Introduction:

The relationship between cinema and the construction of a regional identity in South India in the post-independence period has been the subject of much scholarly writings (Prasad 2010, 2014; Srinivas 2013; Joseph 2013; Radhakrishnan 2015). These studies look at the industrial, aesthetic and political considerations that led to the making of regional cinemas outside of Hindi cinema. The dissolution of presidencies and the emergence of linguistic-national consciousness in the mid-twentieth century resulted in increased cultural productions in regional languages. As Madhava Prasad (2014) points out, the coming of “sound films” and male star system has contributed to the growth of regional cinemas.

Madhava Prasad’s argument that there has always been a constant struggle over the state form in India and that it has reflected...
in Hindi cinema attains importance in the context of the formation of regional states. The Indian state, which inherited its form from the colonial state, was not able to recognize—and help realize the aspirations of—the multiple nationalities in India. The Indian state’s attempt to create a “pan-Indian” identity resulted in a lack which necessitated a symbolic field which provided a supplementary form or a shadow-state where the regional-national aspirations could be mobilized. It is in such a context that we should look at the formation of regional cinemas in the post-independence period. Madhava Prasad’s observation that the cinemas of South India were “mobilised to serve as supplementary structures of representation” (Prasad, Cine-politics 123) in a situation where the realisation of multiple nationalities within the Indian nation was not possible within the nation-state becomes important for our understanding of early Malayalam cinema’s role in the crystallization of the Malayali national identity.

**Malayalam Cinema and the Making of Regional Identity**

While mobilizations around the Malayalam language were central to the construction of a Malayali people, Malayalam cinema facilitated the crystallization of a unified linguistic and cultural identity that the people of Kerala strove for. The Malayalam cinema in the 1950s played an integrative function through “an ideology of inclusiveness by highlighting regional accents, slang and usage as well as employing communal cultural idioms in its narratives and musical compositions” (Swart 126). In the 1950s, when the imagination of a Malayali nation based on linguistic identity was taking concrete shape in the form of the movement for the Aikya Kerala (United Kerala) state, cinema emerged as a modern, secular space where caste, class and other identities were recognized and transcended (Venkiteswaran 71).

The advocates of a United Kerala movement, which campaigned for the formation of Kerala as a separate state promoted
the cause of establishing regional cinema as well. They had openly declared their support for Malayalam cinema and for establishing a production base in Kerala. This was also to prevent the influence of Tamil cultural productions in the region. This cultural anxiety, as well as the need for the setting up of a local film industry, can be seen in Pallathu Raman’s speech at a meeting of the Samastha Kerala Sahithya Parishad in Kannur in 1948. In the meeting, held in the context of the campaign for the Aikya Kerala movement, Pallathu Raman argued:

The [Tamil] film industry is an institution that comes like flood waters and steals money from the pockets of Malayalis. Cinema is well suited for the promotion of music and literature. Fire can be used to burn down a house, but also to cook food. Similarly, cinema also has two aspects. Cinema should propagate moral values. Don’t we [Malayalis] have beauty, culture, music, and women who are experts in dance and other arts, in our land? (quoted in Joseph, “‘Regional’ Cinema” 40).

Madhava Prasad has argued that “in the aftermath of the linguistic reorganization of states, the nationalist address that the cinema adopted as a marketing device gave body to the linguistic nation more concretely than any other cultural form” (Cine-politics 122). In the light of the discussion around the language question in the post-independence period and the question of the lack of a symbolic field to realize the multiple nationalities, let us look at the relationship between Communist politics in Kerala and cinema. It may be noted that while political parties fielded by film stars emerged as representatives of the Tamil nation and the Telugu nation in the 1970s and 1980s, in Kerala it was the Communists who are seen as the representatives of the region. In his discussion of “cine-politics”, Madhava Prasad points out “the influence of
social and political movements such as communism, or the unusual social composition of a linguistic community" (Cine-politics 18) as a possible reason why the phenomenon did not occur in Kerala, unlike the three other south Indian states—Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. Seeing the formation of political parties by film stars only as a symptom of cine-politics, Prasad highlights the question of surrogate political existence in the absence of popular sovereignty.

The desire to see oneself on screen has played a central role in the imagination of an indigenous film industry, be it Dadasaheb Phalke who wanted to see Indian images on the screen, or the early filmmakers in Malayalam. Ramu Kariat, who made Neelakkuyil, states the vision that guided him in the making of Neelakkuyil as thus: “Our cinema should not be like what they are now. It should speak the way we speak, the characters in it should eat the way we eat, and dress like we do” (quoted in Venkiteswaran 72). What is at the heart of this desire is the question of cultural authenticity. Venkiteswaran sees the “desire to see Kerala in film” as a “desire to imagine and bring into being a Kerala through cinema” (72).

The role Malayalam cinema played in the mid-twentieth century in the consolidation of the linguistic-nationality identity is central to the Left’s production of a modern subjectivity in Kerala. While theatre and Kathaprasangam were the most popular mediums of entertainment in the 1930s and 1940s, cinema became the most popular medium in Kerala by the 1950s. The Left in Kerala, which had actively intervened in the field of culture, engaged with the medium of cinema as well. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan argues that the Communist presence has played a key role in “keeping intact the domain of the popular as one that in many ways mirror the structures in the cinematic popular in say, Tamil Nadu” (Radhakrishnan “What is Left” 26). What he points
to in this significant essay is the left’s constitutive role in the construction of the popular domain in Kerala.

The Cinematic Popular and the “Integration” of a United Kerala

In this section let us briefly look at the role that early Malayalam cinema played in the cultural “integration” of the region called Kerala. In the context of the demand for a United Kerala during the 1940s and its eventual materialization in 1956, cinema had to play the important role of strengthening the fictive ethnicity. The linguistic reorganization of states accelerated the evolution of a linguistically defined film markets and the regional cinemas had the task of defining themselves in relation to the cinemas of neighbouring states. For Malayalam cinema, thus, projecting itself as different from Tamil cinema which is thought of as characterized by excesses, was an important task.

Patricia Swart, in her study of Malayalam cinema, *Politics, Gender, Spectators: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Malayalam Cinema of Kerala* argues 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 argues that

that the Malayalam language was seen as a necessary component 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. At the same time, Malayalam cinema continued to promote an ideology of inclusiveness by highlighting regional accents, slang and usage as well as employing
communal cultural idioms in its narratives and musical compositions (126).

The Left’s engagement with culture, with a focus on the democratization of culture, has played a significant role in the construction of a national-popular in Kerala. While the Left took over the leadership of the political movement for the formation of Kerala state by the 1940s, Left-affiliated artists in the Progressive Writers Movement, the Theatre Movement, and cinema imagined a nation of rational subjects through literature, art, and cinema. These domains have played a crucial role in the production of publics in the mid-twentieth century. C.S. Venkiteswaran has argued that in the Kerala of the 1950’s, when the movement for a separate Kerala 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” (71). In a similar vein, while discussing *Neelakkuyil* (1954), a film produced two years before the formation of Kerala, Jenson Joseph argues that the prominence given by the narrative of the film to the Muslim character Moithu indicates the film’s attempt to appeal to the audience from Malabar, a region that was considered not only as culturally distant, and “backward” in the development index compared to the other two princely states, but also as a region where the Communist Party had a decisive influence.

The early Malayalam cinema had the task of defining itself in relation to the Indian nation and Kerala’s neighbouring state, Madras where a strong Dravidian movement sought to create a Dravidian identity for all the people of South India on the basis of Dravidian ethnicity. While the Indian freedom struggle was conspicuous for its absence in early Malayalam cinema, neither was there anything like the DMK film in Malayalam cinema. As we have observed before, it was the creation of a modern citizen through the cinematic address that early Malayalam cinema sought
to achieve as a pedagogic function. Patricia Swart has further argued that “the combination of radical political action and an indigenous cinema was a powerful tool in the creation” of a modern citizen in Kerala. She also argued that “it was Kerala’s Communist movement and its attendant Marxist ideology that often took center stage in the construction of this citizen-subject in the early decades of Malayalam cinema” (125).

The film *Neelakkuyil* attains significance here. It was the first Malayalam film in which people from various parts and sections of Kerala participated, both on screen and off screen. The film was praised for its “Keralaness” and the portrayal of nativity. Paul Willemen and Ashish Rajadhyaksha credit *Neelakkuyil* for inaugurating “for the first time a culturally valid and economically successful indigenous melodrama in Kerala” (338). This model of melodrama that *Neelakkuyil* pioneered, continued to inform Malayalam cinema at least till the 1970s. According to Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, *Neelakkuyil* “attempted to imagine a new geography for Kerala that was not the sum total of Thiruvithamkoor and Malabar, and was symbolically held together by Sathyan’s stardom, even though earlier formations continue to haunt it” (Radhakrishnan, “Thiruvithamkoor” 138).

It was at a juncture when there were multiple imaginations of Kerala that Left-affiliated artists like Thoppil Bhasi, P. Bhaskaran, etc. offered a cultural vision for modern Kerala through the medium of cinema as well as theatre. Left-affiliated artists like Bhasi and Bhaskaran negotiated with a modern technological and cultural form like cinema to address a large number of people. Put differently, these artists chose to use the potentials of a technological mass medium like cinema to carry forward their idea of social change. While the early Left initiatives in theatre and films dealt with issues of social change, after Independence and the formation of Kerala state, “egalitarian developmentalism” gained more
importance. At the national level, many Left-affiliated artists had considered it as their responsibility to participate in the Nehruvian nation-building project.

Unlike the early Malayalam political melodramas from the Left such as Neelakkuyil, Mudiyanaya Puthran, etc. which were about social transformation at the individual level, with the upper caste male as the locus of transformation, later films like Puthiya Akasam Puthiya Bhoomi, Aswamedham, etc. have an investment in the state-led transformation of the society. In Puthiya Akasam Puthiya Bhoomi we see an elaboration of a distinct “developmental aesthetic” which I have discussed elsewhere. The investment in state-led development should be understood in the context of the fear of economic backwardness and in the context of Nehruvian vision of development. It is important to note here that the linguistic reorganization of states, which was thought of as a necessary step for the democratization of society, was conceded more as an act of compromise rather than a truly enabling move. At the national level, the logic of state-led development was given more importance over the question of popular sovereignty. Put differently, the logic of popular sovereignty, which was central to the national-popular conception of language communities, was superseded by the logic of development at the national level. With the fear of economic backwardness haunting the newly formed states, industrialization and planned economy were seen as the remedies. The Left, however, had an ambivalent attitude towards industrialization, which is evident in a Left-mobilizational film like Mudiyanaya Puthran (The Prodigal Son, dir. Ramu Kariat, 1961) where industrialization is looked upon with suspicion.

The KPAC plays during the period between 1951 and 1957 were concerned with social and political mobilization of people towards an egalitarian future. However, after the formation of the state, state-led development and social modernization gained more
prominence. This reflected in KPAC’s plays as well. In the early plays like *Ningalenne Communistakki* and *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (The Prodigal Son), the central characters were party workers and mobilizers of people’s resistance against the exploiting classes. But in later plays such as *Puthiya Akasam Puthiya Bhoomi, Aswamedham* and *Sarasayya*, it was not the political activist but modern figures like the technocrat and the doctor who were presented as the agents of social transformation. With nation-building becoming a major concern of the Communist Party, the artists associated with the Left, especially the KPAC, saw it as their duty to contribute actively to the nation-building process. It is worth pointing out here that the Communist Party in Kerala was critical but not completely dismissive of the Nehruvian vision of economic development. Communist Party’s critique was that it was the interests of the bourgeois class that was protected in Nehru’s vision of “socialist planning”. Thus the critique was about the mode of implementation of the principle of planned economy.

**Conclusion**

Early Malayalam cinema has played an important role in the production of a modern Malayali identity. In the aftermath of the linguistic reorganization, the Left-affiliated artists, through their engagement with a modern technological-cultural form like cinema participated in the construction of a people who subsist in the Malayali nation. While early films focused on social transformation, some of the later films had an investment in state-led development which can be understood in the context of egalitarian developmentalism that has been central to the imagination of a modern Malayali identity.

**Works Cited**

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