Chapter IV

CONFIGURING THE “REGION” AND ITS “OUTSIDE” IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYALAM CINEMA

This chapter explores Malayalam cinema from the late 1980s to the present day in an attempt to understand how the “region” is articulated in the films produced during this period. Through an exploration of Malayalam cinema of this period, I have attempted to trace the shifts in the industrial and aesthetic changes in Malayalam film industry which led to the emergence of certain genres of films. Understanding these shifts is important for my exploration of the articulation of region in contemporary Malayalam cinema. Apart from looking at the articulation of region within the narratives of the film, I also explore how “regional cinema” gets (re)constituted through these films. The chapter begins with an exploration of the historical specificity of the period under which the above mentioned shifts happen in Malayalam film industry.

In this chapter, I argue that since the late 1980s, there emerged a new set of films which affected a shift in the Malayalam film industry. The study attempts a discussion of mainly three aspects: First, the chapter shall attempt to lay out the specific social and economic factors characteristic of the later 1980s in Kerala. Secondly, the chapter shall elaborate why only certain tropes/genres of film would come into the scope of this particular research. Finally, the chapter shall try to establish the reasons behind the emergence of such movies and their relevance in the current study.
4.1 The Period

The Malayalam film industry witnessed a ‘dry’ spell during the late 1980s and 1990s as a result of various factors which are elaborated below. The poor response that superstar films received at the box office by late 1980s was already a sign of an impending crisis. The allegation that “black money” was involved in the production of films resulted in the state government’s attempt to curb illegal investments in the industry, which eventually led to a crisis in the Malayalam film industry. The Gulf War in the 1990s affected foreign remittances to Kerala which accelerated the crisis in the Malayalam film industry. These changes happening at the production front resulted in the emergence of what may be called “low budget” films (Rowena 2002: 5-18). By the late 1980s, there emerged soft-porn and B-grade movies in the Malayalam film industry. While these low-budget films sought to cash in on the dismal state of the mainstream Malayalam film industry, these movies were not able to withstand the strict censorship laws and taxation policies instated by the government. As a result, soft-porn films more or less ceased to exist in its initial stages itself.

However, by the late 1990s, soft porn films made a major comeback with Shakeela emerging as a major star. For more than a decade, these soft-porn films, often called ‘Shakeelapadams’ gave an interim relief to the cash-strapped Malayalam film industry, regardless of the stringent censorship and levies placed on them. While the films starring prominent actors of the Malayalam industry flopped at the box office, it was Shakeela who attracted the Malayali men in large numbers to the theatre. Though
this phenomenon has not been formally established, the actress herself has made such
claims in several interviews. A cursory look at the industry’s financial indices of the
period would also confirm this. (Radhakrishnan 2010: 194-200)

The uncertainty over capital required for film production resulted in changes of
production practices. Till then, Malayalam cinema mostly followed a particular
formula where the central characters, often played by established stars like
Mammootty, Mohan Lal, Suresh Gopi, etc., were given prominence. The presence of
superstars escalated the cost of production, thus resulting in huge loss for producers in
uncertain financial times. As suggested earlier, as a result of the financial crisis, film
producers ventured into the production of low budget movies. A new set of actors
were introduced to the industry, which facilitated the cutting down of production
costs. This experiment also resulted in the total remodeling of the cinematic treatment
of the movie - its plot, themes and narratives. During this particular phase, the
Malayalam film industry also witnessed the emergence of new directors, which has
arguably resulted in an aesthetic shift within the Malayalam film industry. The new
directors ventured into the Malayalam film industry with a novel outlook. They did
not require any star capital for their films. The storyline, treatment and the narratives
emphasized on laughter or comedy. Thus, “laughter” emerged as the unique selling
point of movies made by these new filmmakers. The producers put their money on
such movies as a “minimum returns” was guaranteed. This, as Jenny Rowena
discusses, led to the emergence of a particular genre of movies during this period —
laughter movies or chirippadangal.
In the following section, I explore the characteristic features and functions of what I describe as “minimum return” films and the specific industrial context that facilitated the emergence of such films. I propose that the budgetary constraints and decline of star power in the Malayalam film industry catalyzed the emergence of a new category of movies. These movies, running on a very limited budget, used upcoming actors and laid emphasis on comedy with the sole aim of making a marginal profit for the investors. As these movies required a minimal budget and, as a result, assured guaranteed return of the investment, I term such films minimum return films.

**4.2 Advent of Minimum Return Films**

The current chapter focuses its attention on the different ways in which the region is imagined in contemporary Malayalam cinema, laying an emphasis on comedy films produced since the late 80s. My approach, to this extent, differs from that of Jenny Rowena in her study on laughter films. This chapter particularly looks at the emergence of certain formulaic films and actors in films I have termed minimum return films. I have suggested how financial crisis forced the film industry to turn its attention to low budget movies. Filmmakers sought new actors in an attempt to reduce the production costs as the remuneration for the new actors was much lower than that of the superstars. The attempt was to make films with the minimum possible investment. Some of the notable actors who emerged at this point are Jayaram and Dileep, who went on to become stars in their own right by the 2000s. Due to the emergence of these new actors, the number of films produced slowly increased. The filmmakers were more eager and confident to make films with these new actors as
there was a guarantee that the film would fetch at least the money that was invested. This is what led to the emergence of minimum returns films.

A close observation of these minimum return films reveals several patterns in their narrative, thematic and aesthetic forms. These patterns or formulae - the recurrent thematic and narrative motifs which draw audiences to theatres and assure returns - can be observed in most of these films. For instance, these films were largely set in the rustic locale of the state of Kerala and the plot predominantly brings a sense of familiarity to the audience. The characters are generally low-key, as if they were from one’s own neighbourhood. Even the plot involves certain formulaic elements. The central character, usually a young man from the village, makes timely interventions in the local neighborhood and tackles social and financial issues for the betterment of his immediate community. Through his selfless acts, the protagonist wins the respect of and acceptance from the people and become the neighbourhood hero.

Rather than the big budget star-studded movies which often portray larger-than-life characters and fantastical plots, these movies, the research argues, are more representative of contemporary forms of Malayaliness which the Malayalam film audience could relate to. The very fact that these low budget movies can attract at least a minimum audience to the theatre and bring a reasonable collection indicates that the plot, the way in which the movie is narrated and made, delivers a wholesome package which evokes a sense of affinity, familiarity and catharsis amongst the masses. The basis of this affinity and relatability, the thesis argues, is because of the very Malayaliness of its nature. The popularity of these movies are due to the affective relationships
their plot and characters could build with the audience, who could relate to these very elements due to their embeddedness in the everyday and ordinary life of the Malayali subject. What, then, is the popular imagination of the Malayali-ness that these movies convey and what does this signify? What constitutes the popular and what are the complex ramifications it brings about? These questions form the basis of the argument the current study attempts to take forward. Thus, the research takes mainly films from the contemporary period into account to trace the concept of the region or the regional in order to map how these complex formations are constituted through these films.

The film scholar, G. P. Ramachandran, in his book *Malayalam Cinema: Desam Bhasha Samskaram* noted that the conversational language, plot, narratives styles, songs, costumes, moral codes, family orders, etc. used in cinema have often been influenced by the idea of nation or region, its citizenship and the cultural priorities of the region. Conversely, cinema has also reconstituted popular notions and understandings of the region. “The status of subnational structures, which are often as significant locations for the critique of the nation, has been taken more less granted… Idea of an integrated region is an ideological construction.” (Radhakrishnan 706)

The attempt in this chapter is to critically engage with the complex processes of narrativization and characterization within Malayalam cinema from the late 80s, in order to make sense of their effects on the industrial and aesthetic conventions of Malayalam cinema during the period as well as the construction of a “sub-national” or regional identity amongst its viewers.
The construction of a regional or sub-national identity is explored through understanding of the spatial and well as social configurations of the ‘outside’ and the ‘other’ within the region as imagined by the Malayali viewing public. While there has been a large scale outward migration from Kerala to the Gulf countries (which has led to seeing the gulf as the other in Malayali cultural imagination, as Ratheesh Radhakrishnan points out) and to first world Western nations, of late, inward migration to Kerala from other states of India has become a major cause of concern and anxiety for the middle class population of Kerala. The cultural anxieties of the people of Kerala towards migration to the state often come out in the form of xenophobia, which has often been reflected in contemporary popular cinema. While the construction of a Malayali regional identity had the Tamilian as the ‘other’ for a long time, with the large scale migration from the North Indian states, the term “Bengali”- often used to refer to any migrant community invisibilizing the actual diversity of migration from the north, north-eastern and eastern (Assam, Mizoram, Nepal, Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar and Chhattisgarh) states of India and bordering nations such as Bangladesh - has been derogatorily applied to the considerable migrant population employed in low-end jobs in Kerala. In the following section, I explore how the Tamil identity has historically played the role of the constitutive other of the Malayali identity. What is of particular interest to the current discussion is the way in which contemporary Malayalam films play a role in constituting the Tamil as an other in the everyday life of the Malayali public.
4.3 Constituting the Tamil Outside

A productive way of looking at what constitutes the “regional” in Malayalam cinema would be to trace what constitutes its other. It is often by demarcating itself from the Tamil other that Malayali identity has been constructed. In discussions on popular cinema, it has often been pointed out how Malayalam cinema is presented as an exceptional case as it constructs itself as distinct from Tamil cinema which is characterized by excesses.

The state of Kerala shares its longest contingent border with the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, which lies to its east. The two states have water-sharing accords and, in turn, Kerala gets a large share of its required fruits, vegetables, and staple rice from Tamil Nadu. However, there have been disputes between the two over the sharing of water resources from Mullaperiyar dam, situated in Kerala though leased out to the state of Tamil Nadu. The state of Kerala has often claimed a higher ground across the board, in politics, culture, education and even in cinema. Until recently, Tamil Nadu contributed a big portion of skilled and unskilled workforce for the state of Kerala, mostly employed in menial and daily-wage jobs such as scavenging and in the construction field. Ironically, even before the formation of Kerala as a linguistic state, the government and service sector of the three regions of Kerala – Travancore, Kochi and Malabar – were dominated by educated Tamil Brahmins. The dominance of Tamilians in public and administrative posts during the colonial period had led to certain derision for the community within Kerala. This was further heightened due to the dominance of Tamil language and culture in southern India as Madras was the seat
of the incumbent British Presidency in the region. The opposition towards Tamils was often produced in subversive linguistic forms expressed through local idioms, proverbs and slur words. This is evident even in everyday colloquial usages among Malayalis which continue to this day: Tamils are commonly referred to in Kerala as ‘Pandis’.

The term pandi finds its etymological root in the Tamil kingdom of Pandyas who ruled over parts of southern India until the early part of the 17th century. However, in contemporary times, it has attained a negative connotation among Malayalis, for whom the term suggests the uncouth, dirty and uncivilized mannerisms of Tamilians. The National Permit Trucks, which often bring goods from Tamil Nadu to the state of Kerala, are commonly referred to as ‘Pandi Lorry’, signifying the truck from Tamil Nadu or Trucks belonging to Tamils. Pandi symbolizes an uncouth nature, behavior or sensibility among Malayalis. People wearing ostentatiously bright clothes are often heckled at for being Pandis. Other terms signifying a Tamil origin like ‘Anna’, ‘Annan’ and ‘Annachi’ have also attained a negative meaning among Malayalis. These words otherwise have very respectable meanings in the Tamil language and they are used for addressing somebody with respect. However, these words have been (mis)appropriated to denote Tamilians pejoratively. Here, the pejorative effect does not emerge from negative connotations of the word in its originary language; rather, it is ascribed due to the mere fact that they are words commonly used by Tamils. Malayali kids are habituated to the exteriority of these terms from an early age, as their uncouth symbolisms are used to scare the kids by
parents and elders. For instance, when kids throw tantrums to skip a meal, they are threatened to the effect that if they do not take the meal, they will be given to pandis or annachis who would take them away.

4.4 Anxieties about Migration into the State of Kerala

The debates around inward migration to Kerala have often revealed the anomalies surrounding the much-lauded Kerala Model of Development, the characteristic feature of which is assumed to be high standards of living in Kerala and the inclusive nature of its society. Recent studies have pointed out that the Kerala Model of Development exists through the exclusion of certain sections of the society. For instance, studies have pointed out how Dalits, Adivasis, fishermen communities, etc. have been “outliers” of the Kerala Model of Development (Kappikad 486-487). While there have been studies which suggest how remittances from the Gulf have played a major role in sustaining the Kerala Model of Development, there has not been much focus on the inflow of migrant labourers to Kerala, apart from the cultural anxiety that migration to the state presents a threat to the high standards of living in the region.

The cultural anxiety around migration is, however, not unique to Kerala. Chris Bertram, for instance, points out that,

One of the often claimed worries about immigration is of cultural loss. The incomers will overwhelm the natives who will then lose distinctive identity that they value. Supposedly open borders would lead to the erosion of
difference; people would lose their countries, and be bereft. (Chris Bertram: web)

The above concerns, which are often observed in the case of transnational migrations, are interestingly replicated in Kerala following the influx of a considerable migrant population into the region. Unlike the nation-states of Europe, Kerala is a state assimilated into the union of India, wherein travel and settlement within its boundaries is protected and endorsed by constitutional law. However, the disposition of people towards economic migrants entering the state is charged by xenophobia and racial discrimination. Thus, migration is a pivotal phenomenon to understand how the state of Kerala often behaves and manifests itself like a sovereign nation state, zealously protecting its territorial and ethnic boundaries. It is important here to map the ‘sub-national’ or ‘regional’ ideological undercurrents of this phenomenon through films of contemporary period as they have also reflected similar anxieties. The scholars of the migration studies have seen this particular phenomenon as part of the idea called ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer & Schiller 301-334).

In an essay named, “Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe,” Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar describe methodological nationalism as the concerns of a sovereign nation state with regards to the influx of migration into different nation states across the globe. In such cases, the anxieties about the migration are often understood by the nation states as a process which tends to unsettle an assumed status quo of national security, economy and social fabric. These nation states often produce literature or
Looking at newspaper reports about migration, I trace the public anxiety about migration or migrants which is being formulated or constructed in the public sphere of Kerala. In 2013, Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, Trivandrum, brought out a socio-economic report on the influx of migration into Kerala providing an in-depth statistical analysis of migration from different states to Kerala. The report, commissioned by the Government of Kerala, stated that there are around two million non-Keralite workers employed in the state; most of them are from Orissa, West Bengal and Bihar. The annual remittance being sent by the workers amount to Rs. 1.75 billion, amounting to four percent of Kerala’s gross domestic product. However, the report does not shed light on the contribution of these workers to the state’s GDP. While the report claimed that government was concerned about the social welfare of these workers, it also manifests anxieties about local populations’ concerns about migrant workers unsettling the securities of its health-capital, which Kerala acquired over the time (The National: web).

While the report intends to affect positive changes with regard to migration, it only contributed to existing public anxieties and predispositions. Backed by data from the report, even the Malayali intelligentsia came out openly against the influx of migration. Quite notable was the shockingly xenophobic remarks of Sugathakumari, an acclaimed poet and environmentalist. Her statement published in a prominent daily was as follows,
The biggest problem Kerala faces today is perhaps the excessive migration of workers from other states. It will lead us to a cultural disaster. We can in no way form a cultural rapport with these people who come here to work. Most of them are not just from educationally backward backgrounds, but also from criminal ones. They may eventually turn locals by marrying and settling down here. (Daily Hunt: web)

Scholars of migrations studies across the world have observed the process to be an enabling factor rather than a limiting one. The influx of migrant communities gives rise to cosmopolitan identities and subjectivities are definitive aspects of modern urban multiculturalism. Ulrich Beck has argued that in the tussles over belonging, the presence of migrants and minorities and their actions put forth exemplary dialogic imaginative ways of life and everyday cosmopolitanism (20-34) Similarly, Steven Vertovec (2005) has outlined a ‘habitual concept’ of cosmopolitanism by considering culture as a kind of ‘toolkit’ that migrants take on their journeys (6-9).

For the purpose of the study here, I draw on the theoretical understanding of deterritorialisation, proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. As far as this research is concerned, deterritorialisation refers to the unsettling of any form of fixity of identity, norms and practices. The processes then entailed by migration appear to us as a ‘productive’ threat to fixed and ideal notions of national identity. While the productive notion is expected to enable a kind of everyday cosmopolitanism, the anxieties around migration could be seen as something which is detrimental to a territorial sense of the region or the nation. However, when deterritorializing factors fails to radically
transform the structure of social formations, it remains relative rather than absolute. Deleuze and Guattari note that under such conditions, the destabilizing factors of deterritorialization concurrently produce acts of reterritorialization whereby local actors attempt to reinforce cultural and regional authenticity through acts of parochialism and xenophobia. (Deleuze & Guattari 15-54)

Deterritorialization must be thought of as a perfectly positive power that has degrees and thresholds (epistrata), is always relative, and has reterritorialization as its flipside or complement... Local movements are alterations... Every voyage is intensive, and occurs in relation to thresholds of intensity between which it evolves or that it crosses. One travels by intensity; displacements and spatial figures depend on intensive thresholds of nomadic deterritorialization (and thus on differential relations) that simultaneously define complementary, sedentary reterritorializations. (Deleuze & Guattari 54)

While anxieties about migration, in a way, reveals the internal dynamics of the Kerala society, their worries about the supposed deterritorialization of the region is moulded by existing caste and class prejudices. It is important to notice that, though the lauded Kerala Model is projected as an egalitarian developmental intervention which brought in radical changes to the socio-economic fabric of the state, it was not an all-encompassing socio-development project as it never could take large sections of Kerala society into consideration. Socio-cultural critiques like Sunny M Kapikad and Joseph Tharamangalam have enumerated the loopholes in the ‘Kerala Model’ or the ‘Kerala Modernity’.
Land reform has been considered a cornerstone of the Kerala Model of development. According to Kapikad, the land reform policies in Kerala were not. Dalits, Adivasis, and members of the fishermen community, etc. were never ever part of the project, and were not given any of the redistributed land parcels. Their fight for the land is still prevalent and serves as a reminder of the exclusionary nature of the Kerala Model. (Kapikad: web) Violent actions from the state against the democratic struggles of Adivasis in Muthanga, Chinnakanal and Dalits in Chengara and numerous other places also reflect the ideology of the state, wherein people in the fringes of society are yet to become complete ‘citizens’ and are therefore treated as those on the ‘outside’, beyond the purview of state administration and accountability. Apart from lacking any economical capital in the ways of possession of land or other material assets, these communities are under-represented in politics, government service, educational institutions, etc. These sections of communities can, therefore, be considered as the ‘outside’, the liminal periphery or the internal other against which the ‘egalitarian’ Kerala society is fashioned. Like the way migration or migrant population are supposed to unsettle the presumably harmonious social fabric of Kerala’s public life, this internal ‘outside’ also marked with the potential to destabilize and similar anxieties were consistently aired in Kerala’s public sphere.

As discussed earlier, the anxieties surrounding the large scale inward migration to Kerala corresponds with inherent dispositions towards caste and class as well. This is often evident in discourses about migration: only certain groups or classes of people are the cause of paranoia. While low-end daily wage labourers are seen as a threat,
there is a general ambivalence among the Malayalis towards various other forms of job-related migration from other states. In the contemporary period, certain classes of “Bengalis” and earlier the “Pandis” have been the cause of anxiety for the Malayalis. “Cultured” outsiders were always welcomed, whether these were the Bhadraloks of West Bengal, the caste Hindus of western or northern India, or the Tamil Brahmins of Tamil Nadu. The cultural anxiety of the Malayali seems to be directed only at the labourers from outside. Satyajit Ray, Buddhadev Das Gupta, Mrinal Sen, Rituparno Gosh, Aparna Sen, etc. are still popular and accepted among the Malayalis. Salil Choudhary, a popular film musician from West Bengal, in fact stayed in Kerala for a long period while he composed music for Chemmeen, the acclaimed Malayalam film of 1965. This has been noted in an essay by Ajith Kumar AS in which he talks about the ‘Malayalis’ fear about Bengalis’. The word ‘Bengali’ has attained a new meaning among the Malayalis, as it is being used to refer whoever (the migrants) come from the North, East or North-East states of the country. While Malayalis celebrate the communist traditions and the ‘intellectual’ cinema traditions of West-Bengal, the subalternity of the ‘Bengali’ migrant labourers and their ‘loud’ public presence often create an extreme aversion and anxiety. The formation of a United Kerala state in 1956, as part of the linguistic reorganization of Indian provinces, has acted as a catalyst for the consolidation of a sense of territoriality and thereby the othering of those who fall outside of the linguistic territory (Ajith Kumar: web).

Even within the geographically-bound territory of Kerala, different communities speak diverse languages. These linguistic communities, in fact, dilute the territorial fixities
of the geographical boundaries of the state. The existence of the Tulu language in the northernmost boundary of Kerala or Tamil in its southern and eastern fringes may be seen as challenging the idea of a linguistically unified Kerala. As I have been arguing, an imagination of a modern Kerala based on the linguistic identity required the construction of an other. As I have suggested, Tamil identity emerged as a contrast to the imagination of a modern and rational Malayali identity. The communities in the fringes of Kerala Modernity also often figure as the ‘outside’ within and the influx of migrants into the state would also fall into the same category for the purpose of a collective ‘progressive’ imagination of the region.

This particular tract of discourse is what comes up in contemporary popular Malayalam films. Thus, the study tries to map the particular ways in which this phenomenon of ‘outside’ figures in various filmic texts. The films of the time has incorporated the ‘outside’ in their narratives as a major component, whether it be Tamils, ‘Bengalis’ or the people who are considered as the “outsiders” within the imagination of the state of Kerala.

As elaborated earlier, a nation defines itself by marking the differences between the meanings which it creates for itself and that it creates for others. Imagination of the region called Kerala and its collective Malayali identity get consolidated when it is pitted against other collective identities. It could be argued that it is against the imagined Tamil regional identity which Malayalam cinema pits a Malayali regional identity to mark itself different. Malayalam cinema reinforces its region by othering the Tamil region and its markers in contemporary films.
The attempt in the following sections is to elaborate this point by exploring two major ways of representing the Tamil region, one set within a Tamil landscape and the other within the Kerala landscape, as a prototype. These two aspects have played out in different films, the plots of which revolve around what can be termed a Malayali conquest of the Tamil land or those in which Tamil region is defined by the identity of its Tamil subjects. Films like Pandipada (2005), Kerala House Vilppanakku (2004), Madirasi (2012), Malayali Mamanu Vanakkam (2002) and Meleparambil Aanveedu (1993) define the Tamil region and the Tamil subject that forms a part of the region. These two aspects of depicting the “region” in Malayalam cinema by contrasting it with Tamil region is discussed in detail. An exploration of how this contrast plays out is necessary to understand how the outside is figured in Malayalam films during this period.

A starting point for this engagement would be the analysis of the topography of the Tamil region which is marked within the plot and visual narrative of some of these Malayalam films. It is through the narrative strategy of contrasting the topography of the Tamil region with the imagined landscape of Kerala that the idea of region is established in these films. The lacks and excesses of the Tamil region is contrasted with the idealized imagination of Kerala’s natural wealth; its topography, language, customs and bodies amongst others. In most of the films under discussion in this chapter, these markers are very much evident.

A reading of the films listed above reveals how a clearly demarcated identity is assigned to the Tamil region. The region is often marked as a place which lacks water,
a resource which is found aplenty in Kerala. In a scene from *Meleparambil Aanveedu*, when the Tamil heroine Pavizham (played by Shobhana) first visits her husband, Harikrishnan’s (played by Jayaram), house in Kerala, one sees the camera dwelling on the household pond which is brimming with water. Pavizham expresses her surprise and wonderment when she exclaims, “Kadavulei, niraye thanni irikke!” which can be roughly translated as “God, there is so much of water!” The filmmaker’s an attempt to depict the pond, with its still clear water and the steps leading to it, as a marker of Harikrishnan’s prosperity. It is also a marker of the prosperity of the region defined and depicted in Malayalam films through its topography, which is always depicted as lush green with plentiful water resources. This representation, one may recollect, is drawn from earlier cinematic depictions of verdant forests and gushing rivulets which were familiarized to the Malayali public through song and dance sequences in films from the early 1950s onwards. This region called Kerala, which is defined as God’s Own Country by its own tourism department, is represented as a place of plenitude, while the Tamil region is portrayed as dry, arid and barren. Like water, other markers of the Tamil identity also figures in Malayalam films in contrast to popular conceptions of Malayali regional identity.

The next narrative element that marks out the Tamil region as distinct within the filmic narrative is the portrayal of the Tamil subject’s customs and practices. These practices are marked as specific to the Tamil region and hence different from the Kerala region, thereby making the latter unique. This setting apart or drawing the contrast of subjects who are rooted in Tamil region is done in Malayalam films
through dialogues and *mise-en-scene*. It is not just in the case of the way of life, but even in the case of rituals associated with death that one sees the contrast between the two regions. In *Malayali Mamanu Vanakkam*, the protagonist is dumbstruck by the raucous song and dance performance that accompanies the cremation of people belonging to certain castes in Tamil Nadu. The character feels it is inappropriate and different from the Malayali style of austere and solemn cremation ceremonies. What this depiction of rituals in Tamil region does is to generalize the experience of cremation or death itself. The films suggest that all Tamilians dance and sing during what should be a solemn occasion. The Tamil region is, thereby, presented as a homogenous region through these markers. The Tamilians are shown as people who take bath in open, as opposed to the Malayalis who are endowed with modern toilets and bathrooms. In *Malayali Mamanu Vanakkam*, the protagonist reveals his disgust in seeing a Tamil man taking a bath in the open near a well. The narrative of the film conveniently ignores the fact that within the Kerala region there still exist places where such public baths are not uncommon. By choosing to depict the practice of taking a bath in the open to represent the uncouth nature of Tamil life, the film sets the tone for the rest of the narrative; that the Malayali is culturally different from the Tamil. The region which is imagined and constructed through such narrative is nothing but the Kerala region or a selective yet dominant depiction of the Kerala region. In other films, made by directors like Sathyan Andhikad, who depicts the innate purity of Kerala village life, the same act of taking bath near a pond or well is considered a marker of pastoral innocence and not that of backwardness. Through
these narrative elements, and the portrayal of the practices of the Tamilians, the Tamil region is rendered in contrast to the Kerala region. The Tamil land is presented as a region where the people are not yet citizen-subjects as their consciousness itself is defined by a landscape and ethos that is markedly different from that of Kerala.

These aspects of the filmic narratives become clearer when we look at another contemporary Malayalam films like *Pandipada*. An analysis of this film reveals the homogenisation of the Tamil region that is characteristic of the first category of Malayalam films, mentioned earlier, where the plot takes place in a Tamil landscape or in both Tamil and Kerala region. As this film is also shot partly in Kerala, even the second type of construct where a Tamil subject is defined within the Kerala region can be seen, similar to other films like *Meleparambil Aanveedu* and *Malayali Mamanu Vanakkam*.

The plot of *Pandipada* revolves around 30 acres of land located in rural Tamil Nadu which the hero, Bhuvana Chandran (Dileep) buys to start a real estate venture. While the exact locale in the plot is not clearly defined, one could read that the plot of the film unfolds in one of southern districts of Tamil Nadu where kinsmen, goons and landlords reign. After buying the plot, Bhuvana Chandran lands himself in the middle of a gang war between two feudal lords of Tamil Nadu, Karuppu Swami (Rajan P Dev) who is a Malayali settled in Tamil Nadu and Pandi Durai (Prakash Raj), the former’s brother-in-law, who is a Tamilian. The plot of the land has a rivulet which irrigates the paddy fields of both Karuppu Swami and Pandi Durai and hence the landlords do not allow the plot to be sold. However, when the hero purchases the land
secretly, the two are in search of the culprit and are unable to find him. The hero, with
the help of a friend, takes Pandi Durai into confidence and joins his gang as a
henchman. In his attempt to end the feud between the two lords to facilitate his co-
ownership, the hero proposes marriage between Pandi Durai and his niece, Meena
(Navya Nair) (as is the customary practice in Tamil Nadu) who is Karuppu Swami’s
daughter. Meanwhile, Meena falls for the hero, making the situation complex. While
her father agrees to the wedding between the hero and the heroine, Pandi Durai holds
her hostage in an attempt to marry her. The hero, with the help of his parents, friends
and Pandi Durai’s mother rescues the heroine and makes Durai realise his mistakes,
thereby making him a better man who even decides to go to jail for a murder he
committed earlier during the film to trap the hero.

What the film does is to contrast the locale of the Tamil region with that of Kerala,
and thereby construct romanticized notions of the region called Kerala. In fact, it is
this contrast that is reflected in every aspect of the film including its name. Pandi is a
commonly used racial slur to refer to Tamilians (this has been discussed earlier in the
chapter), while pada refers to a battalion, invoking the Malayali imagination of
Tamilians as unruly rowdies and marauders. The name suggests that the Tamil
populace can be characterized as an unruly mob, who are solely determined by erratic
idiosyncrasies and practices. It should be noted that this reading of the Tamil subject is
popular in Kerala where a large portion of the workforce for manual labour is
constituted by migrant labourers from Tamil Nadu. The notions about these migrant
labourers, which have acquired the hegemonic status of common sense, is that these labourers too are an unruly mass, just like the subjects within the Tamil region.

It is the otherness of the Tamil region—its people, traditions, practices and even the topography—that is caricatured to produce laughter in this film. The film brings to the fore markers of this ‘other’ region including the language, feudal social order including the persistence of the zamindari system and the practice of marriage between an uncle and his niece (which is not a norm in Kerala), evoking a ‘strangeness’ which the Malayali audience can recognize as markedly different from their own “progressive” ethos. The film also shows sickle-bearing henchmen who fight it out in the streets for their landlords, bringing out a cinematic imagination of Tamil Nadu which corresponds with Tamil cinema’s imagination of its own southern region. The south which is defined as a pre-modern, feudal space in Tamil cinema here becomes what Malayalam cinema imagines the whole of Tamil Nadu region to be. In the context of Pandipada and several other films of the same period including Kerala House Udan Vilpanakku (2004) and Thenkasipattanam (2000), the Tamil region becomes the pre-modern space which the classless, casteless Malayali can identify, occupy, contest and even win. For instance, in Pandipada, Pandi Durai who has studied only till Class IV pays his respect to Bhuvana Chandran by sitting on the floor with him for lunch. The landlord even requests the hero to take him as his student and teach him English, the marker of modernity. The contrast which is being drawn between the hero and the villain, who is presented in a comical manner, is the otherness of the Tamil subject and and the Tamil region where education has not made
much of an impact, unlike the “fully literate” state of Kerala. The film assumes that the hero, with his broken English and his MA (subject not specified) degree, can become a rational individual capable of leading the crowd against the uncouth villain. Through several comic scenes, the film depicts the pre-modern violence of the Tamil South which the hero is not familiar with. By marking the Tamil region as feudal and pre-modern, the film defines a Malayali region which is classless, casteless and modern. The narrative strategy the film deploys to evoke laughter among the Malayali audience is to place the collective imagination of the Malayali nation in contrast with the imagination of the Tamil region. When one of the sidekicks, Ummachan (Cochin Haneefa) states in Malayalam, “Ninde okke abhyasam ee Tamilnattile nadakku. Dhairyam undengil Indiayilekku vada”, which roughly translates into “Your audacity and arrogance will only hold in Tamil Nadu. If you dare, come to India.” The ‘India’ which the character throws as a threat in front of the uncouth Tamil comical villains is the imagined region of Kerala or the nation of Kerala, the citizenship of which requires espousal of a certain modernity. Such a reference, which also features in the common Malayali imagination firmly locates Tamil Nadu ‘outside’ of the national imagination of Kerala in particular, and that of India in general. It may be noted here that in the post-1990 period there has been an increasing identification with the Indian nation among the people of Kerala whereas Tamil Nadu has often been as a problematic region which resists the Indian nation.

While a distinction between the two regions is marked by the presence of the topography and its mise-en-scene in films like Pandipada, in other films of the period
belonging to the second category which I mentioned earlier, the Tamil region is defined by characters from the region who by their presence in the Kerala terrain marks a contrast. These characters are marked as Tamil and are used to create a distinction between the two regions and their subjects.

It is important to note here that in most films which are set in the Tamil region, the conflict between the Malayali hero and the Tamil villains get resolved with the former falling in love with a woman (mostly the villain’s daughter) who resides in the Tamil region. For instance, in *Kerala House Udan Vilpanakku*, two friends, Dinesan (Jayasurya) and Vallabhan (Harisree Asokan), are real estate agents who try to sell a palatial house—“Kerala House”. They manage to sell the house, which is located in the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border to Narendra Prasad and family. The conflict in the film arises when Narendra Prasad’s family realises that the border between the two states runs through the middle of the land in which the house is located. While one half of the land belongs to the Malayali family, the other half belongs to a Thevar (‘Thalaivasal’ Vijay). Thevar’s only daughter Sundari (Rathi), who does not get along with Dinesan, vows to drive the family out of the house. The film which has several scenes depicting the differences in Malayali and Tamil culture and its subjects. This marked distinction, which forms the central conflict in the movie, is only resolved when Sundari falls for Dinesan.

To exemplify why the research also takes into consideration the depiction of the Tamil subject within the region called Kerala, one can take into consideration one such film where this subject stands out by its absence. In some of the contemporary Malayalam
films, the Tamil subject is portrayed as an anonymous entity who does not have any claim to citizenship within the Malayali nation. These subjects do not have the protection of the rule of the law or even by the police, thereby making them dispensable. For instance in the film *Black* (2004), an anonymous Tamil character gets picked up for a crime he had not committed and is later on killed in custodial torture.

While these general depictions are common, another aspect of what is constructed as Tamil stands out. This is one where Malayalam cinema as an industry reads the Tamil cinema and constructs an identity for the same. In some films which overtly deal with Tamil regional subjects and in some others where the subject or the region figures sparsely, Malayalam cinema comments on the ‘hero worship’ which Tamils shower on their actors. In *Meleparambil Aanvedu*, Pavizham is found hanging a photograph of the veteran actor turned politician, MGR, on her wall. When her husband’s relatives, who are unaware of this ‘strange’ practice asks her who he was, she answers, “Kadavul” or God. The scene depicts a Malayali reading of Tamil national identity, which is found in other films too. In a film about Kerala’s corrupt and superfluous political practices, *Sandesham*, one of the protagonists, Prabhakaran (Srinivasan) who is a local area leader of a left leaning political party talks of how easy it is for politicians in Tamil Nadu to win elections unlike in Kerala. He feels that Tamils will vote to power any popular film actor, like MGR while in Kerala, the ‘educated’ citizens make informed political choices.

Tamil Nadu, in Malayalam cinema, is a land where people are naïve enough to have loved superstars. But this reading of the neighbouring state’s film industry through
depictions of its fan following, reflects the conflicts which the Malayalam film industry has had with its Tamil counterpart. As mentioned earlier in this text, there was a historic conflict based on lack of studios in Kerala that caused a breakaway of sorts. What should be noted here is that while Tamil film industry where stars like MGR, Shivaji Ganeshan and Rajanikath seem to command public adoration, Malayalam film industry had not witnessed any star following in this scale. The limited size of the industry (when compared to Tamil film industry) and the nature of films had failed to produce a stardom similar to that in the Tamil film industry. Therefore it can be read that the distinction between the Tamil regional identity and that of Kerala’s regional identity is also a reflection of the distinction which Malayalam cinema has made between itself and its Tamil counterpart. What can be argued is that the distinction which the Kerala cultural sphere (that largely influenced the imagination of the Kerala region) made between the two regions is in itself a reaction to what the Malayalam cinema thought of Tamil Cinema and its studio culture, or vice versa. The two cinemas and the two regions are set apart in many ways to make way for a Malayali nationalism in which Kerala region forms an integral part. With the setting up of studios in Kerala, the Malayalam films set themselves apart from the Tamil films and hence a mention of the Tamil film industry in Malayalam cinema is a reflection of this breakaway.

One also has to engage with how this conflict between the two cinemas plays out in a genre of films, now popularly called “New Generation” films in Kerala. These films which begs to strike a difference from the normative regional and subject narratives of
Malayalam films also depicts this conflict in different ways. It should be noted that these films are made at a time when fans associations and fan following of ‘super stars’ in Malayalam films industry has become common and accepted, much like in Tamil cinema. Hence these films depict these changing times of Malayalam cinemascape where stars have become a reality and their stardom accepted even in the midst of cultural conflicts. In the film, *Traffic* (2011), the plot of which revolves around a heart transplant operation for which the organ is supposed to be transported from one place to another amidst rush-hour traffic, has a sequence where a colony named Bilal colony has to be cleared for the vehicles. The only way to clear the colony, which has a reputation of violence and criminality, is to contact the local fans’ association of the star whose child needs the transplant to survive. The fans rule the roost and clear the colony out of their worship for the star. A depiction of this sort would not have been possible in Malayalam films before early 2000s where fan worship was exclusively meant to define the Tamil region. Such instances figuring in Malayalam cinema of the recent past marks the same conflict which the film industry had with Tamil film industry. Hence the research would also look at the changing landscape of Malayalam cinema with regard during the 2000s, to bring out the conflicts which it has had with the Tamil film industry. What will be looked into is also the economical conflicts that plays out between the two industries as discussed within the Kerala cultural sphere. For this, a look into the discourses surrounding the economic stature of the Malayalam film industry and its new avenues is required. Also a probe into the inflow of Tamil films in dubbed formats into theatres in Kerala should
be looked into while trying to define how Malayalam cinema has defined itself thereby defining Kerala region. Quoting a study done by National University of Law, Bangalore, the Malayali audience contributes 25 per cent of the revenue for both Tamil and Telugu film industries as these films are screened in theatres in Kerala. Under these evolving conditions a construction of the region called Kerala can be done within the Malayalam cinema only by considering several conflicts and contrasts with the Tamil region and its cinema.

*Mayilattam* (2004), directed by VM Vinu is another movie that deploys this trope. This film stars Jayaram, who acts in a double role—both as the hero and the villain. The narrative of the film unfolds in a village in Kerala where where agriculture is the main source of income for the villagers. Devan (Jayaram), is the prominent farmer in the village who wins the prestigious “Karshakasree” award for the best farmer of the year, bringing accolades to the villagers. Devan is the only son of a traditional Nair family. His character is demure, innocent and he lives his life for the family. His parents have died and thus the responsibility of the family rests on his shoulders. The hardworking farmer makes it possible to support his sisters and family. While the kind-hearted Devan is always considerate towards his siblings and family, his sisters and family were, in fact, exploiting their easy-going gullible brother for all their means and luxuries. They do not even let Devan marry as it might reduce their share of inherited property. However, Devan’s uneventful life takes a drastic turn as he is accidentally involved in a serious brawl with a local goon. Fearing retaliation, Devan leaves for Pollachi, a border town in Tamil Nadu which shares boundaries with
Kerala. From this moment onwards, the narrative of the film shifts between two geographical spaces, a rustic village in Kerala and a similar setting in Tamil Nadu, Pollachi.

While Devan was missing at large, due to the clash at home, his sidekick accidentally finds a look-alike of Devan in the street, drinking alcohol and dancing to the tune of drums in a funeral procession. The sidekick is astonished to see Devan in such a jovial mood, drinking and dancing for a street procession. The spectacle of the funeral procession is shot in the movie as the introductory scene of the Palani (Jayaram) and it evokes laughter as the wingman ridicules the dead and the customary practices.

4.5 “New Migrants” and Malayalam Cinema

In contemporary Malayalam films, “Bengalis” have replaced the Tamilians both in villain roles and as comic figures. It may be noted that there have been full-length feature films where migration or the outsider emerges as a major thematic players. *Masala Republic* (2014), *Appuram Bengal Ippuram Thiruvithamkoor* (2016) and *Achedin* (2015) are some of the movies which have migration to Kerala as primary concerns. “Bengali” characters have emerged as the villains, echoing the popular discourse around the “criminal nature” of the migrants in many of the contemporary films. Of the many films where ‘Bengalis’ figured in the plot, *Masala Republic* stands out prominently as a social satire which has a full-length roles for migrant characters. The film, directed by debutant director Visakh G. S. follows cinematic strategies of a spoof, and satirizes the ban on pan masala and how it supposedly affects the migrant
labourers in Kerala. Indrajith acted in the lead role as a cop in charge of Anti Gutka Squad. From the beginning itself, the film tries to establish that *gutkha*, chewing tobacco or paan masala are the lifeblood of migrant workers and a ban on these products directly affects their productivity. The strict police officer, Shambhu (Indrajith), in charge of AGS, goes on a rampage against ‘Bengali’ migrant labourers who are portrayed as the main ‘abusers’ of the ‘harmful’ substance. Once the government ban on pan masala comes into force, it becomes the substance of ‘underground’, and becomes the favoured commodity for the ‘mafia’, where the entire mafia is run by ‘Bengali’ migrants. Apart from this particular thread around pan masala, the movie further digresses to various other routes, only to portray the ‘concerns’ of the migrant labourers. Sanju Bhai (Sumangal) who hails from Assam is a migrant labourer who acts as the supplier of the pan masala to the migrant masses with the help of a bunch of locals played by Vinay Fort, Soubin Shahir, Shine Tom Chacko and Srinath Bhasi. While the locals are seemingly friendly with the migrant supplier of the pan masala, purely on the basis of the business interest, they also carry fetishes and anxieties about the migrants throughout the film. When pan masala became the illegal substance, Sanju Bhai ventured into selling ‘Masala Noodles’ with the help of Soubin Shahir and the rest of the motley crew. The director has tried to bring as many ‘concerns’ of migrant community as possible within the narrative of the film. Balettan (P Balachandran) and Beeranikka (Mamukkoya) try to float a new political party to address the issues of ‘Bengalis’ which is named as ‘Naya Naukri Sena’, NNS. The Hindi name is to attract the Hindi speaking population of the migrant
labourers. The first issue they take up on behalf of the migrant labourers is the increase in the price of onion, which is part of the staple diet of migrants as suggested by the film. By the end of the film, NNS evolves as a pressure group and becomes part of the government by raising the issues faced by the migrants. The party founder becomes a minister looking after the welfare of migrants. Though the narrative of the film further digresses into many other aspects, my interest in this chapter has been on the portrayal of the migrant labourers and how the concerns of the migrants are articulated within the filmic text. The narrative of the film treats migration from north-east states of the country into Kerala as having a uniform characteristic. Within the narrative of the film, one sees the migrants as people who chew pan masala or ghutka, without which they can’t work. While the migrant labourers appeared only as criminals in many of the other movies, the migrant characters figure, in *Masala Republic* the entire narrative is devoted to the issues of the migrant labourers. That is where the film differs from many other films. However, as a result of the caricatured representations, the film falls into the trap of subscribing to the dominant imagination around migration to Kerala. In recent films like *Amar Akbar Anthony* (2015), *Appuram Bengal Ippuram Thiruvithamkoor* and *Achedin*, migrant labourers figure but only in a way that corresponds to the cultural anxieties of Malayalis around migration. A recent film like *Kismath* (2016), however, tries to highlight the discriminatory treatment faced by the migrants at the hands of the law-enforcing agencies.
4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how the idea of region is imagined and articulated in contemporary Malayalam films. I have elaborated in this chapter how the phenomenon of migration to Kerala from other states figures as a central concern of the imagining of the region. I have explored this through an exploration of the tropes of the “outside” and the “inside” that has been consistently deployed in the narratives of contemporary Malayalam films, thus locating it within a specific temporal context. In this chapter, I have explored how the imagination of Malayali “nation” has been articulated and redefined in different ways over the years. I have suggested that in contemporary times, the social phenomenon of migration and the construction of the migrant as the other is central to the imagination of the Malayali nation. It is through engaging with the “commonsensical” anxieties about migration that it “intrudes” into the social, cultural and political “integrity” of the Malayali nation. I have also explored how the re-thinking of the phenomenon of migration in the light of new theorizations of “migration” through the frameworks of “minor cosmopolitanism”, “deterritorialization” that may help us to understand the newer preoccupations with a “sovereign”, inward looking national or regional imagination. In my exploration of this phenomenon I have treated the film as the vehicle of everyday rhetoric and discourses in the ideological constitution of the Malayali nation.