



The Dangerous Supplement: A Revaluation of Sreenivasan and the Malayalam Comic Film

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Abstract: *Sreenivasan is often understood to be a representative of the subaltern energies in the field of Malayalam cinema. At the same time, Sreenivasan has had a successful career in each of his roles as a scriptwriter, actor, and director. The label of being a subaltern therefore calls for a closer examination. Briefly touching upon the thematic elements in some of Sreenivasan's most memorable roles from the comic film genre of the late 1980s and early 1990s, this paper argues that Sreenivasan provided Malayalam cinema the energies of a fast transforming world. Mobilising the Derridean concept of supplement, this paper reads Sreenivasan's figuration in Malayalam cinema as a negotiation of a time in which the traditional feudal hero caused a structural blockage in exploring the new worlds that were opening up to the Malayali public sphere.*

Keywords: *Malayalam cinema, migration, supplement, comic film*

This paper calls for a revaluation of Sreenivasan's function in the economy of representation in the full length comedy films of the nineteen eighties and the nineties. Undertaking a thematic reading of some of the most successful movies of the second half of the 1980s and the first half of 1990s in which Sreenivasan (i.e. characters played by him) is given the dominant or next-to-dominant screen presence and point-of-view, the paper argues that Sreenivasan, through the range of characters he played in the movies of the time, and as the prefabricated set of meanings he brings to the film by virtue of his appearances in previous films, provided the supplemental function to defining the region of Kerala and its people.

The role of cinema in defining a region has been studied at length by various scholars. S.V. Srinivas (*Politics as Performance*) and Uma Bhrugubanda (*Deities and Devotees*) has reflected on the role of NTR films in articulating a popular Telugu identity. Among other modes, these also involved the invention of a new auratic reality inaugurated by the mythological delivery of Telugu. Srinivas also illustrates the role played by the folklore genre of movies by Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (NTR) in imagining the Telugu nation, and goes on to say that the public that was mobilized in the name of Telugu pride in the early 1980s by NTR was a ‘cinematic public’ that is a public whose idea of what it meant to be Telugu was circumscribed by the cinematic production of the Telugu nation of which NTR himself was at the forefront. Similarly, in order to explain the rise of the stars in the political life of three of the four (now five) south Indian states – MGR in Tamil Nadu, NTR in (erstwhile) Andhra Pradesh, and Rajkumar in Karnataka – M. Madhava Prasad has coined the term ‘*cine-politics*’ by which he means a politics which was primarily a cinematic relationship between the star and his sidekick who is conceived as his fan. There have also been studies that extend the relation of cine-politics to Malayalam cinema, especially with relation to the superhero movies which marked a visible departure in the Malayalam film culture of the late 1990s. An example is Ratheesh Radhakrishnan’s study of the grammar of Mohanlal’s blockbuster movies from the late 1990s (“Looking at Mohanlal”).¹

The movies of the late eighties and the early nineties have often been read, in hindsight, as a build up to the later superhero phase of the late nineties. Jenny Rowena, in her study of the full length comedy movies of the period (“The Laughter Films”) has studied the figure of the Mohanlal to be both a representative of the uppcaste as well as a locus of identification for the newly mobile former lower castes. In her reading, Sreenivasan, contrasted to Mohanlal, thematises “the inner anxieties of the non-hegemonic

masculine position” (148). Vipin Kumar’s study of the comic films of the period (‘Politics of Laughter’) argue the laughter generated by comic films to be the result of the inadequate symbolisation of the mobile lower order of society who could fit into the hegemonic only through acts of fraudulence. Importantly, Kumar states that the comic characters are not just comic characters, they are also inferred in these movies to be of determinate social positions. These movies play up laughter in the failed utopia rather than wallow in the tragedy. In terming the laughter movies of the period so, an argument which can be extended to Sreenivasan though he is not one of the actors mentioned in the study, Kumar takes this laughter therefore to be the laughing at the failure of the bourgeois order itself when it comes to integrating the other orders of society. Laughter thereby becomes a political act of criticism.

This paper argues that the figure of Sreenivasan is to be read as a supplement to the figure of the Malayali hero. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida introduced the idea of supplement as one which allows us to read oppositional instincts in a discourse not as contradictions but as a divided unity which nevertheless moves in coherence. The supplement is that which provides what is lacking in the original condition. But while adding thus, it is also replacing the former, taking its place. Thus supplement plays the crucial function of providing that which was lacking, as naturally belonging to it, but at the same time, as something which was absent in the original state of affairs, an outsider, it can only be marked as an

³On a separate occasion, Radhakrishnan has also foregrounded the culture war that occasioned this departure in the dominant character of the Malayalam film industry (“What is Left of Malayalam Cinema”). Other studies on the star phenomenon in south Indian cinema include Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Painted Face: Studies in Indian Popular Cinema*; M.S.S. Pandian, *The Image Trap: M.G. Ramachandran in the Film and Politics*; Preminda Jacob, *Celluloid Deities: The Visual Culture of Cinema and Politics in South India*; Sara Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*

absence. Supplement is therefore the other, that which does not belong to the system, which then adds what was lacking, and replaces the original.

In turning to the figure of Sreenivasan as the supplement, this paper aims to move away from celebrating Sreenivasan as a subaltern figure who managed to upend the deeply entrenched colour and physique codes of Malayalam cinema (Sreenivasan is understood to be dark and short), or as the subaltern contradiction against who the uppercaste glory represented by the main hero (Mohanlal or Jayaram or Mammootty) stands a better chance, or as the mimicry figure who stood a better chance of survival by being mottled against a mottled background and by not aspiring to be hero (this is how Sreenivasan's origin story is usually related – as a chance-seeker aspiring only for those characters which could be played by a dark and short man). I reject these positions simply because Sreenivasan was (and continues to be) far too important to be reduced to the position of a particular (unlike, say, Mamukoya). His screenplays laced with black humour, his social-political commentary that ran throughout or shot up unannounced in moments of his screenplay, as well as the obsessive self-criticism in the movies that he himself had directed, had already established him as a maverick in the popular imagination. He was not just an actor, screenwriter and a director, he was also particularly successful in each one of these capacities. It is only a matter of justice then to treat Sreenivasan, and his characters which made him, not as representations of subaltern particulars, but as representation of the mainstream and the hegemonic itself. It is based on this commonsense, based on a historical memory, that the rest of this paper is premised on.

The supplemental reading I wish to undertake is motivated by the fact that Sreenivasan, in much of the movies of the time under discussion, plays second fiddle to a more dominant hero

figures. A few examples are in order: in *Gandhinagar 2nd Street* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1986), Sreenivasan's role is of a facilitator for the protagonist's role, played by Mohanlal, to take off. Sreenivasan is absent for much of the movie as well. He plays a similarly marginal role, as the ally but also the motivator of a crucial twist in the plotline in *Sanmanassullavarkku Samadanam* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1986). Sreenivasan plays the crucial role of being the second of the two protagonists in a host of movies in the same period: with Mohanlal in the CID trilogy by Sathyan Anthikkad - *Nadodikkattu* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1987), *Pattanapravesham* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1988), and *Akkare Akkare Akkare* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1990); with Jayaram in *Nagarangalil Chennu Raparkkam* (Viji Thampy, 1990); with Jayaram again in perhaps as the more prominent lead in *Sandesham* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1991). Sreenivasan also played the lead character in a few movies of the same time, and requires a little more elaboration on his roles: in *Ponmuttayidunna Tharavu* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1988) Sreenivasan played a goldsmith who had invested some of his gold on a woman he was supposed to marry only to end up looking like a fool as the woman's father reneges on his word when a more proper groom, a Gulf migrant, comes seeking a bride. Jayaram, whose skin tone, physique and disposition, like Mohanlal is supposed to be conforming to the savarna aesthetic, plays the usurper. The tables are turned when the gold the lover-goldsmith had given his supposed would-be turns out to be fake. In *Thalayananamanthram* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1990), Sreenivasan plays a husband who heeds his wife's pillowtalk for a fancy life which leads him to cut off ties with his family and ultimately travel down the road to perdition. Jayaram plays the bachelor younger brother here and provides a contrast with the henpecked elder brother. In *Ennum Nanmakal* (Sathyan Anthikkad, 1991) Sreenivasan plays the mature, soft-spoken and self-assured widower with a school-aged daughter who is the receiver of affection of a young woman who has recently shifted to the neighbourhood. Jayaram plays the

role of the lover of the woman who is now more tender towards Dr. Anirudhan, the character played by Sreenivasan. The movie ends with Sreenivasan facilitating the marriage of the young man and woman while effacing himself out of the love triangle. In *Pavam Pavam Rajakumaran* (Kamal, 1990) Sreenivasan plays the lead in an ensemble cast with Siddique, Jagadeesh and Maniyanpillai Raju playing his housemates. Sreenivasan's character, noted for his parsimony, is made to undergo various embarrassments as his housemates trick him into believing that these are (inconvenient) demands made by his ladylove (who is, by the way, unaware of even the existence of such a lover). Sreenivasan plays the central role in *Oru Kochu Bhoomikulukkam* (Chandrasekharan, 1992) as the married man who seeks in vain to block his neighbour's (played by Siddique) marriage because the fiancé was a former college mate and a hater, and privy to one particularly sensational information about him from the past. Again, the character has to go through various episodes of humiliation and failure and his family is in tatters. Sreenivasan plays the lead in his directorial undertaking *Vadakkunokkiyenthram* (1989), this time without the presence of any dominant supporting actors. The movie tells the story of a suspicious husband who is never quite relieved of his pathological insecurity from having landed a wife beautiful far beyond what he assumes to be his range.

While one agrees with Rowena's observation that these are anxieties of the non-hegemonic male, the sheer consistency of these roles coupled with the fact that these were films in which comedy did not play a sidetrack but the main track itself, that comedy was integral to the plot and its resolution, would then raise the question of the nature of hegemony itself. The frequency and consistency of these roles suggest that the non-hegemonic had quite a successful run! Given that these movies involve not just laughing at the characters played by Sreenivasan but also partly empathising if not identifying with a particular inner life of struggles, perhaps a

more gainful way of analysing hegemony would account for its fluid character which does not ossify positions but allow for supersessions and appropriations.

Reading Sreenivasan as a supplement allows me to account for the success of Sreenivasan as the reconfiguration of a regional identity at a particular moment in history. In this, it is crucial that Sreenivasan always had a shadow figure who conformed more to the assumed *savarna* ethos, because it is precisely the lack in this figure that the supplement, Sreenivasan, adds to and takes the place of. “Compensatory [*suppléant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-(the)-place* [*tient-lieu*]...Somewhere, something can be filled up of *itself*, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy” (Derrida, 145). It is also important here that the dominant figure himself, like the characters played by Mohanlal, is in a state of having to go through many embarrassments.

I agree with Vipin Kumar when he says that the political criticism in the comic movies of the period limit itself to the personal and is devoid of any grand vision for the public life. Kumar is not critical of this supposed diminution because he reads in it the avenues for alternatives to bourgeois social style. However, I would argue that in moments of particularity – and Kumar mentions that the comic characters are of determinate social origins – the failure as well as its success at the personal have representational value. Of course this is a premise even in Kumar’s study, or cultural criticism in general. Let us however add, the exact contour of this particularity changes with the setting. That is, the dominant factor of the mix of elements that makes one’s identity is also decided by the context. Thus, the particularity of a particular subject shifts if, say, the point of view is not framed by the region but located as a placement in the wider nation and the world. With an entire economy of the world in the regional cinema – with national and

international award circuits, the million plus strong Keralite migrant labourer in different parts of the world, the transnational movement of films – it is warranted to assume a frame for the region which transcends the regional.¹ The personal success and failure at this juncture becomes a region defining itself.

At the same time, there is the question of the specific function that the supplement in its determinate social position gives itself in these movies. In other words, what lack did the supplement fill itself with? It is my contention that the answer lies in the genre. Who after all is the laughing subject of the laughter cinema? It is here that one can see a crucial function of the supplement. While austerity provided the ethos of Malayalam cinema, an ethos that Sreenivasan himself is identified with, and the fall from a former grace one of the staples of the star movies, especially those of Mohanlal whom Sreenivasan is most successfully paired with in the period, neither austerity nor the absoluteness of a former grace could capture a polity which also found itself to be newly mobile, exposed to the world that was discursively produced as full of opportunities.

The studies of the comic films have circumambulated questions of unemployment, of threatened masculinities by the public visibility of women, etc. While this paper does not deny these factors, this paper wants to draw your attention that such analyses does not move beyond the narrow frame of the borders of the Kerala state and fail to account for the buoyancy of the eighties aided especially by migrant labour drawn mostly from the lower rungs, and by the weakening grip of feudal austerity. The fact of a state that cannot sustain itself without the migrant remittances combined with the general grandstanding on the Kerala Model of Development and the Human Development Indices comparable to western Europe; the palpable fall of communism combined with the grandstanding of one's state being the most progressive as

evidenced by the continued reign of communism, the need to define oneself when one assumes oneself to be under the glare, the comical smallness of oneself despite everything one has seemingly achieved, the grand-narrative of Kerala exceptionalism combined with one's worthlessness, these form the mix of the comic. Perhaps the laughter is not directed towards the failure of utopia, but at the disjuncture of the promised utopia itself to the reality of 'the outside world' – to the very smallness of our imagination itself. A realistic approach to these contradictions came as late as *Arabikkatha* (Lal Jose, 2007) where some of these contradictions are played to comic and pathetic effects.

To read Sreenivasan as a supplement is to account for the success of this actor-screenwriter-director which this paper locates in the lack of the hegemonic model to capture the drastic shifts in the late eighties onwards. The shift is primarily ideological, and mobilises an array of new sensations and orientations¹ which couldn't have been captured by the social realism or the generous-and-caring-rich-patriarch-with-glamorous-and-daring-sons-and-daughters of the early eighties or the pathos of the fall-from-feudal-grace genre which was successful during the late eighties and the early nineties. Sreenivasan, or the comic mode in general, at once brought in a set of confident new energies, while also supplementarily kept alive a feeling of smallness (and therefore

⁴ See Ratheesh Radhakrishnan's "The Worlds of Region" for a discussion on the contribution of the non-national to the making of a regional which is primarily defined by the logic of the national. Radhakrishnan devotes much space to *Arabikkatha*, a film which has Sreenivasan in its lead role. While I agree with Radhakrishnan in the general thrust of the argument, the generic and the historical specificities of our materials, very importantly the souring of the Gulf dream that becomes shrill only in the 2000s, makes for the differences in the modes of self-reflection in these films. Also see Radhakrishnan, "The Gulf in Imagination."

humility) which would sustain the hegemonic without giving way to what it would see as a brash new order. The contradictions in play between the hegemonic and ‘non-hegemonic’ that nevertheless produced a coherent movement for these films produced the self-imagination of the region of Kerala for which apart from all its greatness and exceptionalism, its marginality is also a self-sustaining fantasy.

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Filmography

⁵ On this see Radhakrishnan, "Habits and Worlds"

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