Conclusion

TOWARDS NEW CINEMATIC IMAGINATIONS OF THE REGION

The current thesis has attempted to study how the region is configured in Malayalam cinema. The thesis has observed that, from its very inception, the Malayalam film industry was involved in the project of imagining the region. This was largely so because the region which currently comprises Kerala was historically formed from three distinct territorial units – the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and the colonial province of Malabar. The unified state of Kerala was imagined and produced through the route of the Malayalam language, which was spoken across these three regions. Thus, linguistic cultural products – like literature, theatre and art productions as well as the new medium of cinema – had an integral role in imagining and later substantiating the new territory of Kerala and the associated subjectivity of the Malayali public.

The thesis had attempted to produce a critical engagement with such formations of subjectivity, and how they are constructed through cinematic representations from the late 1920s. The introductory chapter had laid out a brief analysis of various existing critical works on film studies in India. The emphasis of this chapter has been to analyze how these prior researchers had engaged with the questions of language, literariness and regional nationalism embedded in the cinematic text. The chapter recognizes how cinema from the south Indian states have been identified as a distinct
field of enquiry within the broader corpus of Indian film studies. The study of Malayalam cinema is an emerging academic endeavour, drawing much critical attention over the last two decades. The chapter further identifies how certain technological advancements, particularly the development of sound technology in cinema, allows language to enter the diegetic frame for the first time. This led to the development of regional and language-based film industries, catering to speakers of specific languages. The markets for sound films were further reinforced following the post-independence linguistic reorganization of states in 1956. This process, the chapter notes, led to the consolidation of specific regional markets, marked by territorial boundaries, and distinct linguistic audiences for whom these films were made. However, rather than region defining the nature of regional cinema, I propose that it is in fact distinct linguistic cinema which allowed for the imagination, articulation for, and subsequent formation of linguistically-organized regions in postcolonial India.

The first chapter of the thesis has dealt with the emergence of the Malayalam film industry. The chapter initially locates itself by drawing from the debates surrounding the film Celluloid released in 2013, which fictionalized the making of Vigathakumaran, which has retroactively given the tag of the first Malayalam cinema. The release of Celluloid renewed debates on what constitutes the first "Malayalam" film, with accusations levelled that the film journalist Chelangatt had put forward this narrative as he was writing a book on J. C. Daniel, who directed Vigathakumaran. Despite this, it should be noted that Vigathakumaran was the first film which was produced in the geographic territory of present-day Kerala. The thesis has further
identified how Vigathakumaran was violently attacked by upper caste elites who were offended by the fact that the role of a Nair woman was played by P. K. Rosy, a Dalit Christian woman.

The chapter then analyses how the new medium of cinema produced modern and secular public spaces, where erstwhile caste and communal demarcations were rendered insignificant. This egalitarian potential of cinema lay in the fact that people from all castes and communities were seated together in the same space, the only criterion for entry to which was the financial capability to buy a cheap ticket. This particular aspect brought different communities of the region together who could collectively imagine a linguistically formed territory called Kerala. The chapter then focuses on how literary and arts movements, particularly the Jeeval Sahitya Samiti and the Purogamana Sahitya Sangham initiated by the left political movements, took forward the project of the Aikya Kerala movement which envisaged the formation of the linguistic state of Kerala by unifying its separate provinces.

The thesis claims that this particular project also had its influence on the film industry of the region. The chapter takes into account three specific films from the 1950s – Neelakkuyil, Newspaper Boy and Rarichan Enna Pouran. These films embody the aims and objectives of the Aikya Kerala movement and its proposed project of unifying the Malayalam-speaking populace. The imagination of the region, in these films, was developed through specific aesthetic and thematic conventions and representational strategies which aimed to portray Kerala as a culturally and geographically distinct region. An emphasis was placed on the social realist mode of
narrative which embodied images representative of cultural and geographic authenticity. These films also discuss socially relevant issues, the resolution for which lay in the future of the region. Furthermore, the thesis also observes the ambivalence towards modernity in each of these films. Finally, the chapter concludes that the films from the 1950s engage in producing certain sensibilities of being a "Malayali" and thereby positing the citizenhood of the future state of Kerala in the minds of the viewers.

The second chapter follows the trajectory of Malayalam cinema through the 1960s up to the 1980s. This period is characterized as the "golden age of Malayalam cinema" for the numerical proliferation as well as the cinematic quality of film productions. The chapter proposes that one can observe a new distinct aesthetic convention taking form within films of this period. The chapter extensively covers the cinematic legacies of renowned directors like K. S. Sethumadhavan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and John Abraham.

The chapter closely engages with three films directed by K. S. Sethumadhavan – *Odayil Ninnu*, *Yakshi* and *Anubhavangal Paalichakal*. Sethumadhavan was most notable for his collaboration with prominent literary figures who were closely associated with the progressive literary tradition. Sethumadhavan had collaborated with or adapted works of Thakazhi, Parappurath and Kesavadev and brought them to the cinematic realm. One peculiar aspect of Sethumadhavan's directorial oeuvre is his propensity towards the genre of social melodrama. The chapter critically engages with the shift from social realism to social melodrama within the Malayalam film industry.
during the early 1960s. Drawing from Marcia Landy, the chapter understands that the genre of social melodrama is significant for its widespread popular appeal. The chapter also identifies that this genre also emerges as a tactical manoeuvre required to translate the cathartic effect of literature into the cinematic medium. The analysis of the films reveals how larger social conflicts are internalized and personalized within these films, wherein the “modernity” of the protagonist stands questioned. The ambivalence towards modernity, which was notable in Malayalam cinema during the 1950s, is heightened in Sethumadhavan's films, leading to a dichotomous tension between modern rationality and pre-modern feudal sensibilities.

The chapter then traces the emergence of the New Cinema Movement in Kerala from the 1970s onwards. Notable for their remarkable technical proficiency, the movies were directed by trained auteurs like Adoor, G. Aravindan and John Abraham. The chapter also notes that New Cinema emerged in Kerala as a parallel cinema due to the financial support of film societies and cooperatives during the period. The chapter also observes films directed by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and how these films are characterized by a new aesthetic form which worked within the interstices of realism and melodrama. These films, as Ratheesh Radhakrishnan points out, fail to fall under the easy compartmentalization of popular and art cinema. Finally, drawing from the works of John Abraham, the chapter concludes that the New Cinema movement emerged not through state intervention, as is popularly claimed, but through the concerted efforts of filmmakers who explored new and innovative methods of collective production.
The final chapter of the thesis analyses the representations of the region in contemporary Malayalam cinema from the late 1980s to the present day. The chapter identifies that, by the late 1980s, there is a crisis in film production in Kerala. This was due to several conjunctural factors including the lack of investment following crackdowns on black money and the eruption the Gulf War, coupled with the poor reception that superstar films were receiving from audiences. This, I propose, led to the emergence of a new form of film called “minimum return films”. These low budget movies, featuring a new breed of actors, were built around comic and caricatured roles. The emergence of such films reinvigorated the industry with an increasing number of producers choosing to invest money in “minimum return” film which guaranteed marginal profits. These films usually contain low-key characters, whose follies and fallacies give rise to laughter. These characters, rather than the larger-than-life roles of superstar films, were closer to home and relatable to the audience. The films also involve formulaic plots, with the young protagonist going through several comic travails and finally winning the respect and adoration of his neighbourhood.

Following this, the chapter elaborates the construction of a regional or sub-national identity in Kerala. These formations are reflected as representations of the “inside” and “outside” within the region as imagined in popular Malayalam cinema of the contemporary period. The chapter takes into account the large influx of low-level labourers who have migrated to Kerala over the past two decades. This inward migration to Kerala has been received with much anxiety and discomfort by the larger
Malayali public and its intelligentsia. While the Tamil figure had historically been constructed as the “other” or the “outside” in popular Malayalam imagination (as well as in cinematic representations), this has been replaced with the figure of the "Bengali" migrant, a phenomenon which invisibilizes the remarkable diversity of the migrant population in Kerala. The thesis has drawn from the processes of territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization according to the theoretical conceptions forwarded by Deleuze and Guattari.

The chapter, then, analyses two distinct kinds of films engendering the 'other' or the 'outside' in popular imagination of the region. The first kind of films, including *Malayali Maamanu Vanakkamm*, *Pandippada*, *Meleparambile Aanveedu*, etc., posit the Tamil as the antithesis of the region of Kerala. This is enabled through the depiction of Tamil culture, landscape and people as alien to the rational, progressive and literate population of the “cultured” Malayali. Thus, Tamil topography is characterized as arid and dry, its cultures as superstitious and superfluous, and its people as rowdy, uncivilized and uncouth. The second category of films, like *Masala Republic*, *Amar Akbar Antony*, *Appuram Bengal Ippuram Thiruvitamkoor*, etc., involve the depiction of "Bengali" migrants as 'outside' of Kerala's region and popular imagination. The "Bengali" characters have replaced Tamilians in villain roles and comic figures. Migration and migrant emerge as important thematic elements in contemporary Malayalam cinema over the past decade or so.

While the thesis has attempted to produce a comprehensive study of the region and its imagination in Malayalam cinema, it is far from conclusive. This study has been
limited due to the wide period it has attempted to encompass, and due to the lack of adequate secondary sources dealing with the issues and concerns of the current study. The thesis, in this regard, should be seen as a preliminary enquiry into a promising field of study and it opens up new questions and possibilities for further research. A more detailed study of cinema from the region, prior to the 1950s, has to be undertaken in order to understand how the distinct regions of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar were formulated in early cinematic representations. A focused study of Malayalam cinema during the 1960s has not yet been undertaken. K. S. Sethumadhavan, who has left behind a huge cinematic legacy in terms of reshaping aesthetic and generic conventions, has barely received any academic attention. The research shall attempt to further study and explore the cinematic contributions of this director, in order to understand how the region was configured during the 1960s. Furthermore, the economic migration from other states to Kerala is a continuing process, reshaping popular opinions and dispositions. A deeper and more nuanced analysis of this phenomenon has to be undertaken to further understand how popular Malayali imagination if produced in contrast to these exteriorized others.