk expression of the subaltern caste. He has included some bit of parichamuttukali in the scene of Unniyarcha’s wedding procession although that is more secularised as is performed by other communities as well. What one predominantly comes across are opulent sets with dances and costumes which are mainstream and elitist. It seems like a deliberate attempt at presenting them in a comformist, brahmanical setting, thus homogenising the Hindu community. The lifestyle of the chekavars as presented by M. T. is akin to the nambuthiris and the nairs of the time. This is irrespective of the inequalities that existed at the time.

Since the plot is centered on a family feud between two men (Chandu and Aromal) of the same family, the personal sphere precedes over the political as there has been no attempt at presenting anything outside the family. M. T. seems to ignore the social problems of the time. The chekavars/thiyyas were considered as avarnas by the clergy.
and the ruling elite even though their ancestors—villavars—were believed to have belonged to the kshatriya varna. Some of them were considered avarnas because they had once adopted Buddhism and later converted back to Hinduism. M. T does not pay attention to the inequalities that existed at the time. It is said that ezhava men and women, like any other non-brahmin castes in Kerala, were not allowed to cover the upper part of their bodies and certain types of jewellery and footwear were forbidden. Only the respected or rich families like chekavar, channar, panicker and thandan women used to wear upper clothing.

Chandu’s anger is more a personal and egoistic one. M. T. has also not focused much on the bleak side of the life of the chekavars except for some passing reference while talking about Aringodar. What predominates the scenes are the lavish homes, women in finery and men who are only proud of their valour. Chandu has no grudges against his subaltern status which makes him a bonded slave destined to fight even his own kin to please the whims and fancies of the upper caste/ruling classes. M. T. has created “an imagined community” of Chekavars quite contrary to their status in society at the time. Benedict Anderson (6) says that the nation (here a region) is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation prevailing in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. M. T. seems to have attempted to create an “imagined community” picking up threads from the original legend. He has universalized or homogenized the society of the period.

In medieval Kerala, internal conflicts in the aristocracy and divisions among the political elites, had made lawlessness the order of the day. There were disputes among
landlords and tenants and even for the settlement of a simple dispute, an ankam was fought. Ankam, was in fact served as a method of administering justice. The involved parties in a dispute, after getting permission of the respective naduvazhi engaged two combatants to settle the issue through a duel. These mercenary fighters fought to the end of their lives and justice was determined in favor of the winner. The family of the slain fighter was compensated with cash payment and the naduvazhi also was given a payment for his presence. This peculiar system of a duel for the cause of a third party was in vogue in medieval Kerala. If a combatant rejected an invitation extended by an aggrieved party to settle his case through a duel, it would be a disgrace and dishonour not only for him, but also for his family. Social obligations thus compelled the mercenary fighter to accept any invitation to fight. As the saying goes, "one became a chekavar only after the fight of an ankam" and that "A Chekavar's food was on the tip of the sword". Earlier in a scene, Kanaapan Chekavar asks his nephews who were getting ready for a duel whether there was a need for one as Puthooran Veedu, their family house does not lack in fame or money. Later he exclaims, that "the life span of a male in Puthooran house is as short as the life of a sacrificial hen" (21).

The date and place of such an ankam had to be announced in advance and thousands of rural folks thronged to witness the fight as if it were a festival. It is from this that the adage ankavum kanaam thaliyum odikaam (one can see the ankam and collect the shampoo herb) came into being. The tragic story of Aromal Chekavar of Kadattanad is recollected in a medieval ballad. The pathetic condition of the hero's wife and his family is reflected in this song as paradoxes. The anonymous poet both protects a social criticism against the institution of ankam and exalts the heroic fight of Aromal Chekavar.
Several heroes were killed or defeated by their enemies. The defeated had to re-establish his honor by the fulfillment of the vendetta. Foul play too, like instances of unauthorised use of fire arms, sword or shield of the opponent deliberately made to fall apart during the fight with the connivance of the village blacksmith, bad construction of the ankam platform by the carpenter and an understanding with the enemy are described in the ballads.

M. T. subverts the conventional norm of characterization in the legend. It is on these silences and subversion that M.T. works on and leaves us with more silences. M.T.'s Chandu is subverted by the power structures within the family. The personal sphere in turn becomes a sphere for political action. Chandu’s “deviant” thinking/knowledge is “subjugated and disqualified as inadequate” (Foucault 82) by the dominant power structures that control the state. Chandu ends up as a powerless voice, a victim of the repressive structures of power and ideology. Chandu does not defy his uncle or the family tradition and does not question the rules of the elite chekavar clan. One finds a lot of adherence to rituals and tradition. M. T. seems to emphasize and even impose the brahmanical power structure on the chekavar clan which is seen even in their rituals and customs. An exception to this is when Chandu questions Aromal about the sacred thread that he had tied on Unniyarcha during the ritual of noolacharam (tying the thread) while they were kids, signifying their bond.

Chandu: (controlling his anger and trying to be calm, to Aromal) Cousin, I was the one who tied the thali to her in our childhood. (55)
Aromal: (to Chandu) That is just a custom, right? The tradition of elders... just a puppet play that kids are made to do. (55)

Chandu (after grave thought); Oh and any boy at sight can join this game. Then when plans go wrong, you can throw the yellow sacred thread. Is this the smartness of the women in Puthooran Veedu or the habit of the entire chekavar clan? The sastras are taught by the brother, sister or any one? (55)

Chandu is shown as a lovesick person, obsessed with Unniyarcha, falling into her trap and spurning other women. He admits that he is not able to love even Kuttimani who had cared for him as a dutiful wife for eighteen years. Coming from Chandu who is seen expressing subtle yet intense gestures of affection towards Unniyarcha, this claim of being incapable of loving seems incredulous. The relationship with Kuttimani is more of dependency and not love. We see her full of awe and respect mixed with fear. Kuttimani becomes a mere medium, an audience for Chandu to narrate the story in a flashback.

Chandu seems to be confused after losing Unniyarcha. She remains an obsession for him even after she marries Kunjiraman. His treatment of Kunjunooli and Aringodar's daughter Kunji has no justification either.

There are occasions when we see Chandu subtly expressing a desire to marry Kunjunooli but unluckily losing her to Aromal. In his own admission later to Kunjunooli, he feels he had been “late”. Later when he meets Aringodar's daughter, even her maid feels it is her “luck”. But fate intervenes and he has to let them down
by going as second to Aromal, in the hope of winning Unniyarcha again if he wins. Aringodar’s daughter has as striking a personality as Unniyarcha. She is strong and articulate and minces no words when she finds Chandu being a puppet in the hands of the “cunning” Unniyarcha. However, even she is silenced by Chandu. There is a scene where Chandu pronounces a male chauvinistic statement against women as a gender. In the scene, Kunji (Aringodar’s daughter) annoys Chandu with her inquisitive questions about Unniyarcha to which Chandu angrily says:

_The race of women including you sees what others don’t. You can curse and flirt at the same time. You will cry and laugh together. You can yearn and spite alike._ (64)

Although M. T has weaved the plot with all its intricacies, almost justifying Chandu’s actions, it seems illogical for someone like Chandu to reconsider his decisions in the name of love. Chandu’s character therefore appears contradictory: on the one hand he comes across as fiercely independent by moving out of Puthooran Veedu and trying to carve a life of his own. But on the other hand, he comes across as a love-sick man easily falling prey to the machinations of Unniyarcha.

There is an attempt to portray a woman like Unniyarcha in an immoral light. There is no basis for the amorous advances that Unniyarcha makes to Chandu in folklore/ballads. M. T. has resorted to portraying Unniyarcha as a woman with dubious distinction. At the same time, M. T. does not find fault with Chandu, rather justifying his cowardly stand in not being able to win over Unniyarcha. The characterization of Unniyarcha is contradictory. The same Unniyarcha who promises to even forget the _noolacharam_ (sacred thread ceremony signifying marital bond) is
shown in a submissive and conformist light. Although M. T. makes a departure in the name of creative freedom, what is seen in the process is the denigration of a woman famed for her valour.

We do not also hear other subaltern voices in this adaptation of the legend. Even when they are shown, they remain speechless and submissive as servants, attendants and maids. M. T.'s attempt has been to highlight the human, caught in the gamut of political intrigues and personal rivalries. But M. T.'s Chandu, who shows the makings of a social rebel/non-conformist, is portrayed as tragically human in the end, shorn of all trappings of a legendary character. Repeated reading of the legend will throw open rereadings and rewritings both in regard to the main text and the text derived from it. As Bakhtin (1984) says “nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future”

Legend into Film: A reading of the myth of Pulijanmam through the adaptation/screenplay of N. Prabhakaran from the movie Pulijanmam directed by Priyanandan.

Pulijanmam is strikingly different from the other movies that I have analysed. In fact, Pulijanmam was chosen to contrast with the other film adaptations – Perumthachan and Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha. Pulijanmam is a realistic/authentic representation of legends/myths/local histories which are otherwise marginalised by mainstream compilations (Aithihyamala for instance) and even the adaptations which attempt to
Pulijanmam is an attempt at representing the subverted voices that are otherwise drowned in the jarring cacophony of mainstream life and society. Priyanandanan's 'Pulijanmam' highlights the struggle between the oppressors and those who resist exploitative forces in society. Set in the contemporary socio-political situation of Kerala, especially in Malabar region, the film also depicts the disillusionment among the cadres in the so-called progressive political outfits and also the eroding integrity of such political organizations. It is also the story of an abortive but a stern and constructive attempt of a human being who could not resist responding to the blows over the social fabric and attempts to uphold the humane virtues that is fast getting erased in the society. Priyanandanan believes that in our scheme of things every individual is becoming separate entities who prefer to stay within cocoons created by them. "But one should keep in mind that along with those who emerged victorious in their lives, history also speaks about those who failed to make it big in the bargain. Regardless of the amount of success one should continue doing whatever we could make an essential difference in the society," he sums up. (www.pulijanmam.com/home/html).

The myth/legend of Pulijanmam

The script has tried to reinterpret a myth which is mentioned in Thottampattukal in northern Kerala. Kaarigurukkal had travelled to Puliyoorkkunnu to get rid of the anxiety of the rulers. He returns as 'Thondachan' in the shape of a tiger.
Kaarigurukkal is in search of 'pulijada' and 'pulivaalu' and on his return, his wife, Vellachi, was supposed to sprinkle 'arikkadivellam' and beat him with a broom. But out of panic and fear, she fails to do so and he could not get back to his normal self. The movie 'Pulijanmam' has interspersed myth and reality brilliantly by giving a visual interpretation to the problems created by the political and social conflicts in everyday life in the lives of ordinary yet politically conscious people in a simple and realistic way.

**Form and Ideology in Pulijanmam - a reading of the narrative through the film adaptation**

It was from the play 'Pulijanmam' that the thought of a film of the same name emerged. The script of the film, Pulijanmam moves through these problems and complications. The script writers say that they had complete freedom while changing the story from the genre of a play to a movie because of the non-interference from the director. There is a transparency and clarity achieved through fine editing and direction although the movie moves through the scenes of drama rehearsals, performance of the play, scenes from actual everyday life of the characters which could have been otherwise unclear to the audience.

However, the play 'Pulijanmam' was written with the perspective that Kari Gurukkal's turn in his life starts with this episode. The screenplay has included a few details. For instance, the scene where the nattumukhyan and karyasthan (village chieftain and caretaker) come to meet Gurukkal in the kalari is not there in the play. However, in the movie it helps to foreground the character of social relations in the
time when the Gurukkal lived. Although many episodes in Prakashan’s life seem too complicated and diverse, if we observe the actual lives of politicians from a distance, they seem probable.

The citation for *Pulijanmam* says it is a film layered with metaphors to address global and local issues of contemporary society. In the film, based on a story by N. Prabhakaran, the director’s efforts are to intertwine the character called Kari Gurukkal with that of an idealistic farmer Prakasan.

*Pulijanmam* revolves around a village youth, Prakashan, who is trying to stage the play *‘Pulijanmam’*. The various facets/spheres of life: farming, dramatic pursuits, political activities and involvement in social problems find a bold and creative blending in the protagonist, Prakashan. In the present day Kerala, these spheres of life are rift with complications and tensions.

The life story of Kari Gurukal is elaborated in it, beginning with the time before Kari Gurukkal’s birth to the time when Gurukkal becomes an idol after his tiger role comes to an end. There is also the mention of Kari Gurukkal meeting the gods: Pottan, Kurathi aand Gulikan in a casual and passing manner. The film is about the story of ‘Kari Gurikkal’ who is known as ‘Puli-maranja Thondachan’, a folk help and god of the pulavar community of North Malabar. Gurukkal is well versed in martial arts and magic. The story is being narrated against the backdrop of theyyam. For the first time, we see the strength and influence of theyyam in all its splendid ramifications in the lives of people of the Malabar Region. It is indeed not a showcase piece for
Priyanandan and his team. But an inseparable element that still hovers around all junctures of life in Malabar.

*Kari*: Those who rule are mad. Others are weary (16)...I will cure the madness of the rulers. I will change the weariness of others (18).

When the king becomes mad, Gurukkal was ordered to use his magical powers to transform himself into a tiger. He should go to the distant forest and kill another tiger and bring back its head and tail to the village. Then only the king's madness could be cured, he was told. But on his return, Kalari Gurukkal's wife fails to savage him by beating him with broomstick and sprinkling water on his face.

Pulijanmanam is about people who are haunted by justice and social good, people who can't turn away from their world, life and times. At one level the film is about Prakasan, an educated and idealist youngster deeply committed to his society.

*Anila*: (looking at the picture of the play) These things won't work in the present times. The world has changed so much! Who will watch this play with pottan, kuruddan and kari?...these people don't exist today. There is no audience who watches them these days (20).

*Prakashan*: Who said they don't exist? They do. It's because you don't know. They are all there (20).

Prakasan is planning to recreate the story of Master Kari through his play. Prakashan (played by Murali) is a graduate who finds it difficult to adjust his ideas of social
existence with the prevailing social realities. He prefers to live in the village itself, earning his livelihood through farming, living close to nature and fighting against exploitation and injustice around him.

Prakashan: *I want the mud, water and working in the field... also our library, drama performances and gatherings. Without all that...(24)...If we go to London or America, then who will take care of our rice and coconut trees? Who will plant and reap the fields?* (24)

He finds it difficult to accept the political parties and the insincere leaders of these parties. The film also addresses many other issues in Kerala's social life. It might be for the first time that the erosion of social-cultural values in the so-called progressive political parties is presented.

KKC: *The time when political parties used to handle issues in a straight manner has gone. Now is the time of adjustment. Our party has no existence without small adjustments...No one has said that communists should not make money or should not run a business...Now people like you talk of the river and ecological balance at the cost of the chances for the party to make money* (28).

Prakashan finds himself being isolated from everyone, his friends, the party he has pinned all his hopes on and even family. Interspersed with the journey of Kari himself on his mission, the film takes a searing look at degeneration of contemporary life and times and the impossibility of being humane in times like ours.
Everything falls apart around him, but he has to make his journey like the legendary Kari Gurukkal, a local legend about whom he is performing a play. He himself rehearses to portray the main character in the drama, Thondachhan Theyyam Kari Gurukkal. In the drama, Gurukkal has to be camouflaged as a tiger to go to the nearby forests to fetch the tail-hair of real tigers to treat the hysteria of the ruler of the land. In that process, as the drama climaxes, Gurukkal is left in the role of a tiger with no chance of coming back to humanness. For playing the role of Vellachi, the female lead in the drama, Prakashan finds Shahina, a Muslim girl. Shahina is sympathetic to Prakashan and his feelings about society. The rehearsals go on, but the drama was never staged following the outbreak of communal riots in the area. As the societal breakages deepen, Prakashan and Shahina are left with their woes and angers in disapproving realities. Prakashan finds every situation he rehearsed for long in the drama happening in his real life. The film also addresses many other issues in Kerala's social life.

At another level the film is about this legendary figure Kari Gurukkal, a hero from the past. He is a subaltern who acquires mastery over martial and other arts, only to be sent away by the envious powers-that-be to achieve an impossible task. He is to take tiger from and go to the deep forest to bring tiger mane and tail in order to cure the madness of the ruler and assuage the agonies of his people.

_Karyasthan: (saying loudly) The rulers are mad. There is no effect from treatment. We found the solution through the rasi. One should go to the pulipathalam (tiger’s den) and dress like a tiger and get tiger hair and the tail of the tiger. These should be
brought and the rulers should be blessed with this. Then their madness will vanish. It is Kari who should go to the pulipathalam. This was also seen in the rasi. (39)

Despite all odds, Master Kari takes up the task, though benign gods try to dissuade him from that. But, if he has to get his human form back, his wife has to throw over him the water with which she washed rice and beat him with a broom when he returns from the forest in the tiger form.

When Kari Gurukkal finally comes back, his wife is terrified of his figure and runs away from him. Unable to regain his human form and return to society, he disappears into the forest. But his legend lives on in public memory in the form of myths and rituals.

*Prakashan:* *(with dramatic movements)* ...The one who narrates a story has no power over it. He doesn't even understand the meaning of the story. He continues the story. ...continues...continues till he dies. (45)

Apart from the striking balance that the director achieves while dealing with the communal and ecological issues that is eating into the environmental and social tranquillity of the times, Priyanandanan has proved his mastery in blending folk and modern theatre through the medium of the movie.

The movie *Pulijanmam* has tried to give a visual interpretation to the problems created by the political and social conflicts in everyday life in the lives of ordinary yet politically conscious people in a simple and realistic way. *Pulijanmam* revolves
around a village youth, Prakashan who is trying to stage the play *Pulijanmam*. The various facets/spheres of life - farming, dramatic pursuits, political activities and involvement in social problems find a bold and creative blending in the protagonist, Prakashan. In the present day Kerala, these spheres of life are rift with complications and tensions.

*Pulijanmam* is a subaltern narrative, one which displays a consciousness of the social hierarchies of dominant narratives of power. In *Pulijanamam*, one finds in Prakashan and Kari the subaltern's adoption of the roles of singer, story-teller, author and player, oppressed subject and resisting speaker. Language seeks to create a distance between the nation/empire and the subaltern space. However, in *Pulijanamam*, the language of *Pulijanmam* is an eclectic mixture of literary Malayalam, colloquial Malayalam and tribal Malayalam in an attempt to bridge the different spaces. Unlike the other films, *Perumthachan* and *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha*, the film *Pulijanmam* uses theyyam (dance form associated with lower castes as an alternative discourse) converting it into a powerful political and linguistic strategy of resistance. By keeping alive memory, myth, legend and songs even at the cost of risking lives, the narrative in *Pulijanamam* becomes an act of rewriting/refiguring history.