

A historical overview

Cinema came to Kerala a decade after the Lumiere brothers put up their historic show at the Grand Café in Paris, arriving on the shores of Kozhikode in 1906 when itinerant showman Paul Vincent screened some films with his Edison Bioscope there. Film production, however, came much later. The first Malayalam film, the silent *Vigathakumaran* by J.C.Daniel, was made in 1928. It was another 10 years before the first Malayalam talkies, *Balan* (S.Nottani, 1938), was released. There were only a handful of films in Malayalam until the 1950's. It was in the following three decades that film production gathered momentum.

From the beginning, Malayalam cinema focused on social themes and drew heavily on literature. The 1950's and 1960's were dominated by literary influence, social–realist themes, and dramatic treatment. Vibrant talents emerged in directing, music, acting and screenwriting who were to dominate the scene in the couple of decades to come. *Jeevithanouka* (K.Vembu, 1951), *Neelakkuyil* (P.Bhaskaran/Ramu Kariat, 1954) and *Rarichan Enna Pouran* (P.Bhaskaran, 1956), the remarkable films of the 1950's, set the trend. These films were animated by the nationalist and socialist projects, and centred on issues relating to caste and class exploitation, the fight against obscurantist beliefs, the degeneration of the feudal class/society, and the breakup of the joint-family system. Some of the notable filmmakers of this period were P.Subramaniam, P.Bhaskaran, Ramu Kariat, A.Vincent and K.S.Sethumadhavan. Ramu Kariat's *Chemmeen* (1965) could be considered a high point of this period.

In the 1970's, several state institutions were set up to support 'new cinema'. The Film Finance Corporation, the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) and the National Film Archives were established and a new crop of trained professionals entered the scene. This had reverberations in Kerala, too. Film-school graduates exposed to the current trends in world cinema created the feeling of a new wave. The literary scene was already undergoing a 'modernist' revolution of sorts: old forms, styles, themes and narratives were giving way to new ones.

For the filmmakers of the earlier era, even when dealing with individual struggles and dilemmas, the resolution and rendering of the narrative were essentially bound up with social/class liberation. The fate of Neeli in *Neelakkuyil* or Appu and Sankaran Nair in *Newspaper Boy* (the first neo-realist experiment in Malayalam, by P.Ramdass, 1955) or of Pappu in *Odayil Ninnu* (K.S.Sethumadhavan, 1965), was embedded in their class identity and position, and dialectically placed against caste/class interests within the narrative itself. But, by the beginning of the 1970's, the dreams and despair of the individual were gradually coming to the fore over the class and social concerns of previous decades.

P.N.Menon's *Olavum Theeravum* (1970) is considered to be the trendsetter in this regard. Shot almost entirely on location and driven by the realist aesthetic, it broke the claustrophobic ambiance of the studios and theatrical modes of rendition. *Swayamvaram* (1972), by Adoor Gopalakrishnan (an FTII graduate), brought about a much more definitive rupture. Even though the film's plot was a conventional one – the trials and tribulations of a runaway couple-in form and treatment, it was something new. Careful attention to composition and editing, diligent use of natural sounds, slow pace, and controlled acting marked it off from the mainstream.

P.A.Backer (1940-1993) took the social-realist project into the 1970's, and his films consistently dealt with the oppressed and the marginalized-orphans, sex workers, landless peasants, labourers and rebels. His significant films include *Kabani Nadi Chuvannappol* (1975), a bold avant-garde film made during the dark days of National Emergency; *Chuvanna Vithukal*, *Manimuzhakkam* (1976); and *Sanghaganam* (1979). Other notable films of the period were *Nirmalyam* (M.T.Vasudevan Nair, 1973), *Swapnadanam* (K.G.George, 1975), *Aswathamavu* (K.R.Mohanan, 1978) and *Yaro Oral* (Pavithran, 1978).

Through sheer prolificacy and distinctive style, these filmmakers radically transformed the film scene. Before the new wave, films depended more on the spoken word, and in form were based on popular theatre and folk traditions. The new wave brought a new sensibility and self-consciousness to form and treatment. Apart from 'what', 'how' to tell also became crucial. If 'commitment' and 'social change' were the buzzwords of the earlier generation, the new word was 'self expression'. The protagonist (invariably a male) of the post-independence decades was one who fought against the system and looked forward to the future. His subjectivity was constituted and defined by a denial of the past and the present, and a yearning for a better tomorrow. But the hero of the 1970's was disillusioned with the system and the future; lacking any *raison d'être*, he believed only in himself.

The 1980's were a period when the 'art' and 'commercial' divide was most evident in form and 'popular' in public discourses. The 'art' scene was dominated by the duo of Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Aravindan, who, along with a group of new talents, turned out films with regular frequency, thanks to entrepreneurs such as Ravindran Nair, recognition at home and abroad, and a receptive audience base.

Gopalakrishnan's films were noted for their thematic versatility and mastery over form. They were firmly placed in the Malayalee milieu and probed various aspects of its life and polity. *Kodiyattam* (1977) was about a village barn (played by Gopi, one among the many finds of the new wave), coming to terms with his life. *Elipathayam* (1981) graphically portrayed the claustrophobic state of feudal mind that refuses to change in a changing world. *Mukhamukham* (1984) is an introspective look at the Leftist movement and its decadence. In the 1990's, his films became more introspective and analytical.

The films of G.Aravindan (1935-1991) are marked by an oneric quality. Formally innovative, they explored new realms of experience and imagination. While *Kanchanasita* (1977) was a celluloid interpretation of an epic that dwelt upon the all-too-human conflicts of the mythic Rama in a tribal setting, *Thampu* (1978) was a lyrical film about the arrival and departure of a circus troupe and the ripples it creates in a sleepy village. *Kummatty* (1979) was one of the most imaginative of children's films, still an unexpected genre in Malayalam. *Esthappan* (1979) and *Pokkuveyil* (1981) further extended Aravindan's formal experiments, though his later works exhibit a growing concern for the linear narrative.

One of the most enigmatic figures in Malayalam cinema of the period was John Abraham (1937-1987). Erratic and unpredictable, in life and in his films, Abraham's works are imbued with a deep sense of humanity. In a way, they deal with the very impossibility of being human and creative. *Agrahathil Kazhuthai* (1977) is about a donkey in a Brahmin village, and is a darkly humorous look at casteist society. An

element of black humour runs through his next film, *Cheriyachante Krurakrithyangal* (1979), also. It is about a small peasant caught in the storm of social changes; the peasant is so unable to comprehend, absorb, or participate in the changes that they become his phobias. Abraham's last film, *Amma Ariyan* (1989), is a journey through the emotional and mental ruins of a radical past.

While the new-wave filmmakers were attracting all the attention and putting Malayalam cinema on the world map, the commercial mainstream cinema was also undergoing slow but significant changes. The formal and technical innovations that distinguished the new wave were being gradually absorbed by the mainstream, as were the actors and technicians the new wave introduced.

By the 1980's, a kind of osmosis was underway with the gradual dissolution of the boundaries that separated the commercial mainstream from the elitist 'art' cinema. A crop of filmmakers, the practitioners of the 'middle cinema', burst onto the scene. Among them were prolific filmmakers such as Bharathan, P.Padmarajan, Fazil, Satyan Anthikkad, Lenin Rajendran and Balachandra Menon.

In the mainstream, the work of P.Padmarajan and K.G.George dominated the 1980's. Padmarajan (1936-1991), a novelist and short story writer of repute, started his film career as a successful scenarist to Bharathan and I.V.Sasi. He turned to directing in 1979 with *Peruvazhiyambalam*, a poignant film, set in a rural milieu, about revenge and the futility of violence. His later films explore various dimensions of love, human relationships and sexuality. K.G.George, a graduate of the FTII, started as an assistant to Ramu Kariat and debuted in 1975 with *Swapnadanam*, a psychodrama about marital love. In the 1980's he went on to make a series of significant and commercially successful films centring upon women.

I.V.Sasi, Bharathan and Fazil were the most commercially successful directors of the period. While Fazil's concerns were adolescent love and filial relationships, I.V.Sasi made a series of political melodramas based on public and political scandals of the 1980's. The major themes of the period were romantic entanglements and corruption in public life. Sex and violence formed an inevitable part of the narrative.

The burgeoning film industry and the dramatic increase in production were catalysts for new technologies and techniques. The fact that India's first 3-D movie, *My Dear Kuttichathan* (Jijo, 1984), was made in Malayalam stands as testimony to the industry's vitality and vibrancy. A fantasy film for children, *My Dear Kuttichathan* was a great commercial success and was dubbed into several Indian languages.

The 1990's saw a change in themes as well as audience expectations and tastes. The radical shift in economic policies in India and fall of the Soviet Union and the Communist Bloc had a tremendous impact on the Malayalam psyche. Meanwhile, the spread of satellite television, made possible by the new economic policies, was eating into the thematic terrain of cinema.

The plethora of tele-serials, almost all domestic or romantic melodramas, decreased the thematic choices of the film industry. This also transformed the audience base of cinema. With the sobs and soaps invading the drawing rooms, there was a withdrawal of the family audience from the cinemas, and of such themes from films. Working within limited economies of scale, with no substantial outside market, and unable to compete technically with other cinemas, Malayalam cinema of the early 1990's retreated into the only areas where the indigenous seemed to have an assured market and could not be combated from the outside – slapstick and sleaze.

With the erasure of the difference between 'art' and the 'commercial', filmmakers comfortable in both worlds dominated the scene, the prominent among them being Sibi Malayil, Fazil, Priyadarshan, Srinivasan, Kamal, Jayaraj, Balachandra Menon and Lohitadas. Their films were psychodramas and social satires with a tinge of élan. Their strength was in their scripts and many were commercially successful. In a way, the commercial films were rediscovering 'art' cinema as yet another formula.

The rise of communal politics at the national level had echoes in the 1990's. Upper-caste rituals, costumes, concerns and mannerisms were established as the normative and narrative center. The Valluvanadan Malayalam (a slang used by the upper castes in central Kerala and popularized by the highly successful scripts of M.T.Vasudevan Nair) became the mother tongue of popular cinema. The minorities, especially Muslims and lower castes, were gradually marginalized and forced into stereotypes, tending to appear more as exceptions to the 'normal'.

T.V.Chandran and Shaji.N.Karun are the two major filmmakers who made their mark in the 1990's. Chandran made his debut with *Krishankutty* in 1980, followed in 1989 by *Alicinte Anweshanam*, an unsettling film about the chasm that separates the lives of men and women. *Ponthan Mada* (1994) and *Ormakalundayirikkanam* (1995) are disturbing probes into Kerala's history, the former from a subaltern angle and the latter from the viewpoint of a teenager. *Susanna* (2000) is about a woman with a mind and more importantly a body of her own, who refuses to be a mere victim or an object of desire. Chandran's next film, *Danny* (2000), is a sequel to *Susanna* and is a sarcastic interrogation of Malayalee masculinity. In *Padam Onnu: Oru Vilapam* (2003), he takes a critical look at the inhuman practices among the Muslim community in Kerala. His last film, *Kathavaseshan* (2004), is about a middle-class youth committing suicide 'for the shame of being alive' in times like these.

Shaji.N.Karun, the cinematographer of most of Aravindan's films, made an impressive feature debut with *Piravi* (1988), which won several international awards. Beginning with a real-life incident, the film deals with the agony of a father who, not knowing his son was tortured to death by the police, waits endlessly for his return. *Swaham* (1994) is another film about the struggles and travails of a family in a soulless society. His *Vaanaprastham* (1999), which won India's national award for Best Film, deals with the inner and outer struggles of a traditional actor in a society that no longer supports his art or recognises his worth.

The most striking development in the first decade of the new millennium is the emergence of a number of young filmmakers fighting to make their distinct voices heard over the din of Hollywood and television channels, and struggling to express themselves outside commercial formulae. Most of their films are low budget, formally adventurous, thematically introspective and engage the present in all its complexities. Recent years saw some provocative and bold films such as M.P.Sukumaran Nair's *Sayanam*, Pavithran's *Kuttappan Sakshi*, Satish Menon's *Bhavum*, Suma Josson's *Janmadinam*, Liji Pullapilly's *Sancharam* and Rajiv Vijayaraghavan's *Margam*.

This new generation of filmmakers of the post-liberalisation era comes from two different backgrounds. One group, most of them products of film-society activism, film institutes or advertising firms, are based in India, making a living and films there, including M.P.Sukumaran Nair, V.K.Prakash, R.Sarat, Suma Josson, Priyanandan and Rajiv Vijayaraghavan. The other group consists of non-resident Keralites, part of the Malayalee diaspora who work abroad and make films in their mother tongue, including Satish Menon, Satish Nambiar and Liji Pullapilly. Murali Nair, whose *Maranasimhasanam* (1999), an acerbic satire on the degeneration of Communist politics, won the Camera d'Or at Cannes, could be considered the pioneer of this group. His next films, *Oru Pattiyude Divasam* (2001) and *Arimpara* (2002), are also black comedies set against the local socio-political backdrop.

It is interesting to note that, while the films of the resident filmmakers concentrate on global issues and universal themes such as nuclear disarmament and the degeneration of Communist politics, the non-residents take up local issues and themes firmly placing their narrative in the physical, social and mental landscape of Kerala, often with a nostalgic force. They address such topics as lesbianism, the problems of a village economy in the face of globalisation and the pitfalls of professionalism.

A decade of globalisation has taken its toll on Kerala, as on other marginal economies and cultures. Kerala's current film scene is one slowly waking up to the new reality of globalised images and mega narratives.

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