



Linguistic Identity in Malayalam Cinema: The Othering of Castes and Communities

Sreebitha P V

Assistant Professor of English, Central University of Karnataka

sreebitha@gmail.com

Abstract

The recent Malayalam cinema, especially the new generation cinema, seems to embrace differences which otherwise do not find apt representation/presentation in commercial Malayalam cinema industry. The paper tries to chronologically map the changes that happen to the hegemonic dialects in Malayalam cinema along with their respective “others.” While addressing the question of language as well as dialects in Malayalam cinema, I would touch upon the question of region, religion, caste, and gender as these are inextricably related to dialects. For the sake of analysis, I would like to divide the history of Malayalam cinema into three phases. The first during 1950s, when the Malayalam cinema industry was established based on linguistic identity by othering the “Tamil”. The second phase witnessed M T's entry into the field during the 1960s by the introduction of the Valluvanadan dialect; something which can be considered as a breakthrough as far as the history of language in Malayalam cinema is concerned. The third phase is that of ‘new generation cinema’ in the beginning of 2010 which brought different dialects into Malayalam cinema. An attempt is made to see how the dialects/language of the dominant section becomes normative in Kerala in the process of othering and what a dialect refers to in Malayalam cinema at different historical junctures. The paper argues that the hegemonic dialects makes its presence legitimate by othering/ridiculing other dialects spoken by marginalized communities. The recent Malayalam cinema has brought in various dialects spoken by different communities and regions in a positive light and it seems to represent change in the perception regarding what should be the standard language. However, these attempts to bring in many dialects hitherto unrepresented are done in a careful manner.

Keywords: Caste, Community, Dialect, Othering, Region

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The recent Malayalam cinema, especially new generation cinema, seems to embrace differences that otherwise do not find apt representation/presentation in Malayalam cinema industry.² The paper tries to chronologically map the changes that happen to the hegemonic dialects in Malayalam cinema along with their respective “others.” While addressing the question of language as well as dialects in Malayalam

² By differences, I mean the socio- cultural, religious, and linguistic differences of the state.



cinema, I would touch upon the question of region, religion, caste, and gender as these are inextricably related to dialects. For the sake of analysis, I would like to divide the history of Malayalam cinema into three phases. The first phase being the 1950s, when the Malayalam cinema industry was established based on linguistic identity by othering the “Tamil”. The second phase witnessed M T's entry into the field during the 1960s through the introduction of the Valluvanadan dialect; considered as a breakthrough as far as the history of language in Malayalam cinema is concerned. The third phase is that of ‘new generation cinema’ from the beginning of 2010 which brought different dialects into Malayalam cinema. An attempt is made to see how the dialects/language of the dominant section becomes normative in Kerala in the process of othering and what a dialect refers to in Malayalam cinema at different historical junctures.

The history of film productions based on linguistic identity in the context of Telugu and Tamil points out that the hegemonic language spoken by the upper castes was considered as the normative language in the beginning. However, there was resistance and there were movements in both regions that questioned the hegemony of the so-called ‘standard’ languages and the marginalized dialects found expression in the later stages. As in the case of Telugu and Tamil, there were no serious attempts that directly or indirectly addressed the question of "standard" language as well as the marginalization of other dialects in Malayalam cinema industry.

The Malayalam cinema was the product of both Tamil and Malayalam theatre.³ Both the scripts and lyrics of the first sound movie *Balan* (Dir. S Nottani: 1938) was written by Muthukulam Raghavan Pillai, a theater person (Gopalakrishnan 55). The hero (Kunju Nair) and heroine (M. K Kamalam) were from the theater company called *Kottakkal Nataka Samiti*. It should also be noted that among the 11 movies produced during 1928-1950, beginning from the first sound film *Balan*, the story and screenplay were done by the people from theater⁴ and many of them had Tamil background as well.⁵ As we see, cinema was only an extension of drama and the language question was not prominent in the beginning as technicians, including directors, were from different linguistic backgrounds.

However, Malayalam film industry got established mainly by othering Tamil and the Tamilians. As argued by Jenson Joseph, the basic premise of Malayalam film industry's shift from Chennai to Kerala was that it would enable Malayalees to create their own aesthetics and culture through films and would result in economic development. By examining the newspaper reports that appeared in newspapers such as *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi* in the later part of the 1930s, Joseph notes that the cultural elite's contempt for Tamil cinema became a useful marketing strategy for the early film makers in Malayalam, who tried to cash in on the cultural pride in Malayalam and the native land (40). He writes, “Their commentaries attributed certain cultural sophistications to the Malayali, as against the

³ In the initial stages, cinema was considered equivalent to drama. Rehearsals of cinemas were similar to drama rehearsals. Movies did not have something called script at that point. The title of story and dialogues were available in the song books published during that period. It is said that during the rehearsal of the movie *Gnanambika* (1940) the actors had mistaken cinema for theatre and they were doing theatre acting in front of the camera. It is also interesting to note that neither the producer T.R. Sundaram nor the Parsi director S Nottani knew Malayalam

⁴ Some of the established personalities are Thrikkurissi Sukumaran Nair, Kottarakkara Sreedharan Nair and Muthukulam Raghavan Pillai

⁵ Screen Play writers of *Neelakkuyil*, Ramu Kariat and P Bhaskaran's association with KPAC is also important in this context. What seems interesting here is the left background of the early people associated with cinema and that most of them hail from Alappuzha where the first studio was set up.



"uneducated" Tamilians who produce the "morally contaminating" films and "dump them on Malayalees" for commercial exploitation" (39). In such writings, Joseph observes that Tamil cinema and the Tamilian emerged as the cultural "other" of the Malayali as a whole (39). Therefore, setting up studios in Kerala and regular production of Malayalam films, it was suggested, would enable the entrepreneurs and filmmakers in Kerala to grab the market from Tamil films and distributors, which in turn would liberate the local viewers from the "morally degrading" Tamil films"(39). Here we see the attempt of cultural elites in projecting a Malayalee linguistic and cultural identity through the process of the relocation of the film industry. As noted, the Malayalee identity gets established by othering both Tamil and Tamilians.

During the early phase of Malayalam Cinema an ideal/normative Malayalee was envisaged as an upper caste Hindu in the very beginning through othering marginalized/minority communities. Jenny Rowena in her pioneering study points out how the dominant hero is produced through the process of othering or how Malayalam cinema establishes the Hindu upper caste hero by othering all marginalized identities in Kerala.⁶ For instance, *Neelakkuyil* (Dir. P Bhaskaran, Ramu Kariat: 1954), the story of an upper-caste schoolmaster is presented to us as the story of an ordinary Malayalee. As she points out, the ordinary Malayalee envisaged here is the upper caste Hindu Malayalee and it gets established by the process of othering the Muslim character in the cinema. The Muslim character, Moithu (Balakrishna Menon) and the 'Mappila' song that he sings in the film was considered to be the major attractions of the film. However, he seems to play the role of a comedian and the 'Muslim dialect' is in fact used to evoke laughter. Joseph argues that the prominence that Moithu's character gets in the film seems to indicate the film's attempt to appeal to the audience from Malabar, a region that was considered culturally distant from other parts of the Malayalam-speaking regions, and considered 'backward' in the development index than the other two, and importantly a region where the Communist Party had a decisive influence". Rather than appealing to the audience of Malabar, as Rowena notes, it in fact establishes an ideal upper caste Hindu Malayalee by exoticizing the Muslims of Malabar.

While othering Tamil and minority/marginalized communities, a homogenous elite Malayalee identity was also constructed in the beginning phase. While discussing the secular characteristics of Malayalam cinema of the 1950s, C. S Venkiteswaran writes: "...this desire to see Kerala *in* film is also a desire to imagine and bring into being a Kerala *through* the new medium of cinema. For instance, this is how the makers of *Neelakuyil*, a landmark film of the 1950s, described their attempt: "Our Cinema should speak the way we actually speak, the characters in it should eat the way we eat, and dress like we do (1). Like Jenson, C. S. Venkiteswaran does not seem to problematize the Malayalee identity. The above advertisement envisages a homogenous identity for all Malayalees. As noted earlier, Tamil as well as other dialects spoken by marginalized sections were the other of the Malayalam cinema in the beginning and cultural elites were successful in projecting their language and culture as the norm.

The establishment of Udaya Studios⁷ (1947) and Merryland Studio (1952) is a major historical juncture as

⁶ It should be noted that Uroob co-wrote the screenplay and dialogues along with P Bhasakaran. It is based on the story of Uroob and it is known for the dialogues with local accent.

⁷ The first film studio Udaya, established in Alappuzha by director-producer Kunchacko. Though the studio was set up in Alappuzha part of erstwhile Kochi, it became famous with its blockbusters based on the Malabar region, especially those based on *Vadakkan Pattukal* (*Northern Ballads*)



far as the Malayalam of Malayalam cinema is concerned. *Vellinaksharam* (Dir. Felix J Bayse 1949), the first movie produced by Udaya Studios, was advertised as "The Malayalam film, made by Malayalis at a studio set up by Malayalis, in the Malayali land" (Joseph 40).⁸ As noted earlier, Udaya Studios was the first film production studio in the Malayalam film industry. Though Udaya Studios was set up in Alappuzha, it became famous with its blockbusters based on the Malabar region, especially *Vadakkan Pattukal* (northern ballads).⁹ Other than this, the studio was also known for its effective employment of Muslim dialects of Malabar. After the failure of the film *Kidappadam* (1955), Udaya Studios had withdrawn from film production and it made a comeback through the huge hit *Umma* in 1960. This was the first film made out together by Kunchacko and P. K. Sarangapani (1925 – 2011).¹⁰ It is said that Kunchacko had invited Sarangapani to write the script for *Umma* by knowing his talent to write Malabar Muslim dialects. The duo's series of films based on *Vadakkan Pattukal* which reproduced local dialects of Malabar was also well received. From the outset we understand the commercial interest in the dialects of Malabar. However, the dialect here is not limited to Muslim Community of Malabar; rather it reproduces the Thiyya dialects of North Malabar as well.

Sarangapani's and Kunchacko's interest in *Vadakkan Pattukal* and the very combination also raises several questions. Sarangapani joined Udaya Studios, founded by Kunchacko, in 1960 and scripted the majority of their notable works during the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ He is known as the master storyteller of Malayalam film industry's trysts with the 'Vadakkan Pattu' genre.¹² His talent in reproducing the Muslim dialects northern dialects made him the permanent script writer of Udaya. Among the 30 scripts Sarangapani had written, 27 were for 'Udaya'. He quit weaving and stopped writing scripts for plays to work with Kunchacko. It is said that Kunchacko was fortunate to get a script writer like him by paying a

⁸ Kuttanadu Ramakrishna Pillai who wrote the story and dialogues for film also hails from Alappuzha.

⁹ The films, produced at the studio, were produced under the banner of K & K Combines, and later under Excel Productions. Between 1949 to 1955 Kunchacko has produced 7 movies.

¹⁰ It is considered as the first social film in Malayalam and the first Malayalam film based on a novel authored by noted writer Moidu Padiyath. The story of the film centered around the Muslim community in the Malabar region and the success of the movie was attributed to the usage of local dialects of the Malabar region as it was a new experience

¹¹ K. Sreekumar's "Oru Mukham: Janapriya Natakavediyute Mitippukal" has a chapter on Sarangapani which throws light upon his life as well as career. He began his career as a writer through the leftist's stage movement and scripted some of the notable stage dramas of the 1950s and early 1960s. A weaver by profession, influenced by old Tamil musical dramas and Malayalam, Saragapani wrote "Avarente Makkalanu", a realist drama. With this he came to be known as *Writer of Proletariat*. The drama gained attention and therefore he modified and rewrote it. But it created unrest among the ruling class and consequently Divan sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyer had banned the drama. He couldn't challenge the ban and after a break *Ballatha Duniyav* was written with the request of Alappuzha beedi workers. It became a huge hit and professor D Varghese took it on contract for one year and modified it under the name *Imathe Duniyav*. But they couldn't stage the drama due to the opposition from an elite muslim, Thangalu Kunchu who believed that the drama was anti Muslim. In the first case it was the state which banned the production whereas in the second case it was an elite Muslim who opposed the production. It should also be noted that the drama was on Muslim community which was scripted by a Hindu and later taken over by a Christian due to its commercial success. A good number of films were produced by Kunchacko under the banner of excel as well as Udaya in which story, screenplay and dialogue were written by Sarangapani based on *Vadakkan Pattukal*. Those are *Unniyarcha* (1961), *Paalaattu Koman* (Konkiyamma) (1962), *Aromalunni* (1972), *Thumbolarcha* (1974), *Kannappanunni* (1977). The story of last three movies was also written by Sarangapani. Other than Sarangapani, N Govindan Kutty and Thikkodiyar has also written story and dialogue for Udaya production based on *Vadakkan Pattukal*.

¹² It is also said that he had begun writing again in 2007 after a gap of more than two decades in an effort to revive the 'Vadakkan Pattu' genre. Sarangapani's interest in the *Vadakkan Pattu* genre is very evident here.



minimal amount. In fact, for the same reason Sarangapani took back to writing dramas without Kunchacko's knowledge. He has also started a drama troupe (samiti), *Alappuzha Malayala Kalabhavan* (1973) (this title is also interesting) secretly while he was a permanent script writer in Udaya Studio. Sarangapani had to take the help of S. P. Pillai, the noted dramatist to divulge his creation of own troupe to Kunchacko in a very diplomatic way. This tells us more about the commercial aspect of film industry. Sarangapani was only hired to write script for the movies for his talent in writing Muslim dialects as well as to write stories, scripts and dialogues based on *Vatakkan Pattukal*. As noted earlier the language used in early Malayalam cinema might have been a diluted form of the language used in theatres. But with Kunchacko's entry through Udaya Studios, we see how Malabar and its dialects getting represented in the Malayalam cinemas in a serious manner.

Sarangapani reproduces Thiyya dialects or rather north Malabar dialects in the movies based on *Vadakkan Pattukal*. Here both region and communities get represented through dialect/language. For instance, the movie *Unniarcha* (Dir. Kunchacko: 1961), reproduces the local dialects of North Malabar and the songs in the movies are also composed in typical northern ballad style. Sarangapani also seems to do justice to the question of gender, caste, and region in this movie. He recreates the legendary figure *Unniarcha* as she appears in *Vadakkan Pattukal*. This movie clearly locates the caste of the characters. *Unniarcha* is mentioned as *Chekothi* and we find several references to *Chekavar* and *Angachekavan* as well.¹³ In the movie, other than *Chekavars*, characters from caste such as *Kollan*, *Mukkuvan*, and *Panan* also appear on the screen. A reference to the Nair communities is also made in the movie.

We find a paradigm shift with M T Vasudevan's entry into the field during the 1960s as Valluvanadan Malayalam spoken by the upper caste Hindus of Central Kerala became the standard Malayalam of cinemas produced in Kerala. Here we see how a dialect spoken in a specific region and community finds hegemonic space in Malayalam cinema. It has to be noted that there was no screenplay and story for the movies produced during 1951 to 1962, except the movies *Yaachakan* (Dir. R. Velappan Nair: 1951) and *Neelakkuyil*. M T Vasudevan Nair is considered as the first and foremost script writer in Malayalam who wrote screenplays after having learnt cinema as a distinctive visual art which has its own language, grammar, and structure. It is also said that, it was only after he began writing screenplays that the Malayali viewers began to consider film script as a distinctive genre.

The 1960s is an important historical juncture as the movie *Murappennu* (Dir. A Vincent: 1965), the first movie M. T scripted in Valluvanadan dialect produced during this time. When M T scripted it in this new dialect, one of the distributors commented that the dialect would not appeal to anyone and it would not be welcomed by people of Travancore. Instead he wanted Muthukulam Raghavan Pillai, script writer of *Balan*, to write the script. This points out that the intended audience of these movies was the people of Travancore and the language used in Theater was only acceptable then. However, M T insisted to use the same dialect and the movie became huge hit thereby paved way for the coming of Valluvanadan dialect as the dominant and standard language of Malayalam film industry. It is possible to justify his insistence on the Valluvanadan dialect as it is based on his story, *Sneathinte Mukhangal* and his writings are basically on his own community. But this does not seem to be a casual choice since he continues to use the same dialect even for the movies based on North Malabar.

In 1989, M. T Vasudeva Nair's wrote script for *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* (OVV) which deconstructs the

¹³ Some scholars argue that *Chekavar* refers to caste Thiyya whereas it is also opined that *Chekavar* as a title given to someone who excels in martial arts. There are many evidences which proves that *Chekavar* refers to Thiyya caste



plot of the “original” song that formed part of the *Puthooram Pattukal*.¹⁴ While Sarangapani used the northern Malabar dialects spoken by Thiyyas of the region, MT replaces it with the Valluvanadan dialect. Along with the question of language the question of caste also seems quite problematic in the movie. While Chekavars are a lower caste of North Malabar, M T portrays it as the title given to the warrior who excels in the martial arts. Here M. T seems to project a Nair identity to the characters through the film. MT constructs an Upper caste Hindu hero by ‘othering’ the legendary Thiyya figures. M.T’s use of the Valluvanadan Dialect in OVV is done by othering both dialects of North Malabar as well as Chekavas or Thiyyas.

We have already noted some of the important historical junctures in which the Malayalam of Malayalam cinema was set up. Padmarajan’s films have portrayed a variety of dialects from Onattukara (Mavelikkara Harippad area) to Thrissur. Though movies like *Chemeen* (Dir. Ramu Kariat: 1965), *Kodiyettam* (Dir. Adoor Gopala Krishnan: 1978), *Kolangal* (Dir. K G George: 1981) *Thoovanathumbikal* (Dir. Padmarajan: 1987) seems to have treated dialects in serious manner, it was mainly limited to dialects spoken by specific communities and specific regions. With the new generation cinemas, we see that dialects represent more regions, religions and communities in a different manner. It was not only the cinemas, but to some extent songs as well as the titles of the cinemas too started eulogizing the regions which were hitherto unrepresented.

The directors of new generation cinemas of Malayalam have experimented with various dialects spoken throughout Kerala. *Aamen* (Dir. Lejo Jose Pellissery: 2013) in Alappuzha dialect; *Cocktail* (Dir. Arun Kumar: 2010), *Ee Adutha Kalathu* (Dir. Arun Kumar: 2012), *Rajamanikyam* (Dir. Anwar Rasheed: 2005), in Trivandrum dialect ; *Chappa Kurishu* (Dir. Sameer Thahir: 2011), *Kammattipadam* (Dir. Rajeev Ravi: 2016), *Annayum Rasoolum* (Dir. Rajeev Ravi: 2013), *Iyobinte Pustakam* (Dir. Amal Neerad: 2014), *Honey Bee* (Dir. Jean Paul Lal: 2013)and *Angamali Dairies* (Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery: 2017) in Kochi dialects; *Pranjiyettan and The Saint* (Dir. Ranjith: 2010), *Punayalan Agarbattis* (Dir. Ranjith Sankar: 2013) in Trichur dialect; *Oru Indian Pranayakadha* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikad: 2013) and *Achayans* (Dir. Kannan Thamarakkulam: 2013) in Kottayam Dialect, and *Maheshinte Pratikaram* (Dir. Dileesh Pothan: 2016)and *Idukki Gold* (Dir. Ashiq Abu: 2013) in Idukki dialect.

To some extent, Malabar, the “exotic” land and its dialects, especially the Muslim dialects earlier othered to normalise the Malayalee, continue to be so in the new generation cinema as well. A large number of cinemas produced in the Malabar setting have been telling the story of the Muslims of Malabar and especially north Malabar Muslims. *Thattathin Marayathu* (Dir. Vineeth Sreenivasan: 2012), *Malabar Wedding* (Dir. Faisal, Rajesh; 2008), *Adaminte Makan Abu* (Dir. Salim Ahamed: 2011), *Ustad Hotel* (Dir. Anwar Rasheed: 2012), *Shutter* (Dir. Joy Mathew: 2012), *Bavuttiyude Namathil* (Dir. G. S Vijayan : 2012) etc. are in Kozhikode dialect and mostly spoken by Muslims. However, there are also exceptions like *KL 10* (Dir. Muhsin Parari: 2015), *Palerymanikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (Dir. Ranjith: 2009), *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (Dir. Hariharan: 2009), *Ayal Njan Alla* (Dir. Vineeth Kumar

¹⁴ Regarding the changes made to the story, M.T. says in the introduction to the script of the film: "As per the song, Aringhodu was the one who prompted Chanthu to replace the iron nail by a bamboo one, sending his daughter and cousin away. There, I have deviated. Such a vicious plan never goes without a female touch. For Unniyarcha to come to his life again, Aromal has to win the fight. The death of his guru is also something that he doesn't wish for. As Chanthu, who always get attracted to the fire Unniyarcha, stands in the midst of confusion, I felt to read it as the ploy of Aringhodu's daughter." (M.T. XII)" It was not only the woman characters who were altered in this new version of the story.¹⁴ Rather all main characters were portrayed with modifications. Though the title song refers to betrayal of Chandu, the movie deconstructs the figure in a very positive light. Along with this M. T mainly deconstructs the figures of Unniyarcha and Kunjiraman.



:2015), *Malarvaadi Arts Club* (Dir. Vineeth Sreenivasan: 2010), *Puthan Panam* (Dir. Ranjith 2017) etc. which has used dialects representing other communities of the region.

In many movies, only the hero or heroine speaks the dialects while all other characters speak in so-called standard Malayalam and within the movie we see them being mocked by others. Biju Menon speaks Palakkadan dialect in *Ordinary* (Dir. Sugeeth: 2012) while others speak in Pathanamthitta dialect. While the heroine of *22 Female Kottayam* (Dir. Aashiq Abu: 2012) speaks in Kottayam dialect the hero of *Ayal Njan Alla* (Dir. Vineeth Kumar: 2015) speaks in Koyilandy dialect. The multilingual setting in the film makes this legitimate and the character speaks Hindi instead of his own dialect when he was supposed to address a gathering in the guise of a superstar. He is ridiculed for his use of dialect in the movie. There are also cases in which the hero speaks “standard” Malayalam while all other characters speak dialects. For instance, except Nivin Pauly all other characters speak Thalassery dialect in *Thattathin Marayath* (Dir. Vineeth Sreenivasan: 2012). Similarly, in *Jamna Pyari* (Dir. Thomas Sebastian: 2015) while all characters speak Thrissur dialect, Joy Mathew’s character Prakashettan continues to speak in Calicut dialect for which he is being mocked at.

Many have pointed out the negligence of a variety of dialects across Kerala in Malayalam film industry. Failed attempts to produce regional dialects in movies based on Malabar setting and the exaggerated and awkward dialect spoken by Christian and Muslim characters in Malayalam Cinema has also been pointed out by many.¹⁵ As discussed, the question of language/dialect in Malayalam cinema is complex and the hegemonic dialects makes its presence legitimate by othering/ridiculing other dialects spoken by the marginalized communities. Recent Malayalam cinema has brought in various dialects spoken by different communities and regions in a positive light and it does seem to represent change in the perception regarding what should be the standard language. However, these attempts to bring in many dialects hitherto unrepresented are done in a careful manner. A multidialectal setting (Kottayam, Alappuzha, Kochi etc) in *Ishq* (Dir. Anuraj Manohar: 2019) Perambra and Trivandrum dialects in *Virus* (Dir. Aashiq Abu: 2019) Calicut dialect in *Thamasa* (Dir. Ashraf Hamza: 2019), Kochi dialect in *Thottappan* (Dir. Shanavas K Bhavakkutty : 2019)Kochi) etc proves this.

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¹⁵ Chinmay Murali throws light on the recent appearance of dialects in Malayalam cinema. He argues that Malayalam industry's attempts to include various slangs was only a commercial experiment and it had no intention of breaking the elitist notions of "good language" and these experiments were limited with the regional varieties of language, spoken by the elite class. He adds that whenever a film used the language spoken by the lower caste people, it was used to create sub-standard jokes or in a derogatory manner. He argues that the censors wanted the films to narrate the heroic adventures of Savarna heroes in a language accepted by the society as “good language” i.e. the "Savarna language" and therefore they have banned *Papilio Buddha* by projecting it as “filthy” language. All other films which violate the "Savarna code" become filthy and highly susceptible to be censored (14). Murali here describes how language becomes a manifestation of power as well as a tool for oppression.



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