

MOHAN DHARAVATH & ACHUTHA
Edited by

Reimagining **MARGINALITY**

EXPLOITATION, EXPERIENCE, EXPRESSION



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ISBN 978-9355293534



AUTHORS P R E S S

CHAPTER 1

Configuring the “Region” and Its “Outside” in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

Mohammed Shareef M.P.

Introduction

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

The Period

The Malayalam film industry witnessed a ‘dry’ spell during the late 1980s and 1990s as a result of various factors which are elaborated below. The poor response that super star films received at the box office by late 1980s was already a sign of an impending crisis. The allegation that “black money” was involved in the production of films resulted in the state government’s attempt to curb illegal investments in the industry, which eventually led to a crisis in the Malayalam film industry. The Gulf War in the 1990s affected foreign remittances to Kerala which accelerated the crisis in the Malayalam film industry. These changes happening at the production front

producers put their money on such movies as these films guaranteed a "minimum returns" at the box office. This, as Jenny Rowena discusses, led to the emergence of a particular genre of movies during this period – laughter movies or *chirippadanzhal*.

In the following section, this paper explores the characteristic features and functions of what is described as "minimum return" films and the specific industrial context that facilitated the emergence of such films. It proposes that the budgetary constraints and decline of star power in the Malayalam film industry catalysed the emergence of a new category of movies. These movies, running on a very limited budget, used upcoming actors and laid emphasis on comedy with the sole aim of making a marginal profit for the investors. As these movies required a minimal budget and, as a result, assured guaranteed return of the investment, the paper terms such films minimum return films.

Advent of Minimum Return Films

Filmmakers sought new actors in an attempt to reduce the production costs as the remuneration for the new actors was much lower than that of the superstars. The attempt was to make films with the minimum possible investment. Some of the notable actors who emerged at this point are Jayaram and Dileep, who went on to become stars in their own right by the 2000s. Due to the emergence of these new actors, the number of films produced slowly increased. The filmmakers were more eager and confident to make films with these new actors as there was a guarantee that the film would fetch at least the money that was invested. This is what led to the emergence of minimum returns films.

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

Conclusion

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

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