CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A SURVEY OF THE LINGUISTIC TERRAIN OF MALAYALAM CINEMA

In the current thesis, I attempt to map the ways in which Kerala has been broadly and diversely imagined since the time of the linguistic reorganization of the states of India in 1956. My aim is to understand how various cinematic strategies have been deployed to define Kerala as a territory with its own geographic, linguistic and regional contours, identifications and assertions. As a work belonging to the discipline of film studies, this research takes into account the specific nature of the cinematic apparatus as a complex machinery of mass viewership and engagement, and the particular historical and social contexts within which Malayalam cinema brings into depiction the cinematic imagination(s) of the region of Kerala. Prior to the linguistic reorganization of the states, the region currently defined as Kerala was constituted by Travancore and Cochin, both of which were princely states, and Malabar, which was directly under the control of the British Presidency. During different historical points, the “idea” of Kerala has been produced “differently” through the mediums of print (within the literary sphere, for instance) and cinema. However, cinema and literature are entirely different in terms of their accessibility to the general public, their means and processes of production, as well as their networks of circulation and distribution.
Therefore, one may arrive at a tentative understanding that the forms acquired by the literary and cinematic imaginations of Kerala are also different.

However, this study is also aware that in its early years, following the linguistic reorganization of states, the Malayalam film industry not only drew a lot of its material from the sphere of literary works, but furthermore, a number of literary personalities had begun venturing into the film industry as script-writers, lyricists, actors, film-makers etc. As mediums of mass communication, both print and cinema produce publics. But print and cinema, or any visual medium, are mediated by various criteria of eligibility which define how, and to what extent, they could be accessed by their respective readership and audience. Print requires its readers to be literate. In India, a literate public is historically synonymous with an upwardly mobile class and caste denomination. The print medium, which has the capacity to interpellate individuals and groups into a community – orienting the public towards linguistic formations of regional nationalism in the case of Kerala and other states in India – is also based on excluding the “illiterate”. To access the medium of cinema, however, it is not necessary for one to be literate or to belong to any particular class. If one can buy a ticket, they can be party to the same cinematic experience as anyone else who is seated within the closed auditorium. This is what makes popular cinema a peculiarly commercial enterprise with an immensely popular appeal. However, for cinema to mobilize a public, a degree of identification is required between what is being depicted on the screen and the people who are watching it. The language spoken in cinema, the cultural, temporal and territorial sameness between what is being shown and those
who see it, are important axes through which the public is mobilized. By negating the barriers of literacy, cinema, especially popular cinema, has had the capacity to mobilize a public by integrating groups belonging to diverse caste, class and religious denominations.

It is important for this thesis, then, to understand how a particular form of cinematic practice and experience came into being with the linguistic reorganization of the Southern states, where one’s subjectivity as part of a community was first and foremost to be determined by their linguistic association. This thesis also takes into consideration that part of the linguistic reorganization of states was not only the constitution of the political identity of a Malayali public, but also one that is commercially viable. This would also imply that the commercial aspirations of the film industry brought into existence a market for its circulation. An important observation for this thesis is that the market for regional cinema emerged not necessarily by what is historically recognized as Malayalam cinema. Rather, such a market was already in the process of being put together even before the first Malayalam film (*Vigathakumaran* 1928) was made. *Vigathakumaran*, which has currently been identified as the first film produced in the region comprising Kerala, was fashioned as a *Malayalakkara* (Malayalam land) cinematic enterprise by director J. C. Daniel. Prior to this film, it was not that the people of Kerala were not familiar with the experience of cinema. Cinema had, in fact, already come to the land in the form of touring talkies and makeshift exhibition units which were screening foreign films and mythologicals and devotionals made in Bombay and Madras. One
can therefore say that a market for cinema already pre-existed the market for Malayalam language films.

The first ever film made in what was later demarcated as Kerala was, therefore, a self-conscious enterprise towards the institution of a Malayalam cinema, one that is commercially and aesthetically autonomous, and distinct from the film enterprises produced in Tamil, Hindi and foreign languages. J. C. Daniel had voiced his visions for a Malayalam film that was supposed to be distinct from the mythologicals and devotionals made in Hindi and Tamil, and the kind of foreign films that were being imported and circulated. He asserted that Malayalam films should incorporate the form and content of social dramas, similar to those being made by international filmmakers such as Charlie Chaplin. Daniel’s aspiration was to create films that could be called by Malayalis as “our” films. The Malayalam film, according to Daniel should have to have its distinct cinematic language, narratives, themes, and economy of production, circulation and distributions. Moreover, unlike the films that were being made in other regions, the films produced in Kerala were envisaged to incorporate aesthetic, social and cultural elements that were familiar to the people of Malayalakkara. The coming of sound technology to Malayalam films further consolidated the regional basis for the Kerala cinema market. The first sound film to be made in Kerala was Balan (1938), directed by S. Nottani.

I have broadly categorized my thesis according to overlapping periods that have been identified by pre-existing scholarship on Malayalam cinema. I have attempted to chart the history of Malayalam cinema through the study of three periods: 1950s, 1960s-80s,
and from the 1990s till the present day. These categorizations have not been arrived at only as a temporal consideration. Nor can such a narrative be fixed within sharp categories of distinction. However, these time periods also coincide with thematic, generic and aesthetic forms that appear to evolve during given periods and as part of their social, cultural and political contexts. I take into consideration the existing scholarly descriptions and characterizations of cinemas that emerged during the given time periods. Films made during the 1950s-60s have largely been defined as social melodramas. The films that characterize the following decade (1970s-80s) have often been held remarkable for their paradigm shift in aesthetic and narrative considerations. Films of this period have been defined as technically polished auteur endeavours by graduates of FTII, such as Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and other prominent directors such as M. T. Vasudevan Nair and Aravindan. They have also been defined as art-house cinema, and lauded for their social realism in aesthetic as well as narrative themes. I finally engage with the cinema of the 1990s to that of the present day. These are popular films that I understand as the manifest products of Gulf migration and the economy that it enabled in the modern state of Kerala.

In the following sections, as part of the introduction to my larger research on how the region of Kerala is constituted through cinema, I first attempt to understand how the term Indian cinema has been defined. We may consider Indian cinema a conglomeration of the various vernacular cinema enterprises. However, such a broad understanding effectively invisibilizes the perceived as well as real hegemony of the popular Hindi film industry at the national and global levels, and the primacy of the
Tamil film industry in the south of India. I therefore attempt to arrive at a definition of Indian cinema, and with reference to that I shall try to understand what it would mean for a film industry to call itself a regional film industry. How then does a regional film industry identify and assert its existence, as part of the umbrella category called Indian cinema or as something that is ideologically and formally distinct not only from the Indian national cinema as a whole but also from other regional cinemas? What then are the specific ways in which Malayalam cinema assert itself as a regional cinema, and how does it cinematically configure the contours of the modern state of Kerala?

Following the above considerations, I look at how Malayalam cinema created a democratic public sphere, thereby making a historic intervention in the socio-cultural politics of the region. I study the ways in which Malayalam cinema cut across the specificities of caste, class and regions to produce a public that then became a part of the cinematic imagination of the region of Kerala. Effectively, what follows is a comprehensive history of the scholarly and popular debates on the emergence of the Malayalam film industry and the ways in which Malayalam cinema has historically and variously constituted the territorial and political identity of the region of Kerala.

1.1 Contesting the Idea of a Singular Indian National Cinema

There have been several debates which have raised the question of what constitutes national cinema when it comes to the discipline of Indian film studies. As the film scholar, Stephen Hughes, has observed, this seemingly innocuous question often poses as an enormous challenge for Indian film studies.
As a ‘national cinema’, the range and ethnic diversity of Indian cinema presents an enormous challenge for Indian film studies. At best, the term Indian cinema refers to kind of impossible object, which is too enormous and varied to be adequately studied as a whole. Instead film scholars have for the most part worked within the limits provided by the regional language based cinemas assuming that they are the self-contained units of study which collectively construe Indian cinema as a whole. (Hughes 218-219)

Similar views are put forward by Paul Willemen in his Preface to *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (1998). As noted by Hughes, Willemen describes the difficulty in imagining the territorial integrity of Indian nation-state as a decisive factor in describing its film industry. Such a notional understanding of Indian cinema would highly restrict our understanding of significant contributions of colonial cinema as well as the contentious and interactive dynamics of various post-independence regional cinema. He further explains that the very notion of Indian cinema involves a process of essentialism, whereby specific regional, personal and historical experiences are subsumed under the dominant national identity which constantly attempts to, but fails at, homogenizing the public. He states,

Any account of Indian cinema cannot but run the risk of essentialism as outlined by Deane, including its reactionary aspects and distasteful ancestral longings. To acknowledge, with Ahmad, that the art-form defined under such murky circumstances is always too diverse to fit neatly under any label that could be affixed to it, is small comfort, especially in the context of
contemporary India where the risks to life and limb of ancestral longings and essentialism are so gruesomely made real. In such a context, it is not enough simply to point out that India is and always was plural and diverse and that any attempt to essentialise it, to force a coincidence between territory and chronology, or between nation, ethnicity, religion and state, is un-Indian (in the sense that it betrays the struggle which achieved an independent state in the first place) as well as murderous. (9)

As Hughes and Willemen clearly illustrate, a unified national cinema in India remains an impossibility, and Indian cinema, at best, could be defined as an agglomeration of distinct regional film industries. While there has not been a singular, monolithic entity called Indian national cinema, one could see the multiple language films, existing as self-contained and self-sustained entities and thereby producing multiple “national”, “regional” or “vernacular” cinemas across the country. As Hughes observes, the prior research on regional language based cinemas assumes each of these to be self-contained units of study which collectively constitute Indian cinema as a whole. This observation also mirrors the multiple regions or linguistic states which are collectively imagined to form the nation state called India. The impossibility of a singular Indian cinema, as Willemen notes, reflects the impossibility of defining India as a “nation” rather than as multiple specificities defined by the regional and personal experiences.

The idea of a “unified” Indian nation was largely a project which was constituted within the imagination of colonial rulers and nationalists. This political unit called India is often represented as encompassing a civilizational unity unifying a multiple
number of national identities which seemingly exist as a ‘nation state’ in its broadest sense. The formation and imagination of the “nation” was also seen as a compulsion in time; the colonial form of governance was inherited by the new nationalist administration and new country had to be conceived as a nation state in order to be in time with the new global order of nation states.

The overarching idea of the Indian nation state as an umbrella category with multiple nationalities under it was contested almost immediately after independence when different regional movements started erupting with the demand of re-organizing the politically imagined territorial unit called India into linguistically defined states. It is also important to notice that there were in fact multiple claims for sovereignty, particularly from the different princely states of the subcontinent. All of such claims were put to rest through political interventions and negotiations, tempered by the passionate nationalism following independence.

The reorganization of states on linguistic basis was catalysed by increasing demands made by populist regional groups, formed through the mobilization of distinctly regional forms of nationalism. The trajectory by which the linguistically defined state re-organization took place has its own significance in constituting different regional bases for the Indian cinema. The language based state re-organization resulted in the creation of language based cinema industries too.
1.2 Cinema, Creating a Democratic Public Sphere

When cinema as a medium was introduced in the sub-continent, it reconstituted the pre-existing social hierarchies of caste and class. The fact that it had to be exhibited to a mass audience within a closed space effectively disrupted prevailing segregations based on social hierarchies. People from different caste and class backgrounds, who were generally separated by norms of untouchability and pollution, were compelled to sit in close proximity and watch the same film. The commercial determination of cinema could then radically disrupt traditional ways of existing as a social formation (Venkiteswaran 68-70). We also have to understand that in the early 20th century, the introduction of cinema to Indian society had a constitutive function; that of constituting market through its self-production as an object of capitalism. The only determinant factor which decides the accessibility to this medium is the ability to afford a ticket to watch a film, thereby producing the possibility of production of a public sphere where other social and cultural capital do not play a determining role. The constitution of a consumer market and that of a democratic public sphere, to this extent, coincide with the “normalization” of commercial cinema and its viewing practices. In this manner, the introduction of cinema played a significant role in destabilizing existing social norms and giving form to more inclusive and egalitarian public spaces.

The desirable changes cinema as a mass medium brought in re-constituting a kind of social fabric were noted by scholars of film studies. The trajectory by which early film viewing practices influenced the formation of a “democratic” public sphere in South
India was discussed by scholars like Sivathamby, in the case of Tamil cinema, and C. S. Venkiteswaran and Moorkoth Kunhappa (one of the early writers on Malayalam cinema) who have observed this particular phenomenon in the case of early film-viewing practices in the state of Kerala.

According to C. S. Venkiteswaran, when cinema evolved as a mass entertainment medium, it had followed the routes of the theatre movement which had already created a kind of democratic “secular” public sphere in Kerala. During the 1950s, the region comprising Kerala was already in the process of getting unified as a geographically united state - combining the two princely states of Travancore and Cochin with Malabar, which was under the Madras Presidency - largely as a result of debates about Aikyakeralam (Movement for a united state of Kerala). At this juncture, cinema in Kerala was also in a process of creating a space where existing and erstwhile identities of caste and class were rendered irrelevant. As Venkiteswaran points out, the intervention of cinema was, in effect, creating virtually a “new secular” space by ways of inventing narratives and languages of familiarity which were largely encompassing differences of regional, cultural, class and caste variances and yet considering them in the ways of bringing them into narratives, language and the plot. With these sorts of new changes happening around cinema, Venkiteswaran observes that, by the 1950s Malayali viewers were in fact entering a new secular narrative of cinema, materially substantiated by the “talkies”, to watch and to be part of a democratic secular cinematic space where everyone seemed to be equal. Apart from the desire to see oneself projected through the medium of cinema, what these films largely projected
during the time, was also the idea of Kerala as a unified linguistic, geographical and political unit. This particular phenomenon could be considered as the rudimentary development of imagining a region through the medium of cinema. Thus, looking at this period of Malayalam cinema is pivotal in understanding how the region is reconstituted in regional cinema.

In the Kerala of 1950’s, cinema, like the theatre movement, was actually creating a space where caste and class and other erstwhile identities were irrelevant. It was virtually a ‘new secular’ space, creating narratives and language of its own that cut across regional, cultural, caste and class differences, yet addressed them, one and all. So in fact the Malayali viewer of the 50’s was indeed entering a new secular narrative world created and offered by the ‘talkies’ (the talking films) to watch and participate in ‘cinema’, the secular space where everyone is equal. It was in a way the playing out or ‘performing’ of a secular nation. So it was a desire to see oneself projected, and what was ‘projected’ was also the idea of Kerala, which films created, showed and invited the audience to share in. (Venkiteswaran 70)

Moorkoth Kunhappa, in his book Cinima (Cinema), talks about the popular nature of cinema and asserts how the logic of desire makes a cinematic public possible. The accessibility to cinema was only defined by the purchasing power of the audience to buy relatively cheap tickets for the films. Kunhappa notes that movie tickets, in the 1950s, were cheaper than an affordable meal.
In villages, older forms of entertainment have disappeared and new ones are yet to take their place. Humans sustain themselves not just with food. They need music, dance, images, stories and drama for survival. How can they access these? Where do they find it? The answer to these silent, but important questions is the cinema hall...If you pay 8 annas, you get stories, drama, images, songs. In two or three hours, you could hear the biggest singers in India. Do you want to see the acting of the world famous Charlie Chaplin? You just need to have a cinema hall in your town. What else do you get for 8 annas? Not even a good meal. (Kunhappa 21)

Sivathamby’s observations on early Tamil cinema viewing practices are applicable in the case of Malayalam cinema as well. Until the coming of cinema and its exhibition to the mass, Tamils cutting across different social hierarchies were never ever able to access different art forms and performances available until then. It was cinema which brought in Tamil people across the social boards under one roof.

But in the Tamilian context the film has a very significant place in that it is the first aesthetic expression of the Tamils that had the entire Tamils as its patrons. A bird’s eye view of the history of the performing arts among the Tamils would show that all those arts (dancing, music and drama) in their practice and performance did not bring all the Tamils, irrespective of their social distinctions to the same auditorium. It has already been shown that in the period of Cilappatikaram itself the classification made of Kuttu performances was based on the social status of the audience. The Vettiyal and the Potuviyal
classification, mentioned in Cilappatikaram reveals a classification based on the audience. This applies to music and dance too; in the case of music there is enough reason to infer that the Vettiyal Potuviyal bifurcation has started in the pre Cilappatikaram period itself. (Sivathamby 4)

Cinema, as a medium, has the potential to bring about significant changes in existing social relations, by disrupting social norms through enabling increased access to new public spaces. Apart from opening up new egalitarian spaces, the proliferation of the medium in different regions of the sub-continent, especially the following the advent of sound cinema, necessitated the “use” of specific vernacular languages, thereby reconfiguring conceptions of the region in particular linguistic markets. This research also takes into account the ways in which a given region (in this case, Kerala) is reconfigured at various historical moments by cinema as a medium.

1.3 The Role of Theatre and Cinema in Consolidating a Linguistic identity

It is in the cultural realm that any political movement takes a concrete form. The literary and cultural imagination of people on the field of language politics had its supplements in the realm of popular culture. The progressive literary movements, from its earliest formations as Jeeval Sahitya Sangham, have played a key role in defining Malayali identity. The Jeeval Sahitya Sangham, as well as the later Purogamana Kala Sahitya Sangham, took up the project of taking art and literary production beyond the paradigm of “art for art’s sake”, and to produce a new proletariat literary movement grounded in the social realities of the region, while being shaped by regional aesthetic
conventions and concerns. (Pillai: web) In this context, the thesis further explores the complex negotiations through which theatre and film reconfigured imaginations of the region, constituted regional identity and gave rise to new regionalized forms of nationalism in the first half of the 20th century.

It was in the last decades of the 19th century that modern forms of drama emerged in the Malayalam language. Initially these plays were based on religious epics translated from Sanskrit. Even after the emergence of Malayalam plays, Tamil commercial dramas continued to remain immensely popular in Kerala, drawing in huge crowds well into the 1920s. The genre of musical drama was the dominant one for a long time. Nissim Mannathukkaren has argued that, by the 1920s, significant changes began to take place in the nature of the plays and questions of caste and gender exclusions were increasingly addressed. He says that with the shift towards realism in literature, inspired by the socialist/communist political movements, brought about significant alterations in the mode of Malayalam drama from the 1930s onwards (Mannathukkaren 8-14). The debates surrounding the nature of Malayalam dramas are important for two reasons. Firstly, the argument that Malayalam plays should move away from the tradition of musical dramas led to the promotion and subsequent popularity of prose dramas, which enriched the literary and prosaic vocabulary of the language. Apart from enriching the language, theatre also contributed to the creation of a secular space. The role that the theatre movement played in the creation of a national-popular collective in Kerala needs to be studied further.
Even though Malayalam cinema was in its nascent state, early Malayalam films have contributed to the imagining of a Malayali nation. M. Madhava Prasad has argued that “in the aftermath of the linguistic reorganization of states, the nationalist address that the cinema adopts as a marketing device gives body to the linguistic nation more concretely than any other cultural form” (Prasad 2003: 36). Unlike literature, the other site where a national identity is elaborated, cinema was accessible to more people. The works of C. S. Venkiteswaran and Jenson Joseph also noted the significant role played by early Malayalam films in imagining a Malayali nation.

It needs to be noted here that particular linguistic identities are formed in contrast with, and often in contention with, another linguistic identity. Linguistic identities are produced within a region by exteriorizing other language-based identities, and essentializing them as from the “outside”. In fact, the “irrational” Tamil identity is what stood in opposition to the “rational” and “secular” selves that Malayalis wanted to imagine for themselves. Even though not comparable to the sort of antipathy that the Telugu-speakers showed towards the hegemony of Tamil in the Madras presidency, there was some sort of animosity towards the hegemony of Tamil Brahmins employed in government services in Kerala, especially in the southern Travancore region. With the formation of linguistic states, the construction of a distinct identity became a pressing issue. Indigenous cultural production was sought to ward off the evil influences of the cultural products imported from Tamil Nadu and other neighbouring states. As scholars like S. V. Srinivas and Madhava Prasad have argued about the evolution of a linguistically defined film markets, cultural
productions like cinema achieved more importance than ever after the formation of linguistic states. It can, hence, be argued that the Malayalis were imagining, reframing and re-producing a particular identity in and through their early films.

Patricia Swart, in her study of Malayalam cinema, *Politics, Gender, Spectators: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Malayalam Cinema of Kerala*, notes that cinema has played an important part in imagining a unified linguistic and cultural identity for the Malayalis. She argues that the Malayalam language served as the actual basis for the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956 and its promotion as a tool of unity was primarily associated with the Left. She says that the Malayalam language was seen as a necessary component of the identity of the modern Kerala citizen and cinema was uniquely situated to provide the kind of unified linguistic and cultural identity that Malayalis seemed to crave for. At the same time, Malayalam cinema continued to promote an ideology of inclusiveness by highlighting regional accents, slangs and idioms in its narratives and musical compositions. C. S. Venkiteswaran has argued that in Kerala during the 1950’s - when the movement for a separate linguistic state was at its height - cinema, quite like the theatre movement, “was creating a space where caste and class and other erstwhile identities were irrelevant.” Similarly, while discussing the film *Neelakkuyil*, produced in 1954, two years before the formation of Kerala, Jenson Joseph argues that the prominent role given to the Muslim character Moithu indicates the film’s attempt to appeal to the audience from Malabar, a region that was regarded to be culturally distant from other parts of the Malayalam-speaking region and considered “backward” in development indices. However, Malabar was also a
region where the Communist party held decisive influence. Many commentators have argued that *Neelakkuyil* was the first Malayalam film in which people from various parts and sections of Kerala participated, both on and off screen.

What emerges distinctly in early Malayalam movies from the 1950s is the humanist figure of the protagonist - as a secular and rational modern Malayali hero. The protagonist, who epitomizes the new identity of the Malayali, inhabits the spaces of modernity, uses the language of modernity, and thus places himself within a secular mould distanced from earlier notions of caste and communal prejudice. When Sreedharan Nair, the hero of the film *Neelakkuyil*, hesitantly states, “You try to be a human!”, he echoes the title of a play scripted by the left-wing playwright E. K. Ayamu. In both occasions, we find the same invocation of the universal identity of the humanist figure, tempered by notions of modernity, egalitarianism and rationality. This study presents the hypothesis that it was the deployment of language as a foundational category of identity - an identity further refashioned and reinforced through the medium of cinema - that enabled the proponents of Malayali nationalism to Malayali identity as rooted in the logic of egalitarian progress, epitomized through the figure of the modern “human” citizen transcending all other ethnic and communal identities.

1.4 Sound and the Vernacular in Indian Films

It is perhaps pertinent to note here that the emergence of vernacular cinema, and the subsequent association of linguistic identity with regional cinema, could only emerge
following the technological innovation of adding a soundtrack to the film reel. The
dding of sound to the motion pictures resulted in an unprecedented growth,
diversification and consolidation of the Indian film industry during 1930s. Stephen
Hughes marks this period of radical shift in the history of Indian cinema as a time
when the proliferation of Indian vernacular language films started on a large scale.
From 1931 onwards, the production output of Indian talkies instantly shot up to
relentlessly supply the new market for Indian films in regional languages. The import
of foreign films declined during this period and the local production escalated rapidly;
between the years 1931 to 1935, the number of Indian talkies produced went up from
27 to 233. As Hughes succinctly notes,

Cinema sound decisively shifted the balance in favor of the emergent Indian
film industry. For Indian film productions, sound was a decisive advantage
over their foreign competition and created new opportunities to market cinema
to Indians. The introduction of sound technology into Indian film production
during 1931 helped to reorganize the film industry around numerous
linguistically specific cinemas.

Indian talkie films emerged as a new kind of linguistic medium expressed
through spoken dialogue and song lyrics. This new technology created
possibilities for making films according to notions of linguistic identity, which
were to a large extent predicated upon the assumption that pre-existing groups
of native speakers would both define its content and constitute its market.
(Hughes 213-219)
It was in 1932 that *Marthandavarma*, a silent film, was produced in Travancore. The significance of the titular hero has to be noted in this context. Marthandavarma was the first ruler who unified the modern state of Travancore. Renowned for his martial skills, he was much celebrated for defeating the Dutch naval fleet in the Battle of Colachel in 1741. Moreover, his feats were memorialized in C. V. Raman Pillai’s book of the same name. Published in 1891, the book established him as an icon of idealized Malayali masculine pride and prowess during the early part of the 20th century.

By then, the Tamil film industry had already started producing sound films or talkies. With the incorporation of sound into the films, the Tamil film industry garnered an edge over the then-popular and easily available foreign films. The first sound studio in South India, Srinivasa Cinetone in Madras, came into being in the year 1934. However, the Tamil film industry had begun the appropriation of sound technology into films much before this, in an attempt to consolidate the emergent Tamil and Telugu linguistic markets. As early as 1931, the first bilingual Tamil-Telugu talkie was produced and distributed.

The emergence of sound studios in Madras was catalysed by the need to produce Tamil cinema in the city, instead of depending on studios in Bombay, Calcutta and Kolhapur, where the technological incorporation of sound into films was already available. Following the emergence of an established studio system in Madras, many talkies or sound films in Tamil and other South Indian languages began to be made on a considerably larger scale. In the year 1935, when the sound studios were established in Madras, as many as 35 talkies were produced. During the first decade of sound
technology in Tamil films, between 1931 and 1941, more than 240 films were made. With this kind of a revolutionary change in film production, the Madras Presidency witnessed the mushrooming of cinema theatres, and in 1936, the film exhibition centres had reached to almost 225 in number, of which 12 were within the city limits of Madras itself and almost a hundred were touring talkies. This was against 46 permanent film exhibition houses and 12 touring talkies which were in operational across the Madras Presidency during 1927. (Baskaran 49-50)

Though the Tamil film industry brought in sound into films, resulting in an unprecedented growth in the industry in terms of production and establishment of cinema houses, in Kerala, silent films continued to be screened until the early years of 1940s. There has not been much information available on the introduction of sound in cinema halls in Kerala. However, it could be assumed that cinema halls began introducing sound technology in Kerala as soon as the particular trend started emerging in other parts of South India. Tamil sound films or talkies, prominently mythologicals, were major hits in Kerala wherever they were shown. Though this seemed to be the case, the comparatively smaller size of the linguistic market in the region might have made many skeptical in venturing into the production of Malayalam talkies in Kerala. Koshy observes that the productions of a distinct Malayalam cinema was delayed as the filmmakers of Madras held on to the thought that making a sound film in Malayalam would not be economically viable “because Kerala is not even one-fifth of the size of Tamil Nadu”. (Koshy 46)
The Malayalam talkie era had to further wait coming into being because of the economic stagnation as a result of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Furthermore, it took considerable time for the consolidation of the linguistic market for cinema in Malayalam-speaking regions because of the delay in the initiation of sound technology as opposed to Madras, where the regional film industry had already capitalized on the linguistic market to such an extent that Tamil and other South Indian movies had pushed foreign films to the periphery.

On a general account, though the Malayalam talkie had to wait for some time to come into existence, there were concerted efforts from various corners towards consolidating a Malayalam linguistic market within the South Indian film industry. To tap the potential market opened up by the advent of sound, several local entrepreneurs and quite a few of production concerns located away from Madras attempted to venture into Malayalam talkie production. As a result of this, the first ever talkie in Malayalam, *Balan* (S Notani, 1938), was produced by T. R. Sundaram, proprietor and owner of a theatre company called Modern Theatres in Salem in present-day Tamil Nadu. Sundaram, who ran a drama troupe, had a distinctive interest in developing a market for film distribution in Kerala. *Balan* was advertised and promoted as the ‘first Malayalam social’, and it made a reasonable return for its producers. The cost of production was borne largely by the exhibitors, who loaned an initial investment of Rs. 25,000. Though the production was done by a Salem-based theatre company, pioneers like Alleppey Vincent, who was instrumental in the inception of the first film
studio in Kerala, not only acted in the film but also served the role of production executive for the first ever talkie recorded in Malayalam (Gopalakrishnan 67).

In the genealogy of Indian cinema, the crucial moment when the advent of sound technology got incorporated into the medium is an important event in time to understand how the regional and linguistic market for cinema came into being. This particular aspect here is a major concern which shall inform the study, particularly in analysing how the incorporation of language (through sound) enabled the production of new vernacular cinemas, and how Malayalam cinema itself was shaped by social and political interventions claiming greater regional autonomy on the basis of linguistic identity. Patricia Swart, for instance, has laid a preliminary framework towards understanding such formations and has suggested that cinema itself has played an important part in imagining a unified linguistic and cultural identity for Malayalis (78-83). The study would delineate these aspects with both discursive as well as contextual analysis of various debates and concerns, and shall look into how the investment on linguistic identity has enabled the formulation of a unified region called Kerala and the regional cinema presently called ‘Malayalam Cinema.’

1.5 Cinemas of South India and the Case of Kerala

The emergence of the Malayalam film industry, as is the case in the other South Indian filmic traditions, is substantially distinct in its trajectory compared to the progression of the mainstream Hindi film industry. The ideological contours of Hindi cinema of the 1950s have largely been explored through the critical discourse pertaining to the
political transformation during the period immediately following independence in India, from the colonial to a postcolonial nation state. Meanwhile, studies on South Indian cinemas have largely drawn attention to the peculiar kind of democratic imaginary which was operational in these South Indian states, and its complex connections with excessive popularity and political power that some film stars from the linguistic states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka enjoy.

The seemingly incongruous association of cinema with the social imagination of democratic formations, nevertheless, had a complementary effect on both the entities. The phenomenon of a passionate fan-adulation enjoyed by these actors or stars, who were able to mobilize their stardom in electoral politics - a few of them rising to the position of Chief Ministers and other cabinet ministers - is peculiar to the South Indian context. This particular aspect in the southern states has been studied by various scholars. Prasad (1999) notes that a mixture of historic conditions enabled this particular phenomenon. For Prasad, cinema appears as a medium expanding and reconstituting linguistically homogenized markets in India, consolidated following the advent of sound films. The cessation of colonial rule created an evidently visible void, characterized by the absence of patriarchal authority. This hiatus was bridged by linguistically oriented electoral politics based on popular demands for state reorganization on the basis of dominant languages. Furthermore, while the emergence of film studios in the south precipitated the development of regional cinemas, the subsequent decline of film studios has led to the increasing dependency on star value as a decisive factor in production. This market-oriented transformation, which fails to
concurrently reshape existing socio-political and economic backgrounds, remains constituted as a passive revolution – through which dominant regional players retain hegemonic status through the complicity of subaltern actors - which, in turn, retains a pedagogic relationship between the consumers and the cultural producers. These historic conditions contributed to the occurrence of a particular situation in time where “cinema...came to be chosen as the site of a strong political investment, where audiences responded with enthusiasm to an offer of leadership emanating from the screen...” (Prasad 1999: 49). Prasad’s approach critiques and problematizes existing dominant understanding of star-adulation or star-worship as a product of the ‘false-consciousness’ of naive film spectators. Instead, he proposes much more complex relationships between the stars and spectators or fans, which he refers to as “cine-politics”. According to him, inconsistencies in the existing accounts on this phenomenon fail to encapsulate the different dynamics in play. For him, the phenomenal structure of star-worship in the southern regions are characterized by the active participation of fan audiences, whose critical engagement with the star, and by extension the film industry, can be understood as an extra-parliamentary form of political aspiration and assertion (1999: 37-52). Furthering this argument, Prasad notes in a later essay (2009) that the distinct forms of cine-politics and the fan culture in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, are the constituent sides of a cultural politics drawn and set in action by the ideology of a popular/subaltern sovereignty which escapes the dominant understanding of a sovereign citizenship. Prasad’s postulations on the cinemas of linguistically
homogenized southern states of the country provide us with an ample understanding of various factors in play in the cinemas of newly constituted linguistic territories, particularly in southern India. (2009: 68-76)

However, the typical cult of star-adulation, which is a significant phenomenon in other South Indian states, is prominently absent in the state of Kerala, at least until the late years of 1990s. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan in his essay, *What is Left of Malayalam Cinema?*, has proposed that this notable absence of star-worship and its supplementary links with parliamentary politics need not necessarily signify that such a distinctive form of politics is not operational in the state of Kerala. According to him, in the case of Kerala, “the ‘popular’ is something that might have to be theorized horizontally – relating cinema and other institutions, like Communist Party, for example – rather than vertically, as a story within the history of cinema” (2010: 34). He proposes that, while there is an apparent lack of star worship in Kerala, this void is filled by the Communist Party, evident in the adulation of prominent leaders, investment in ideological constructs, and mobilization through a massive support base. While the Left parties in Kerala remained avowed to maintaining a rational stance, they constantly negotiate with this position - particularly in promoting the image of larger than life leader-figures - to keep their support base intact.

The existence of the Left in Kerala, like the structures of the political in Tamil Nadu (for example), exceeds the limits of the rational political public as it makes itself visible in modern Kerala. An invisible domain of beliefs, irrational structures of knowledge, fandom, rituals and practices remain the central
structure within which the politics of rationality is played out. This allows for
the Communist Party to exercise complete hegemony in spheres outside
parliamentary politics even when they are not triumphant in the elections.
(Radhakrishnan 2010: 41)

Furthermore, Radhakrishnan elaborates that Malayalam cinema, during the 1950s,
played a significant role in imagining the region of Kerala. He points out that early
Malayalam cinema, the production base of which was almost exclusively located in
Travancore, struggled to shake off its ethos and appeal to a broader and diverse
audience. By the 1950s, with the Aikya Kerala movement in its peak, the Travancore-
based film industry makes a concerted move towards breaking the difference between
the distinct regions of Kerala, by moving away from specific aesthetic modes towards
an emphasis on shared language. He notes,

What we are talking about is essentially a Thiruvithamkoor-based industry
finding its markets. Rather than an ideological investment, it was the necessity
of reorganization of its market into a linguistically organized one that pushed
the industry into negotiating these differences. In the context of the differences
between the way the cinematic public was imagined in Thiruvithamkoor and
Malabar and the continued attempts by the industry to negotiate these, I would
like to propose the following argument. As far as the Thiruvithamkoor film
industry was concerned, I propose that Malabar appeared to operate as a space
of transcendence, a neutral space marked by the modern logic of consumption
and the response of the public sphere, and was necessary for the industry to establish itself outside its own cultural particularities. (2015: 133)

The existing academic understanding of Indian cinema of the 1950s and the particular political propositions that cinemas of the South India were forwarding during the time provides us with some rudimentary understanding how film and stardom negotiate with newly formed political and governmental formations. As Prasad notes, these fan-star relation may become factors of political mobilization, motivated by notions of regional or linguistic assertion and assimilation. Radhakrishnan also points out how the regional film industry, particularly in the case of Kerala, had to break out of specific aesthetic conventions locked within the region and rather focus on shared experience of the language, in a bid to appeal to a broader, geographically separated market. The current thesis aims to locate itself within this framework, while trying to further understand the complex formations of regional identity through various representational modes within the Malayalam film industry.

### 1.6 An Overview of Film studies in Malayalam

Most of the existing studies that have attempted to historically map the coming into existence of Malayalam cinema are methodologically limited in the ways they are able to take into consideration only the narrative themes, whose meaningfulness is derived from the contemporary socio-political contexts. The individual attempts at filmmaking during the years of inception of what eventually came to be known as Malayalam cinema are usually considered in terms of “exceptional events” that are
then retrospectively located in a narrative of the emergence of an industry. To be able to depart from the existing understandings of Malayalam cinema during the years of its inception, we need to be able to shift our focus to extra-filmic contexts, to understand how the imagination of the region is scripted and propagated through films of this period.

We often refer to the works of P. Bhaskaran and Ramu Kariat to understand the nature of 1950s Malayalam cinema. Within the discipline of film studies that concerns itself with the south of India in general, and the cinema of Kerala in specific, these works have not only been considered historically viable, but as texts that validate the aesthetic legitimacy of what has been popularly referred to as socialist-realist cinema. However, since the 1950s cinema has largely served as a backdrop to studies of cinematic trends that emerge in later years, most of our understanding of it remains limited in the way that knowledge of this cinema feeds into concerns specific to cinemas of another time and form, and not as knowledge that is self-constituting for the 1950s cinema. This has largely been the case because most contemporary studies on Malayalam cinema have focused on the production and aesthetic aspects of the 1970s cinema. This time has been an attractive one for many because of the ways in which cinema was engaging with non-dominant social and cultural lives and assertions. Much of the studies on this time read this cinema as formal and thematic manifestations of the socio-political articulations of the time. Following the 1970s, scholars such as Jenny Rowena, T. Muraleedharan, Ratheesh Radhakrishnana, Bindu Menon, S Sanjeev, Navaneetha Mokkil and Bindu Menon have noted the shift that
takes place in thematic trends towards a preoccupation with the conventional family form. Rowena’s seminal work on 1990s Malayalam comedy films studies the ways in which dominant caste patriarchy is reproduced through the cinematic representation of relationships between men of marginal caste locations and dominant caste women. Such cinema usually made a comic performance of the anxieties that such men had about their marginal masculinities, in the process reaffirming the dominant caste woman as the ultimate object of desire and the invisibilisation of lower caste women. Her work is posited through a demystification of the historically celebrated Kerala model of development, the diminishing importance of the family melodrama of the prior period, the increasing public mobility of upper caste women and the economic centrality of the Gulf in the lives of marginal men and women. Rowena’s work methodologically falls in the category of analysis that places film narratives and contemporary socio-political contexts side by side in a manner of comparison and meaning-making. In her work, the 1950s cinema also serves to present a historical backdrop to her own concerns (Rowena 2002: 31).

Other studies on this time include that of Muralidharan, Sanjeev and Venkiteswaran. Muraleedharan’s work, _Disrupted Desires: Male Bonding in Mohanlal Films_, places the phenomenon of “male-bonding” as part of a notional trend that perceives the socio-political assertions of lower caste men and economically mobile upper caste women as threats to existing social norms. His study is also able to locate in representations of “male-bonding” the potential of a homoerotic/queer charge, at the same time, recognizing the social and political dominance of upper caste Malayali
men over lower caste men and dominant caste women (65-76). Sanjeev and Venkiteswaran study the cinematic enterprise of Sreenivasan. Sreenivasan’s marginally located body has often been “used” cinematically for purposes of denigration. Yet, Sreenivasan himself, when “authoring” his own films, was able to turn the cinematic gaze towards otherwise invisible issues related to caste and caste oppression (Sanjeev & Venkiteswaran 23-32). This study has academically been acknowledged as one of the important interventions in the secular claims made by the dominant Left politics in Kerala that continues to engage with questions of caste and other forms of socio-political discrimination and assertion.

Radhakrishnan’s study, titled *Gulf in the Imagination: Migration, Malayalam Cinema and Regional Identity*, on Malayalam cinema that was produced during the 1970s, 80s and 90s turns its focus towards the ways in which the economy enabled by the Gulf interacted with Malayalam cinema, and how the Gulf was firmly entrenched in the cultural self-description of contemporary Kerala. Radhakrishnan also makes a significant distinction between what was popularly described as artistic cinema and commercial cinema and how they reproduced perceived social and economic hierarchies in the region of Kerala that was activated by migration to the gulf and the economic in-flow that followed such mobility (2009: 217-245).

Popular and academic discourses on the 1970s cinema effectively produces the definitions of art cinema and commercial cinema and hierarchical relationship between them. While, it has been claimed and generally understood that art cinema is more intellectually oriented, commercial cinema, it appears, has largely configured by
visceral or sexual preoccupations, especially through the overt sexualization of the women’s body. Sanjeev’s work deploys the methods of discourse analysis to present to us this understanding. His study also asserts that what has been generally described as the 1980s middle-brow cinema attempted to merge these two divergent tendencies. Middle-brow cinema for instance could produce a different set of meanings to the what would have been otherwise understood as the excessive exhibition of the women’s body. Mokkil’s article, Re-viewing ‘Her Nights’: Modes of Excess in Indian Cinema, locates the sexual body of the woman at the intersections of a social that is overdetermined by both anxieties about the sexual charge of the female body and the claims to progressiveness that emanate from Malayali society, thereby making it possible for a self-proclaimed art film to be resignified as a semi-porn film. (273-285).

Bindu Menon’s work on the other hand studies the 1980s middle-brow films, directed by film-maker K G George and how they interact with the subjectivity of the Malayali women, especially in the context of its articulation in 1950s Malayalam cinema. Her work maps the 1950s aesthetic tendencies residual in 1980s Malayalam films, and how these are symptomatic of the cinematic attempts to resolve ideological anxieties that had remained unresolved during the prior periods. (16-22)

1.7 Methodology and Material

This thesis includes analysis of a range of materials that may be characterized as historical, discursive and textual. I attempt to study the specific socio-political and historical contexts of each period, of which each cinematic form is a part. This research does not consider cinema as merely a reflection of the socio-political and
cultural realities of its time, but takes into account cinematic trends as a part of these shifts. I engage with the historical contexts through prior scholarly and journalistic engagements. The said research also undertakes close analysis of film texts from the periods of interest in an attempt to understand the broad thematic, narrative and aesthetic patterns of the time. The thesis also engages with popular discourses constituted by fan writings, commentary by film enthusiasts, journalists, critics and scholars, interviews and interactions with film personnel, actors, directors, producers and technicians. Many of these texts appear in popular Malayalam language film magazines, scholarly and semi-scholarly journals and on the internet. This study may be located at the intersection of multiple disciplines of history, film studies, sociology, literature and region studies. An important theoretical framework for this study has been the Deleuzian concept of deterritorialization and how it destabilizes prior understandings of fixed territoriality and territorial identity.

1.8 Structure of Dissertation

The thesis has mainly been divided into three core chapters; each one attempts to look at different concerns at different times in the history of Malayalam cinema in re-configuring and re-constituting the region called Kerala. The study is carried forward through a composite methodological framework, by employing a contextual analysis of the socio-political and literary history of the region and analysing the role of the film industry in shaping the popular imaginations of ‘united’ Kerala as well as later formations of regional identity. Simultaneously, the thesis also attempts to understand how such concerns are reflected in the Malayalam cinema of the time.
The Chapter II observes the development of Malayalam cinema during and around the time of the *Aikya Kerala* movement and its demands for the linguistic state of Kerala. The chapter starts with a hypothesis that cinema has played an important part in imagining a unified linguistic and cultural identity for Malayalis. While closely analysing movies like *Neelakkuyil* (1954), *Rarichan enna pouran* (1956), and *Newspaper Boy* (1955), the thesis notes that films of the period display and concurrently give form to the desire for forging a linguistic state within popular and public imagination within the region. The representation of this nascent regional nationalism was the culmination of the efforts of other socio-political activities initiated by movements such as Progressive Literary Movement and Kerala People's Arts Club which took forward the leftist project of the *Aikya Kerala*. This would further complement the historic understanding of how Malayalam language served as the actual basis for the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956 and how its priorities were primarily associated with different political concerns. Malayalam language was a necessary component in the constitution of and in enabling a modern Kerala and cinema situated to facilitate the kind of unified linguistic and cultural identity that Malayalis seemed to crave for.

Chapter III engages with Malayalam cinema during the second decade after the state formation, during the 1960s and 1970s. It would also stretch a bit 1980s as it is taking forward the concerns of the previous period. It could be noted that during the late 1960s, the regional state of Kerala proposed a new direction to the role of the ‘national’ or regional formations, “an-industrial nationalist” route. What Kerala did
was to strengthen its local industry, encouraging a sub-national cinematic identity that was closer to the tradition of national cinemas, as originally defined in Europe: through a combination of state subsidy for local productions, the creation of infrastructure and local protection from other film industries. During the subsequent period Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC) was upgraded to a Public Sector Undertaking with an explicitly nationalist objectives of ‘facilitating the production and promotion of Malayalam Cinema’ as against film production practices which were monopolized by the studios in Madras till then. The period also saw the emergence of other independent film collectives like Chitralekha Cooperative Society, initiated by Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Apart from state intervention in the film industry, these two decades also saw the emergence of new auteurs and directors who collaborated with writers from progressive literary groups and organization. The chapter closely engages with the directorial career of K. S. Sethumadhavan, who worked with writers like Thakazhi, Kesavadev and Parappurrathu. The confluence of prominent literary figures and auteur directors allowed Malayalam cinema to explore new themes and aesthetics and reach new heights of technical proficiency. Sethumadhavan has been credited with bringing a language and narrative idiom of its own to Malayalam cinema, rooting it within the cultural and linguistic milieu of the region. The chapter also traces the trajectories of the new cinema movement, including films of Adoor and John Abraham, and observes how these films engage with the question of the region. The chapter explores these concerns in order to map how these new interventions re-formulated or altered the broader imagination of the region.
Chapter IV deals with the Malayalam cinema from the late 1980s. The chapter attempts to understand how the “region” is constituted within contemporary Malayalam films. The chapter maps how representations of the Malayali community and their imagination of the region is usually constructed as their response to the “outside”, or the 'other'. The process of influx of migration from outside the state has been a matter of concern in the state; this anxiety often comes out in public discourses and in the social realm, and has often been obliquely or directly reflected in the films of the time. While such caricatured representations had been about Tamil settlers or migrants for the longest period, the focus has now shifted to the phenomenon of ‘north-Indian’ migration, often encompassed within the prejudicial colloquial term “Bengali migration”, which invisibilizes the actual diversity of migration from the northern, north-eastern and eastern (Assam, Mizoram, Nepal, Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh) states of and adjacent to India.