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Bhakti Crossing the Boundaries of Language: Experience and Exegesis of an Andal Translator from Tamil to Malayalam

— **Syam Sudhakar** and **S. Suthara**

Abstract: This article explores the challenges and dynamics of translating the medieval Bhakti poet Andal's renowned work *Tiruppavai*. It investigates the cultural, political and gendered dimensions of the process of translation, emphasising the complexities of preserving the original's "foreignness" while adapting to the target language. Drawing on the theoretical speculations of Walter Benjamin, Gayatri Spivak and Antoine Berman, the article underscores the political nature of Bhakti translations and its role in the cultural dialogue of contemporary India. An individual translation experience from ancient Tamil to Malayalam is narrated, reflecting on linguistic and metrical challenges and the process of balancing fidelity and creativity. The article positions translation as not merely a technical task but a significant cultural and political engagement with Bhakti's rich tradition. The paper also problematises the prominent trend of translating Bhakti literature from intermediate English translations in India.

Keywords: Andal, Bhakti literature, translation, cultural politics, gender dynamics

Andal, a ninth-century Bhakti poet from Tamil Nadu, could be regarded as a successor to the tradition of female Bhakti poetry initiated by Karaikkal Ammaiyar—the two prominent women writers among the twelve Alwars and sixty-three Nayanars. It is generally opined that Bhakti literature sprouted from Tamizhakam of South India in the sixth century AD (Nappinnai 1). With Andal, Bhakti literature expands into various dimensions, transcends limitations, and blossoms into its complete manifestation. She has composed two poignant works in

the Bhakti tradition on her love for Lord Krishna: *Tiruppavai* and *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*. The zenith of Bhakti literature is attained through *Nacciyar Tirumozhi*, while *Tiruppavai* mostly limits itself to the status of being a text of bridal mysticism (Rangarajan). This article has two parallel strata. The first showcases the personal experience of translating the Bhakti poet Andal into contemporary Malayalam, which was published in the weekly periodical *Samakalika Malayalam* on January 10, 2022, by drawing speculations from major theoreticians. The second interrogates existing ideas of translation, focusing on the difficulties in translating a text belonging to the Bhakti cult.

Why Andal?

2 The question of why Andal, among several Bhakti poets, was chosen for translation is complex, as it contains both personal and political reasons. In "The Politics of Translation" (1992), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak positions translation as a highly political act involving dynamic and culturally specific nuances that are being linguistically transferred. She emphasises the essentiality of "responsible translation", wherein the translator can take adequate time for preparation to produce a culturally non-negotiable rendition of the original (399). I [hereafter addressed as the translator] ventured into this translation project during the vulnerable and complicated times of the COVID-19 outbreak. This period of isolation and academic stagnation, punctuated only by online discussions, unexpectedly brought quality time for creative works. Random discussions on Bhakti literature with students—mostly online and occasionally in person—triggered an initial thought of translating Andal. It was seven years of life in Tamil Nadu and acquaintance

with the Tamil language that further prompted the translator towards this work. A translator must be an "intimate reader" and should "surrender" to the linguistic quality of a text, for which prerequisite knowledge of the source as well as the target language would be a supplement (Spivak 400).

Andal immortalised and preserved the archetypal memory of *Paavai Nonbu*—a traditional festival typically associated with the Vaishnava cult in Tamil Nadu—through her *Tiruppavai.* The disparity that the Kerala equivalent of the festival *Thiruvathira* is associated with the Shaiva cult infused further curiosity. The research as an aftermath of this interest led to the translation of *Tiruppavai* as a holistic project. Initially, a translation of Andal was attempted based on existing English versions, such as those by Archana Venkatesan, S. L. N. Simha, and Chenni Padmanabhan. However, Spivak problematises the homogenising effect of such translations, wherein regional source texts lose their intensity when transformed for the sake of a dominant Western readership (400). Afterwards, the original Tamil version was selected as the source for translation.

Just like how Spivak urges translators to maintain the "linguistic rhetoricity of the original text", it is pivotal to pay ample attention to minute details so as to underscore the cultural, political and gendered dimensions of the source text (405). The task of a translator who attempts the same on an ancient text is further challenging and complicated, as such archaic works are culturally and politically loaded. Antoine Berman formulates his theory of translation in "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign" (1985) and centres his argument in favour of the idea of preserving

the "foreignness" of the original text (296). To maintain the essence of the text in translation, I decided to translate 'my own' Andal without compromising the truth of *Tiruppavai.*

Reworking the Draft: Problems and Challenges

The tradition of *Paavai Nonbu,* dating back to the Sangam period around two thousand years ago, is observed in the Tamil month of *Margazhi*. *Tiruppavai,* the collected verses of the medieval Vaishnavite poet Andal, is recited in Vishnu temples in rural Tamil Nadu during this time (Nappinnai 7). The huge towers, shrines and intricate carvings all over the Vatapatrasayee Rangamannar Temple in Tiruvilliputtur, where *Paavai Nonbu* is observed, compelled the translator to concentrate more on the metrical side of the translation project. As Berman further opines, neglecting the rhythmic quality of the source text in translation is fundamentally unethical (292). The visit, coupled with exposure to various musical renditions of *Tiruppavai* available online, made the translator reapproach the entire text by incorporating metrical patterns. During the 1990s, Malayalam literature witnessed a significant movement towards reconnecting with Tamil, initiated by writers such as the renowned poet Attoor Ravi Varma. While early scholars prioritised the Sanskrit aspect within Malayalam, this age witnessed a shift towards Tamil, likely as part of de-Sanskritisation and de-Brahmanisation of the language. Attoor, in his translated collection of poems titled *Puthunaannoru* (2003), attempted a careful translation by incorporating more Tamil words. Being a writer of an entirely different generation, the translator approached Malayalam as it is, by not showcasing its belongingness to either of its root languages. The major aim of the

translation was to shape a Malayali readership of Andal by popularising an ancient Tamil text, thereby blending its major roots in proportion—a cultural act that would let intracultural dialogues occur, as Berman suggests (296). The translator used the metrical pattern of *anustip*, a Sanskrit metre that blends seamlessly with Tamil, to equally prioritise both languages.

After completing several drafts, the translator referred to earlier Malayalam translations of Andal, including *Andal Padiya Thiruppavai* (1986) by Ulloor M. Parameswaran, and could identify linguistic variations. Spivak vehemently opposes infidelity to the source text and language in translation, arguing that such independent involvement by translators distorts the cultural singularity of the original. However, Ulloor's liberal engagement in the translation process cannot be considered problematic or unjust, as translation also comprises appropriation and incorporation into a new language and culture. Such a non-linear exchange of literature might force the translators to be involved in the creative regeneration of a text, which is not synonymous with being untrue to the source.

Why do creative writers translate?

Apart from the obvious factors such as fame, monetary benefits, or popularity, there exists an often overlooked but important dimension in a creative writer's translation enterprise. Perhaps a creative writer translates in order to break away from their regular style and diction—an attempt to renew creativity. This factor differentiates the translation endeavours of a creative writer from those of a conventional translator. Both translation and creative writing are inherently creative processes; the basic

difference between the two acts being the degree of the writer's freedom. Decades before Spivak's opinion on originality in translation, Walter Benjamin in "The Task of the Translator" (1923) explains the position a translator has to choose to navigate between fidelity to the original text and their creative freedom. According to Benjamin, "a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning" (21). Nevertheless, Benjamin suggests that translation basically involves creativity that endures with time, emphasising its role as an art (16). Translation has every quality of a creative process, except that it is bound by the weight of the original text. The tension between creativity and hindered freedom makes translation a craft, where the translator must recreate meaning while respecting the 'aura' of the original text, to borrow from Benjamin (*The Work of Art* 22).

When translating Andal's *Tiruppavai*, the similar linguistic roots of Tamil and Malayalam, with shared grammatical structures and syntactical order, helped mitigate some challenges. However, finding equivalents for certain Tamil words and adapting Bhakti poetry to modern poetic sensibility proved difficult. There are a number of factors that make the process of translating Bhakti more than just a task for a translator. Many figures of speech and poetic techniques used in regional Indian poetry are inspired by the modernity brought forth by Western praxes. In fact, the literary devices in Andal's works do not fully resonate with the multiple sensibilities of contemporary readers. The Bhakti cult was perhaps the only phenomenon that unified India in its diverse entirety during the medieval age. When translating such a prime specimen of a text, the translator must navigate the

complexity of bridging the past and present poetic sensibilities.

Capturing irregular metrical structures and addressing ambiguities in the text are additional challenges when translating Bhakti. One such ambiguity arose from the identity of a creature referred to as *Aanai Chaathan* by Andal. In the translations of Venkatesan, Simha and Padmanabhan, the Aanai Chaathan is specifically characterised as King Crow, with a call "Kīcu Kīcu" (Venkatesan 57; Padmanaban 19) or "Kisu Kisu" (Simha 16). However, it is possible to regard the bird as a drongo, known for a similar call, unlike the crow's 'caw.'

Another major challenge in translating Andal relates to gender. Translation is fundamentally a political act, with language closely tied to gendered agency, according to Spivak (397). While working on Andal, the translator realised that women had played a major role in bringing up the Bhakti cult. The challenge of capturing the intricate connection between Bhakti and contemporary feminism also confronts a male translator. This was followed by further uncertainty regarding whether a male translator can fully understand a female writer's perspective. There are instances where Andal lightly ventures into the domain of eroticism, and translating his work poses another risk of being interpreted as a writer with a 'male gaze'. These confusions connected with the translator's gender itself are political and highly problematic in contemporary India while getting involved in translating a cult text.

Lost and Gained in Translation

Setting aside the intricacies of gender and ideology, there is a perspective on translation traceable to the likes of Robert Frost that "poetry is what is lost in translation" (Untermeyer 18). However, theorists have since shifted their focus to the potential benefits of translation, emphasising that what is gained—particularly the cultural nuances of the target language—is crucial. For instance, in Ulloor's translation of *Tiruppavai*, the phrase "like cotton in fire, sins will get burnt" is introduced as a simile, suggesting that sins are burnt upon visiting *Narayanamurthy* (37). This particular simile is not found in Andal's original version and can be considered as an instance of 'gaining' a new simile from translation.

8 However, it should be kept in mind that whether translation results in gains or losses, the core problem is within the nature of language itself. Any future attempt to translate Andal from the translator's side might, therefore, involve the use of an entirely new diction. This principle stays true for the whole of a writer's creative process—if a poem is written and then rewritten after some time, it will not be rendered in the same language. This behaviour is due to the arbitrary and ambiguous nature of language and is not at all concerned with the technicality of translation.

Bhakti Reborn

Translating Bhakti literature itself is a significant political activity in contemporary India since it further diversifies the culturally rich landscape of the country. As a movement, Bhakti stands out as one that encapsulates vernacular and subaltern politics, spirituality, the

concept of desire, the idea of body, and the intricacies of language—all woven into its literary essence. The cultural expansion of the trajectory of Bhakti literature is in many ways facilitated through multiple translations. One of the problems faced by Bhakti literature is that it is often translated to other Indian languages through the intermediary of English. Kabir, Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, Andal, Lal Ded et al., for instance, are first translated into English before presenting them in the translated regional language. There is a need for more translators who can facilitate the nuances of Bhakti directly from one regional language to another. This process presents a final challenge for the translator, as no translation done can be considered perfect, since all the exhaustive nuances of any language cannot be converted entirely to another. Translating Bhakti is therefore not just a task but also a challenge.

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Breaking Silences: M. Haleema Beevi and the Feminist Interventions in Kerala's Renaissance and Print Culture

— Razeena P R

Abstract: M. Haleema Beevi stands out as one of the forerunners of Muslim social reform in Kerala during the early 20th century. A dynamic and fearless figure, she left a lasting imprint on history as a politician, orator, journalist, and freedom fighter. Beevi's beliefs were grounded in the conviction that true women's empowerment could only be achieved through constructive societal engagement. In the late 1930s, she emerged as the first Muslim woman in Kerala to establish and edit two significant publications: *Muslim Mahila* (Muslim Woman Magazine) in 1938 and a weekly publication named *Bharatha Chandrika* in 1944. Additionally, she founded a newspaper, utilising journalism and publishing as tools for social reform. Central to her activism was her challenge to gender segregation, posing a vital question to her community: "How can a society thrive when its women, who make up half of the population, are side-lined and stripped of dignity?" This article seeks to examine the mind and motivations of this remarkable woman who, despite her significant contributions, has been largely erased from the mainstream history of Kerala's renaissance and print culture due to patriarchal structures.

Keywords: Kerala renaissance, social reform, print culture, women's empowerment

The early 20th century marked a pivotal period in Kerala's history, commonly referred to as the "Kerala Renaissance", which was characterised by waves of social reform, intellectual awakening, and political change. While this era is often celebrated for its progressive movements against caste oppression and religious orthodoxy, the narratives surrounding women's roles, particularly those of Muslim women, have remained

underexplored. M. Haleema Beevi emerges as a pioneering figure whose contributions to social reform, journalism, and women's rights challenge the dominant male-centric narrative of Kerala's renaissance. Despite her remarkable achievements, Beevi's legacy remains marginalised, overshadowed by patriarchal structures that have historically minimised women's contributions to social change.

The article aims to examine the life, work, and impact of M. Haleema Beevi as Kerala's first Muslim woman journalist and a significant player in the state's reformist movements. It explores how Beevi utilised journalism as a medium of resistance against societal norms that restricted women's education, mobility, and participation in public life. Through an examination of her publications, activism, and role in Kerala's socio-political landscape, this article seeks to illuminate Beevi's contributions to both the print culture of Kerala and the broader struggle for gender equality within the Muslim community.

M. Haleema Beevi was born in 1918 in Adoor, a small town in the southern part of Kerala, into a modest Muslim family. Her father, Peer Muhammad, and her mother, Maiteen Biwi, held traditional values, but Beevi's early exposure to reformist ideas shaped her intellectual trajectory. At a time when Muslim girls rarely attended school, Beevi was fortunate to receive a formal education, studying up to the seventh grade. This limited education, however, would prove instrumental in her later role as a writer and social reformer. In a society where Muslim women's education was often restricted to religious instruction at home, Beevi's schooling represented a radical departure from the norm.

Beevi married K.M. Muhammad Maulavi, a religious scholar, at the age of 17. Maulavi was a key figure in the Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen movement, which sought to reform Islam in Kerala by purging superstitions and encouraging rationalist interpretations of the faith. His influence, along with his association with prominent reformist thinkers like Vakkom Moulavi, played a crucial role in shaping Beevi's intellectual development. It was through her husband's connections that Beevi was introduced to the world of journalism, eventually becoming the first Muslim woman in Kerala to edit and publish a magazine.

Grace Mubashir's article "Haleema Beevi: Pioneer of Social Reform and Broad-Based Muslim Education in Kerala", published in *Sabrangindia* dated March 15, 2023, talks about how "at a time when society was in the grip of conservatism, irrationalism and over-religiosity" (par. 1), the works and words of M. Haleema Beevi, the first female journalist from Kerala, stand out as a beacon for later harbingers of the Renaissance into mainstream Kerala. Beevi participated in social movements at a time when Muslim women had not yet joined the mainstream society. Beevi was Kerala's first female newspaper editor, the first female municipal councillor, an Ernakulam DCC member, the Travancore *Vanita Samajam* president and the Travancore State Muslim League's Thiruvalla Taluk Secretary. Beevi was a symbol of women's advancement in Kerala's Muslim society and a unique presence in the history of Kerala's Renaissance and the history of Muslim religious reformation (Mubashir).

J. Devika, a noted historian and scholar of gender studies in Kerala, writes about how the Renaissance paved the

way in Kerala's history. In the preface of her book, *Her-Self: Gender and Early Writings of Malayali Women, 1898–1938* (2021). Devika says how the "genealogies of feminism in Malayali society and the time period in which we have habitually situated the Malayali first generation feminists (the decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century) have changed quite significantly" and further adds:

> The latter is usually referred to as *Navoddhanam*, or 'Renaissance'—evidently a borrowing from the historical experience of Europe—and refers to the recovery and reinterpretation of classical (largely Hindu) texts. The learnings of the past twenty years, however, convince me that the experience of social change in Malayali society of this period is not exhausted by this characterization, and worse, it authorizes majoritarian interpretations of the period. (xxi)

Devika also states that the origins of the anti-patriarchal movement in Kerala can be traced back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This struggle is best understood through a subaltern framework of resistance, encapsulated in the concept of *streevashi* (the "unyielding will of women"). This term refers to the unwavering defiance, particularly exhibited by the most marginalised groups within the caste hierarchy of that era, known as *janmabhedam* (birth-based inequality). Among these were Dalit women, whose relentless labour was dehumanised and who were treated as mere instruments of productivity. Likewise, women from the Malayala Brahmin community were oppressed in a different manner, regarded primarily as reproductive commodities (xxii).

In 1938, Beevi launched *Muslim Mahila* (Muslim Woman Magazine), a monthly publication aimed at addressing the specific concerns of Muslim women. At a time when Muslim women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, *Muslim Mahila* served as a platform for discussing women's education, rights, and participation in public life. The magazine also advocated for religious reform, challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islam that kept women in subordinate positions. Beevi, who edited, printed, and published the magazine herself, used her platform to reach out to Muslim women across Kerala, encouraging them to seek education and engage in social issues. Despite its significant impact, *Muslim Mahila* faced financial difficulties and political opposition. Conservative factions within the Muslim community criticised Beevi for challenging traditional gender roles and promoting what they saw as "Western" ideas of women's rights. By 1949, these pressures forced Beevi to discontinue the magazine. Nevertheless, she remained undeterred and, in 1944, founded *Bharatha Chandrika*, a weekly publication that later became a daily newspaper.

Bharatha Chandrika played an important role in shaping Kerala's public discourse. The newspaper provided a platform for progressive voices, including prominent writers like Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, who first published his famous works "*Neelavelicham"* (The Blue Light) and "*Pathummayude Aadu"* (Pathumma's Goat) in the magazine. Through *Bharatha Chandrika*, Beevi collaborated with other literary figures, including Ponkunnam Varki, Balamani Amma, and Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, who contributed to the burgeoning reformist spirit in Kerala.

While *Muslim Mahila* focused primarily on the empowerment of Muslim women, *Bharatha Chandrika* catered to a broader audience. It addressed political, social, and cultural issues affecting all communities in Kerala, with a particular emphasis on the rights of women and marginalised groups. Beevi's editorial stance was unapologetically feminist, and her writing reflected her deep commitment to gender equality. She frequently addressed the issue of *purdah* (the practice of veiling), criticising it as a symbol of women's oppression and calling for women to be allowed to participate fully in public life.

One of the most significant aspects of M. Haleema Beevi's work was her ability to frame women's rights within the context of Islamic reform. Drawing upon the teachings of reformist thinkers like Vakkom Maulavi and the Nadvathul Mujahideen movement, Beevi argued that Islam, when properly understood, championed gender equality. She positioned herself as a pioneer of Islamic feminism, advocating for a reinterpretation of religious texts that supported women's rights.

Beevi's critique of the patriarchal structures within her community was both radical and strategic. She used religious arguments to challenge practices such as purdah and the exclusion of women from education and public life. At a time when conservative religious leaders wielded significant influence over the lives of Muslim women, Beevi's approach was bold. She argued that the Prophet Muhammad had been an advocate for women's rights and that Islam, far from being inherently oppressive, was a religion that upheld the dignity and equality of women. By rooting her feminist critique in religious texts, Beevi was able to counter the claims of

those who used Islam to justify the subjugation of women.

Beevi's involvement in the Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen movement further solidified her role as a religious reformer. The movement sought to modernise the Muslim community by promoting rationalism and scientific inquiry while rejecting superstition and outdated customs. Beevi, along with her husband, used her platform in *Bharatha Chandrika* to advocate for educational reforms, particularly the education of Muslim women. She frequently clashed with conservative elements in the community who resisted change, but her persistence made her a key figure in Kerala's Islamic reformist circles.

In addition to her contributions to journalism and religious reform, M. Haleema Beevi was an active participant in Kerala's political landscape. In 1947, she became the first female municipal councillor in Travancore, a significant achievement in a society where women, especially Muslim women, were rarely involved in politics. Her election to the municipal council marked a turning point in her public life, as it allowed her to advocate for women's rights and social reform from within the political system.

Beevi was also involved in India's independence movement, participating in protests and demonstrations against British colonial rule. Her activism extended beyond the cause of independence to include women's rights and education. She believed that women's participation in the nationalist movement was essential not only for the liberation of the country but also for the liberation of women. Beevi's involvement in the political

arena demonstrated her commitment to both national and gender-based causes, and she frequently emphasised the intersection of the two in her speeches and writings.

One of Beevi's most notable political achievements was her participation in the 1953 Mujahid Women's Conference in Kochi and the 1956 Mujahid General Conference in Kozhikode, where she delivered powerful speeches advocating for women's education and social participation. In these speeches, Beevi argued that women's exclusion from public life was detrimental not only to their personal development but also to the progress of the nation as a whole. She called for Muslim women to break free from the constraints of domesticity and pursue education and professional opportunities, emphasising that the empowerment of women was essential for the advancement of the community.

J. Devika, in her translation of Beevi's speech at the Muslim Women's Conference, given in her book *Her-Self*, offers significant insight into the progressive views that Beevi harboured, almost making one wonder that these thoughts were far ahead of her times and age. Some excerpts of Beevi's speech are given thus:

> Today, we have here the prospect of experiencing the blessed beauty of a unique beatitude, of the priceless bonds of sisterhood. That we, who have been consigned to the depths of ignorance, who have been subsumed, immobilized, under the waves of darkness in the kitchen of unfreedom, who are not free to move out of inner quarters, or reflect on the various strands of opinion, who live lives as slaves of the worst sort, have been able to organize a conference like this, that is

> precisely the essence of that great beauty. (171-172)

Beevi cites harmony among women as a viable solution against patriarchal oppression. For her, women's demotion to the domestic sphere not only evaded them from male-dominated activities such as politics and financial independence but also obstructed female companionship, as each woman was divided by the boundaries of their own home. It is these barriers that her conference aimed at trespassing to create a wholesome female community. Beevi extends the physical restraint put on women to elucidate upon the mental confinement experienced by women. As the main purpose of her activism was to promote women's education, it was essential that she demanded that women break free from the encumbrance of ignorance in pursuit of knowledge.

Devika further provides a critique of women's culturally propagated inferiority, stated by Beevi, thus:

> How can a community become cultured, when women, yes, women, who are the very source and essence of all the advancements of the world, have become shallow and insignificant, and bear the ill fame of being weak? The nation is not for Man alone. Woman has the right to share equally in all the duties that fall upon Man as an individual; this can never be obscured. Sacred Islam does not bar our freedom, refinement or education. Born in a time when the world had acquiesced to opinions such as 'women do not have souls; no freedom; no hope of salvation; no rights in the family', and so on, in a country in which the birth of a female infant was such

> ignominy to the family that it was buried alive, what did Rasool Kareem (may his name be honoured) do? (172)

At the core of Beevi's activism was her critique of the patriarchal structures that marginalised women in both public and private life. Beevi recognised that women's oppression was not simply a result of religious or cultural traditions but rather a deeply entrenched system of power that benefited men at the expense of women. She argued that women's exclusion from education, work, and political participation was not only unjust but also illogical, as it deprived society of the talents and contributions of half its population.

Beevi's feminist critique extended to the cultural construction of gender roles. She questioned the traditional expectation that women should be confined to the domestic sphere, arguing that such roles were socially constructed rather than natural. In her speeches and writings, Beevi emphasised that women were capable of much more than the duties of wifehood and motherhood, and she called for their active participation in all spheres of life. Beevi's arguments were radical for her time, and they challenged not only the norms of her own community but also the broader societal structures that kept women subservient.

Despite her significant contributions to Kerala's social, political, and religious landscape, Beevi has been largely erased from mainstream historical narratives. This erasure is partly due to the intersection of multiple forms of marginalisation: as both a woman and a Muslim, Beevi faced double exclusion in a society that privileged male, upper-caste voices. Mainstream histories of Kerala's

renaissance and freedom movements have often focused on male figures, neglecting the vital role that women like Beevi played in these transformative movements.

Recent scholarship, however, has begun to recognise Beevi's legacy. Historians such as J. Devika have highlighted the complexity of women's movements in Kerala and the significant role that figures like Beevi played in challenging patriarchal systems. Beevi's contributions are now being reassessed in light of her work as a journalist, social reformer, and political activist. Biographers Noorjahan and Noora, in their book *Pathradipa* (Journalist) (2022), have also emphasised that Beevi's literary and journalistic work was not merely a personal achievement but part of a broader movement for social change. The book is an exemplary work that sheds light on the life and works of the great reformer that Beevi was.

V. Geetha, in the preface to the book *Her-Self* by J. Devika, talks about how women like Haleema Beevi, among others, have brought about a revolution in the print culture of Kerala with their revolutionary writings and thoughts. Geetha says:

> This is a world of ideas that thinking women in Kerala made available to their contemporaries in the late 1890s and during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Voiced and written in the context of debates about women's education, duties, vocation and civic roles these were informed initially by reformist ideas and subsequently by nationalist and communist assumptions about the greater common good. These views comprise arguments that continue to

> haunt feminist thinking and gender studies to this day. (Devika xi)

She further adds thus:

> Muslim women desired a different transformation of the civic: in her call to Muslim women to participate in national life, Haleema Beevi pointed out that the Koran enjoined equality and that the Prophet was himself the harbinger of this radical parity between the sexes. Therefore, it behoves Muslim women to step out of their homes and set their seal on national politics, by becoming a part of it. This neat manner of reconciling secular responsibilities with religious faith serves as a useful counter position to the emerging Hindu Right's rhetoric of the nation and faith, which, among other things, led to the partitioning of the subcontinent. This speech also points to the unfinished task of working through the texts and histories which encapsulate Muslim experiences of the modern, especially modern gender. (Devika xviii-xix)

Conclusion

Beevi was a pioneer in Kerala's renaissance, print culture, and women's rights movements. As Kerala's first Muslim woman journalist, she used her voice to advocate for women's education, challenge patriarchal structures, and promote religious reform. Her work in journalism, social reform, and political activism laid the foundation for future generations of women in Kerala to engage in public life and advocate for their rights. But history seems to have undergone a state of forced amnesia, as she was neither mentioned in the history of mainstream

journalism or literature nor in the pages of Kerala's Renaissance Movement. She was doubly marginalised because she was a woman and a Muslim. But scholars and historians now give credit to the fact that her works have been detrimental in paving the way for substantially improving the socio-educational status of Muslim women in contemporary Kerala. Though Beevi's legacy has been marginalised in mainstream histories of Kerala, which have often overlooked the contributions of women and religious minorities, her life and work remind us of the importance of documenting and celebrating the contributions of women to social and political movements, particularly those who have been historically excluded from the narrative. Beevi's vision of gender equality, rooted in both religious and secular ideals, continues to resonate in contemporary feminist movements, and her story serves as an inspiration for those working towards a more just and equitable society.

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The Body = Nature Equation: Ecosophical Aesthetics in Mohiniyattam and Nangiarkoothu

— **Salini V G** and **Anand P**

Abstract: Many contemporary ecological philosophies emphasise the inherent human ability to connect with and even empathise with the natural world. In India, the performing arts have long served as a medium through which human beings engage with the realm 'beyond the human'. This intimate bond between nature and human life finds vivid expression in performance traditions, particularly through the Nayikas, the female narrators. Two classical art forms of Kerala—Mohiniyattam and Nangiarkoothu—occupy a unique space as essentially female forms, illustrating how the body, especially the female body, embodies the essence of nature. Within these forms, the mental ecology of the character and the natural landscape complement one another, unfolding in performance through the evocation of Rasa. This paper seeks to explore how the emotions of the mind and the depictions of nature interweave within the actor's body—the performing body—thereby imparting an ecosophical aesthetic experience to the spectator.

Keywords: Ecosophy, Aesthetics, Theatre, Dance, Mohiniyattam, Nangiarkoothu

One of the significant cultural movements of the twentieth century is the shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric approach. Deep ecological ideas called for humans to expand and include more of the 'beyond the human world'. It neglected the dichotomous divide between man and nature. It is believed that such a dualism defines man as a separate entity, leading to the eventual erosion of our intrinsic codependent relation with the natural world: "Deep Ecology believes in the

fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features. It believes that anthropocentric thinking has alienated humans from their natural environment and caused them to exploit it" (Nayar 246). This underlines the need to develop a more ethical relationship with the environment. It emphasises and encourages the ability of humans to connect with the natural world and even empathise with it. Many studies and discourses align with the key idea of deep ecology that "there has to be an emotional relation with and response to nature and not merely a rational-intellectual one" (246). It is here that art forms like dance and theatre, where the primacy of the body cannot be neglected, become channels of connection with the 'beyond the human'.

Classical dance forms of India have always gained worldwide admiration for the importance they give to the body and mind of both the actor and the spectator. The most sublime concept of Indian aesthetics, that is, Rasa, is itself rooted in human psychology. As Bharatamuni mentions in the sixth chapter of *Natyasastra*, *vibhavanubhava vyabhichari samyogad rasanishpathi:*, rasa is manifested when the basic emotions that lie deep within our psyche are aesthetically aroused by the combined effort of objective conditions, bodily actions, and supporting emotions. This points to an intricate and inherent relationship between body and mind. Classical Indian dance forms, with their codified acting formulas, put forward a body-mind that is a single unit rather than two different entities. Philip Zarrilli illustrates this psychophysical body with the case of Kathakali, where the actor's training enables him to regulate his breath in tune with emotions. While doing Navarasas, for example, "the actor's breath animates not

only the particular facial expression to which the audience's attention is drawn but simultaneously enlivens and activates the actor's entire body as it assumes a dynamic posture appropriate to the particular emotional state" (Zarrilli 35). Such a body is a source of knowledge for the spectator. Hence, classical dance forms of India have the potential to reclaim our embodied relation with the 'more than human' world through the medium of the perceiving body-mind.

The performing arts of Kerala, both folk and classical, demonstrate how nature has exerted its fascination and power on human beings. A pro-environmental behaviour is inherent in many of them. In folk performance traditions such as Theyyam and Padayani, the interdependence between nature and ritual practice is vividly pronounced. Natural materials and elements are integral to the costumes, performance spaces, and ritual procedures that constitute these art forms. For instance, *Adavi*, a key ritual in Padayani, exemplifies the centrality of ecological awareness, demonstrating how these practices foreground and sustain an intimate relationship with the environment. In classical art forms like Kutiyattam and Kathakali, this naturalistic intelligence is embodied in the body's affective nature, that is, its ability to perceive and experience the natural world. Just like Giuseppe Barbiero says, "There is no doubt that the abiotic components [for example the mountain, the sea, the river, the lake] or the atmospheric events [for example the clear sky, the clouds, the rain] influence our mood and our psychic state" (Barbiero 9), which is many a time reflected in our performing arts.

The concepts of body and nature have long been pivotal in discourses surrounding women. Traditionally, a binary

has been constructed in which man is aligned with mind and culture, while woman is associated with body and nature. This cardinal dichotomy has shaped critical debates across the humanities and social sciences. In contemporary scholarship, however, the alignment of woman with body and nature has been reread as a critical strategy used to articulate the potentialities of both woman and nature. Within the field of performance studies, in particular, the female body emerges as a potent medium for exploring this relationship. The classical art forms of Kerala—Mohiniyattam and Nangiarkoothu—offer illustrative examples of how the performing female body perceives, expresses, and reclaims its interconnectedness with the more-than-human world.

Mohiniyattam is widely regarded as the traditional dance form of Kerala. Although it is performed by both men and women, it has historically been associated with the feminine, as implied by its very name. Literally meaning 'the dance of Mohini', the celestial enchantress, the form is characterised by graceful, flowing movements grounded in *Kaisiki Vritti* and by an emphasis on *abhinaya*, most often articulated through the perspective of the *nayika,* or heroine: "Of the various classical styles [*vrittis*] catalogued by Bharatamuni in his Natyasastra, Mohiniyattam is close to the *Kaisiki* [graceful] variety. Comprising movements, which are feminine, gentle and graceful, the *Kaisiki* style is most appropriate for the exhibition of the erotic sentiment (Sringara-Rasa)" (Shivaji 50). Practitioners like Bharathi Shivaji and Kanak Rele find Sringara as the primary sentiment of Mohiniyattam: "Sringara Rasa—verily the fountainhead of Mohiniyattam style—is so basic that

without this Rasa, the dance may be likened to a marriage without love" (69).

Mohiniyattam acquired its distinctive identity during the reign of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal, who, with the assistance of the Tanjore Quartet, restructured elements of the Tamil *Sadir* tradition into a format rooted in Kerala's cultural milieu. He further enriched the repertoire with his Sanskrit and Malayalam compositions, making the *padams* of Swathi Thirunal central to the performance practice of Mohiniyattam.

Most of these verses, especially those of Swathi Thirunal, are grounded in Sringara-bhakti, in which the devotee assumes the self of the *nayika,* who yearns for union with the divine; in Swathi Thirunal's case, with Lord Padmanabha. In his songs, nature and landscape function as vibhavas, or objective conditions for the manifestation of Sringara Rasa. The lyrics are rich in natural imagery and typically depict the *nayika* confiding in her *sakhi* [friend] about her longing for her beloved. The *sakhi* herself is frequently evoked through natural metaphors—*panimathimukhi* [she whose face resembles the moon], *aliveni* [she whose hair is dark and curly like swarms of bees], *ilamariman nayane* [she whose eyes are like a young deer's], or *kalabhagathe* [she whose gait resembles that of an elephant]. The heroine's pangs of separation are heightened by the natural setting, which she perceives as ideal for union with her lover. For example, in the *padam* beginning *aliveni enthu cheyvu*, the *nayika* laments to her friend—whose hair resembles swarms of bees—that her beloved Lord Padmanabha has not yet arrived. She describes the night as resplendent with moonlight, cooled by sandal-scented breezes, resonant with the hum of bees, and adorned with

nocturnal flowers, yet asks what all this beauty is worth if her hero does not come. Bharathi Shivaji describes an instance of *Swadhinapathika nayika*, one who enjoys the admiration of her hero, thus: "The mood is created by depicting a garden in moonlight. The garden is overladen with jasmine flowers, the fragrance of which is so intoxicating; the creepers are intertwined gracefully around the tall trees; the cool soft breeze caresses the body; the trees swaying gently, respond to the caresses of the wind" (Shivaji 76). Similar natural imagery recurs across Swathi Thirunal's verses, each time enhancing the emotional texture of the performance.

Sringara, being the crux of Mohiniyattam, a key figure in its expression is Kamadeva, the god of love. His presence across Kerala's classical performance traditions—whether Mohiniyattam, Kathakali, or Kutiyattam—emphasises the centrality of Sringara Rasa within these forms. Kamadeva is also inseparably linked to nature, and his very identity is defined through natural imagery. His emblematic weapons, the *panchabana,* or five arrows, are composed of five different flowers. They are aravinda [lotus], ashoka, chootha [mango blossom], navamalika [jasmine], and neelolpala [blue lily]. Each arrow carries a distinct effect, collectively intensifying the mood of love: the lotus induces swooning, the ashoka brings pallor and emaciation, the mango blossom generates the heat of desire, the jasmine intoxicates, and the blue lily produces a sudden shock. His bow is made of sugarcane, with bees as its string, further embedding Kamadeva's imagery within the sensuous world of flora and fauna.

Mohiniyattam abounds in images drawn from nature—the sun, moon, bees, breezes, and a rich variety of flora and fauna. In doing so, it creates on stage a non-

anthropocentric universe, where the human performer and the more-than-human world coexist. Rasa arises through the integration of vibhava, or objective conditions; anubhava, or bodily actions; and vyabhicharibhava, or supporting emotions. Accordingly, just as the performer's body movements and expressions are crucial to evoking Rasa, so too is the natural landscape she invokes through performance. Her mindscape becomes linked to the landscape through her embodied gestures. Through her abhinaya, graceful movements, and expressive delineations, she implores moonlit nights, *sumasayaka*—cupid with his arrows—and blooming gardens. This interweaving of performer and environment resonates with Giuseppe Barbiero's idea of Green Mindfulness, the practice of connecting with nature and developing ecological awareness, even when it is not possible to have direct contact with nature (Barbiero 22). Barbiero finds it necessary to develop "biophilic qualities" (15), that is, to stimulate that innate tendency to connect with other forms and natural processes, and Green Mindfulness can cultivate an emotional bond with nature. In art forms like Mohiniyattam, where nature becomes an inevitable element, an orientation towards naturalistic intelligence—the recognition of humans' inherent biophilic capacity to connect with, attend to, care for, and empathise with the natural world—is established in an aesthetic way.

In Mohiniyattam, the very movement of the body is closely aligned with natural phenomena, such as the waves of the ocean or the swaying of paddy shoots. As Bharati Shivaji observes, "The endless coconut trees swaying in the cool, soft breeze by the seashore could have inspired in shaping the… movement of

Mohiniyattam. The quivering of the eyebrows, so conspicuous in expressing Sringara in Mohiniyattam, also seems to be in style with the fluttering of palm leaves, gently wafted by the soft, cool breeze" (Shivaji 51). Similarly, fundamental hand gestures such as *sukatunda*, *bhramara*, *mrigashirsha*, and *sarpashiras*, as well as characteristic gaits including *hamsapada*, *mayurapada*, and *nagabandha*, reflect an inherent biophilic sensibility, revealing a deep, embodied connection between the performing body and the more-than-human world.

Recent scholarship in consciousness studies, cognitive science, phenomenology, and performance studies has underscored the affective capacities of the physical body. Its potential to perceive, internalise, and express itself renders the body a significant site of inquiry for ecological and environmental theorists. As Alexa Weik von Mossner observes in her introduction to *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*, we use our bodies not only to understand human characters but also the deliberations, emotions, and actions of nonhuman agents and even the movements of inanimate objects (Mossner 3). In this light, while nature in Mohiniyattam primarily evokes Sringara Rasa, in Nangiarkoothu the performing female body becomes the medium through which the boundaries between nature and culture are blurred, highlighting an embodied interconnection between the human and beyond the human worlds.

Nangiarkoothu is popular as a subtext of Kutiyattam, the ancient classical Sanskrit theatre tradition of India, preserved and practised in Kerala. While it enacts scenes from Sanskrit plays, the performance structure of Kutiyattam extends beyond conventional notions of

drama, which typically involve multiple characters enacting a linear plot. In its classical format, a Kutiyattam performance may span seven to twenty-one days, depending on the narrative. The central dramatic enactment is traditionally presented only on the final day. The preceding days are devoted to predramatic sequences such as *Purappadu* and *Nirvahanam*. Among these, *Nirvahanam* is particularly significant. It constitutes a solo performance by a single character, in which the performer recapitulates past events leading up to the current context of the play. *Nirvahanam* can be considered the essence of a Kutiyattam performance. More than one character performs *Nirvahanam*, making it a polyphonic narrative. Nangiarkoothu, too, evolved as the *Nirvahanam* of the character Kalpalathika in the play *Subhadradhananjayam* written by Kulasekhara Varman. Kalpalathika is the friend of Princess Subhadra, who is being sent on a mission by the princess. As L. S. Rajagopalan in his work *Women's Role in Kudiyattam* says:

> 'Nangyar Kuttu' is the performance of the *Viskambha* at the beginning of the second act of *Subhadradhananjaya* of Kulasekhara Varman (978-1036 A.D). While the role in the drama proper is very small the prelude is expanded and the story of Lord Krsna's childhood as adapted from the *Bhagavata*, X Skandha is enacted by a 'flash-back technique' called Nirvahana. (6)

Nangiarkoothu, as the name itself suggests, is the mode of acting by women. To illustrate, in *Sreekrishnacharitham Nangiarammakoothu*, the basic text of Nangiarkoothu, the entire narration is done by a single female performer who assumes the role of the character Kalpalathika. However, during the enactment

of past episodes, that is, *Nirvahanam*, she functions primarily as an objective narrator rather than a character confined to a single perspective. Depending on the narrative context, she impersonates multiple characters, including Ugrasena, Suraseni, Kamsa, Indra, and Akroora, as well as non-human entities such as Kaliya, Narasiṃha, Garuḍa, Kuvalayapiṭa, cows, peacocks, swans, and bees. This multiplicity of embodiment is achieved not through changes in costume, makeup, or stage props, but through the central technique of *Pakarnnattam*. *Pakarnnattam* is the defining feature of *Nirvahanam,* which itself constitutes the core of Kutiyattam. Through this technique, a single performer internalises and expresses the thoughts, emotions, and actions of multiple characters, demonstrating the performative depth and versatility intrinsic to the art form. "*Pakarnnu* means transfer from one to the other and *attam* means the performance. Combined, *Pakarnnattam* means 'performance by transferring' from one to another . . . and in the specific context of acting it is the 'chain of transformations' undertaken by the actor from one self to another's self" (Madhavan 123). Here, the actor, during the course of multiple impersonations, does not identify fully with any character but internalises the consciousness of multiple characters. "Accordingly, in *Pakarnnattam* it is the actor's text that is being read. Again, *Pakarnnattam* is made possible purely through body movements and stylized acting and not through any changes in attire or spectacle" (V. G. 73). It is during *Pakarnnattam* that the performer's body becomes the space where a non-anthropocentric world is created. In this process, she impersonates non-human entities such as bees, peacocks, swans, elephants, and cows that appear within the narrative. For instance, in the performance of "Kaliyamardanam," the female

performer adopts the movements, facial expressions, and eye gestures that evoke the serpent Kaliya. Similarly, in ""Mayilattam"—the dance of the peacocks—she mimics the posture of the peacock. Such embodied impersonations require acute observation and harmony with natural forms, springing from a deep affective engagement with the non-human world and stimulating the embodied sensibilities of the performer.

There are numerous episodes in Nangiarkoothu where the emotions or inner feelings of the characters are portrayed through descriptions of nature. In the episode "Sitaparityagam" from *Sreeramacharitham Nangiarammakoothu*, the entire forest is portrayed as gloomy and desolate, suggestive of Sita's despair. In "Poothanamoksham", an episode from *Sreekrishnacharitham*, the descriptions of the landscape are suggestive of the emotion of Adbhuta, or wonder, in Poothana upon seeing the scenic beauty of Ambadi. The Adbhuta Rasa is conveyed through the depiction of the environment where the performer enacts the roles of peacocks, bees, swans, and cattle along with the people of Ambadi. The episode, "Vrindavanavarnana", as signified by the very name, is exclusively the description of the nature and woods of Vrindavan. Here the performer describes the forests with huge trees adorned with winding branches, thick leaves, flowers, and fruits where numerous birds dwell, and where Krishna, along with his friends, does adventures. Similarly, an enactment of Veera Rasa, or the heroic, could be illustrated through the episode "Govardhanodharanam". As Krishna embarks on his mission to rescue his people from the torrential rain, he scrutinises the majestic mountain closely. The episode, being a depiction of Krishna's heroism, has the dominant emotion manifested

in the description of Mount Govardhan. The actor's movements, too, are heavy and strenuous, fitting the Veera Rasa perfectly. She first draws the picture of the mountain before the audience using only her eyes and then goes on to gesture the peaks, valleys, caves, and cliffs, along with the forests, as well as creatures. According to her imagination, she can improvise the episode to show how rivers spring from the rocks, how elephants roam the forests, and so on. Thus, nature descriptions, many a time, correspond to the mental ecology of the characters reflected through the body of the actor.

Both Mohiniyattam and Nangiarkoothu exhibit a storytelling structure rather than a conventional dramatic structure centred on a single character. Similar to a storyteller who adopts the expressions of multiple figures, the performer assumes various identities over the course of the performance. In Mohiniyattam, with the accompaniment of music and verses, the dancer enacts *Pakarnnattam* with less intensity compared to a Nangiarkoothu performer, yet the narrative strategy remains largely analogous, involving multiple impersonations without exclusive identification with any one character. In this sense, the performer's body functions as a liminal space, that is, a neutral site through which diverse identities, emotions, and even non-human presences can be mediated and expressed. Victor Turner calls the liminal space a threshold of "uniformity, structural invisibility, and anonymity" (Turner 26). Within this neutral space, that is, the performer's body, there emerges a blurring of conventional dichotomies, such as body and mind, and nature and culture. The performing body is understood not merely as a physical entity but as a body-mind, possessing an active, attentive

consciousness that continuously perceives and responds to its environment. Scholars such as Philip Zarrilli, along with practitioners like Tadashi Suzuki, emphasise the significance of a highly vigilant body-mind, one that is acutely aware of the body's interactions with its surroundings and capable of regulating internal processes, including the flow and control of breath, to enhance both expressive and affective capacities. Thus "Body Consciousness", as analysed by Richard Shusterman, "is not merely the consciousness that a mind may have of the body as an object, but includes the embodied consciousness that a living, sentient body directs at the world and also experiences in itself… " (Shusterman 133). Through this conscious, affective engagement, the performing body does not merely represent nature but actively interacts with and shapes it, creating a performative ecology in which human and more-than-human agencies mutually resonate.

In Mohiniyattam and Nangiarkoothu, the equation Body=Nature is realised through the performing female body, which becomes a conscious, liminal space where human and non-human, culture and nature, merge. Through embodied narrative, gestures, and attunement to the environment, these art forms cultivate an ecosophical aesthetic, revealing how the body can both express and affect the natural world. These classical art forms thus reveal the performing body as both a medium and agent of interconnection, demonstrating how aesthetic experience can simultaneously reflect, inhabit, and influence the more-than-human world.

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Ravi's Readiness to Sail Towards the Other Shore in *The Legends of Khasak*: A Study Based on Shad-ripu Theory in Indian Philosophy

— Martin K A

Abstract: This paper offers a recontextualised reading of *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (1969; trans. *The Legends of Khasak*, 1994) by O. V. Vijayan, by reading the protagonist Ravi's inward journey through the Upanishadic framework of *Shad-ripu*—the six inner enemies (*kama, krodha, lobha, moha, mada,* and *matsarya*). While existing scholarship has productively examined the novel through existential, sociopolitical, psychological and mytho-symbolic frameworks, such readings often foreground alienation, guilt and meaninglessness within Eurocentric philosophical paradigms. This study argues that an exclusive reliance on Western existentialism risks narrowing the novel's interpretive possibilities, given its deep entanglement with indigenous philosophical traditions of Kerala and India. Focusing primarily on Ravi's confrontation with *kama* (lust), *moha* (attachment), and *mada* (ego), the study demonstrates how desire is gradually exhausted, attachment repeatedly uprooted, and ego dismantled through Ravi's engagements with sexuality, place and myth in Khasak. By situating Ravi's crisis within an Eastern epistemological framework, this paper reinterprets death as dissolution (*laya*) rather than negation. More broadly, it gestures toward the possibility of rereading modern Malayalam narratives of inwardness through indigenous philosophical paradigms.

Keywords: Shad-ripu, Indian philosophy, Upanishad, existentialism

O. V. Vijayan's 1969 seminal novel, *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* [translated by the author himself as *The Legends of Khasak* (1994)], is not merely a story but a deeply textured philosophical meditation on existence, guilt, and the porous boundary between the rational and the mythological. At its core lies the narrative of Ravi, an

intellectual who abandons his academic life and the promises of urban modernity to establish a rudimentary school in the remote, myth-drenched village of Khasak. As Jerome Vadackel observes, "Ravi's decision to follow a more internal path away from committing strictly to the scientific study of astrophysics has remained consistent" (3) in the novel. Ravi's decade-long sojourn is a journey into a self-imposed purgatory, initiated by an unforgivable moral transgression—a confused, quasi-incestuous relationship with his stepmother. The novel ends with an act of profound and devastating finality: Ravi's passive acceptance of a fatal snake bite near the bus shelter in Koomankavu. This paper tries to state that Ravi's decision to let the snake bite him is not an act of accident or the result of a simple despair, but the only logical, necessary, and transcendental culmination of his entire being in Khasak. By the end of the novel, Ravi is found to be a person who has conquered all the *Shad-ripu* [six enemies], which necessitates his readiness to move beyond the temporal plane of existence. Although there are six enemies or fetters, only a few of them are predominantly prevalent in the character of Ravi; hence, only those will be focused on at length here.

A substantial body of scholarship already exists for *Khasakkinte Ithihasam*, approaching the text through sociopolitical, cultural, existential, and psychological frameworks. Several studies focus closely on character construction, that of Ravi and Appukkili, for instance, while others examine the novel's engagement with magic realism, myth, and the existential condition of the modern Malayali subject. Given the long and well-established history of existentialist thought in Malayalam literature, it has become almost natural to read *The Legends of Khasak*, primarily as a modern existential text

foregrounding alienation, guilt, and the crisis of meaning. Such readings are further reinforced by O. V. Vijayan's own reflections in interviews, where existential concerns frequently surface. However, this paper argues that an exclusive reliance on Western existential paradigms risks narrowing the interpretive possibilities of a text that is deeply embedded in Kerala's indigenous philosophical traditions. Alongside existential anxiety, *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* sustains a parallel and intertwined discourse of spiritual inquiry that draws from Indian metaphysical thought. This study therefore proposes a methodological shift by reading Ravi's journey through the conceptual framework of *Shad-ripu*—the six inner enemies outlined in Upanishadic philosophy—thereby displacing a purely Western existentialist reading.

Rather than rejecting existential interpretations, this approach recontextualises them within an Eastern epistemological framework. The study suggests that Ravi's crisis is not merely one of meaninglessness but of progressive detachment from desire, attachment and ego. Central to this reading is the parallel drawn between body and mind: Ravi travels through space and relationships using the body but ultimately transcends corporeality through a sustained inward journey. The novel, this paper contends, actively invites such an interpretation, and the *Shad-ripu* framework is explored here as one of several indigenous possibilities for understanding Ravi's final readiness to cross "to the other shore."

The first and predominant enemy or fetter to be overthrown is *Kama*, often translated as lust or excessive desire for sensory gratification. Ravi, as found in the novel, is a man of lust and sensory gratification. There are

hints of a girlfriend-turned-lover relationship with Padma, the daughter of his professor in the Madras Christian College. Ravi is already burdened with the incestuous relationship with his stepmother, which causes him to abandon his studies in astrophysics and take up an inward journey of liberation. While being on a brief stay in Swami Bodhananda's ashrama, Ravi is not able to reconcile with his *Kama* and starts an affair with a Swamini Nivedita over there. He leaves the ashrama abruptly on one fine morning, and the description is worth noting: "He woke only the ashrama's handyman, and of course the Swamini, one to carry his scant luggage and the other for a hurried farewell. Unwittingly he wrapped her saffron dhoti round his own waist. He realized this awkward mistake only after he had come a good way" (Vijayan 1). This episode indicates that the passion of lust is very strong in Ravi, which has not yet abated even though he is residing in an ashrama. Both these relationships finally lead Ravi to seek refuge in Khasak, a remote village in the District of Palghat.

Ravi's life in Khasak and the role he plays over there as the teacher in a single-teacher school do not provide him with the solutions to conquer his *kama* [lust]. Having failed to sublimate desire within familial, academic or ascetic spaces, Ravi's unresolved *kama* finds an intensified expression in the liminal world of Khasak. The stay in Khasak causes his passion for lust to fuel higher, and he is found to be celebrating the same with many women over there. The list includes Kesi, Chand Umma and Kodachi, whom Ravi seeks for sexual satisfaction. Ravi's interactions with these women are a central theme, highlighting his spiritual and existential journey as he grapples with sin, sexuality, and the search for redemption. Although Ravi is having physical unions with

the ladies in Khasak, gradually he is fed up with his actions and realises that these acts are becoming mechanical and a matter of boredom. At this stage, desire no longer operates as transgression or escape but as repetition and exhaustion. This signals the beginning of Ravi's disillusionment with bodily pleasure itself. The latter part of the novel reveals the narrative of having a physical affair with Kodachi: "May not be a fever, he thought, but the warmth of the body's arousal. Her flushed face was pressed close to his, it blotted out the sky and the menacing dusk . . . Ravi heard the whistle of the of trains, the dull clatter of rails; it was the journey again. Into its great weariness dissolved the hut, the woman and her infant child" (Vijayan 143). Phrases like 'the dull clatter of rails', 'the journey again' and 'its great weariness' testify that Ravi is getting saturated with his habit of lust and would like to be relieved of the same.

The main woman with whom Ravi had a notable relationship was Maimoona, "the Houri of Khasak" (Vijayan 24). She is the most beautiful woman in Khasak and is given in marriage to Chukkru as his second wife. Meanwhile, Chukkru commits suicide, realising that Maimoona continued her illicit affair with Nizam Ali, which she started in her early adulthood. When the smallpox epidemic thrashed Khasak, Ravi also had been a victim and was taken to a ruined Mosque of the King, and Nizam Ali and Maimoona treated and cared for him. After the seventh bath, shortly after recovering from smallpox, Ravi encourages Maimoona to engage in a physical relationship, to which she agrees. Maimoona leaves the scene, and the description which follows immediately hints that Ravi is gradually able to transcend his lust and is moving beyond the materialistic experiences towards something metaphysical: "Peace descended on Ravi; he

was now the helpless infant god, afloat on the deluge, lying on a pipal leaf, the Creator forever beginning his sorrows anew" (Vijayan 151). This refers to the appearance of Infant Krishna floating on a pipal leaf in the endless ocean once shown to Sage Markendaya when he requested Him to show a glimpse of His unfathomable Maya. The sage then realises that the baby is a god who has withdrawn the world to himself before recreating the universe. This indicates that Ravi too is getting relieved from the deluge of lust and is being created anew.

Among the other enemies, Ravi is least affected by *Krodha* [Anger], the second fetter, because, as per the explanation, *Krodha* arises in a person only when *Kama,* or desire, is obstructed. Ravi, in the novel, is a very free bird and is capable of satisfying all his *Kama* [lusts]. With nothing blocking him from attaining *kama*, the emotional conditions necessary for *krodha* [frustration born of obstructed desire] begin to dissolve. Furthermore, Ravi is never found frustrated in situations where one has every right to be fuming. Any youngster would have been frustrated if they had faced the same [following] charges levelled against Ravi in connection with the school teaching role in Khasak: "An anonymous letter, but one containing grave charges: Ravi spends his time telling stories instead of teaching, his morals are unsound, he keeps a false admission register, he is fanning religious hatred, he spreads it with the help of a black magician named Nizam Ali" (Vijayan 195). Madhavan Nair conveys this plot against the school to Ravi with great circumspection: "'Don't be upset, Maash. The whole village is united—'" (Vijayan 195). But, a surprisingly cool Ravi replies to him: "But, Madhavan Nair, I'm not upset" (Vijayan 195). Later, when two comrades from Kozhanasseri approach Ravi to seek his support and to

make it an issue that could lead to a revolt if he cooperated, Ravi discourages them, much to their dismay. Hence, it is evident that Ravi has already been relieved of the fetter called *Krodha* [Anger].

Ravi's character is not at all touched by the third enemy, *Lobha* [Greed]. Nowhere in the novel does Ravi exhibit this trait. Instead, it is clear in the beginning of the novel itself that he belonged to a different genus and has lost interest in the competitive world around him and the bright future he would have had in Princeton along with his girlfriend Padma. Divya Anand has beautifully recorded the contrast and the absence of greed in him when she writes: "The figure of Ravi, the astrophysics honours student, with the prospect of pursuing higher studies in Princeton, lying on the beach with Padma, is juxtaposed with the image of Ravi in Khasak, sleeping with Kodachi, infected with small pox, her body oozing pus" (98). In spite of being a promising student, his decision to quit the college before the final exams deliberately shows that Ravi wanted to withdraw from this highly materialistic and hypercompetitive world and longed for an inward journey. By the end of the novel, there is no change in Ravi, even when he meets and talks in detail with Padma in the guesthouse at the dam site in Palghat:

> 'Ravi!'
> 'I'm listening.'
> 'Come away with me.'
> A long silence. Sunset gave way to the early stars.
> 'I hate to say it, but he may not be with us for long. Plan something for the future. I have a job in Princeton. I can support you, and you can resume your studies where you left off.'
> Ravi laughed.

> 'What studies, Padma? What research?'
> 'You mock me, Ravi. I hate this.'
> A cry rose within her. And he spoke inside his own impenetrable silence—*there is nothing to learn by looking at the galactic desert outside, turn the spectroscope inward, to where He has set his bow in the clouds within as a sign of the covenant between Him and the earth.* (Vijayan 192–193)

The intense conversation between them makes it clear that Ravi is least bothered about pursuing his higher studies, and he even seems to understand the futility of any studies and research and realises the importance of an inward quest. This clearly indicates that Ravi is untouched by the third fetter, *lobha* [greed]. While Ravi's freedom from *lobha* reflects a rejection of worldly success, his deeper struggle lies not in renunciation of ambition but in severing emotional and spatial attachments: the domain of *moha*.

Moving on to the next fetter, titled *Moha* [Attachment/Delusion], Ravi seems to have a close alliance with it. Once the umbilical cord is cut, the child grows up rooting in his/her body and the immediate surroundings, which become his/her strong anchors. As per Maitri Upanishad, "Thinking, 'I am he,' 'This is mine,' he binds himself with his self like a bird in a snare" (806). The Upanishad further states that "the elemental self is overcome because of its attachment" (807). Hence, it warns that "wise people should not identify their true self with the body" (807). The childhood of Ravi is closely attached to their house and surroundings on the hilltop in Ooty: "Ravi's memories of his childhood always began with noontide. He sat on the veranda of their house on the hilltop… His most cherished memory was of the sky-

watch, a pastime in which his mother joined him, though not often, as she was big with child" (Vijayan 3-4). That protection and anchoring of the home is cut due to the sudden death of his mother and the arrival of his stepmother, his chittamma, and ". . . Ravi sat alone on the veranda, not wanting to watch the sky, uninterested in his toys. Those were his Cinderella days, a period of orphanhood…" (Vijayan 5). After severing his attachment to his home and its surroundings, Ravi embarks on a search for a new anchor.

The search for another anchor is fulfilled when Ravi joins Malabar Christian College, where he had his studies in astrophysics. Ravi shifted his anchor to this college and its surroundings, and particularly he began to revolve around his favourite professor and her daughter, Padma. But, all of a sudden, he is fed up with this atmosphere, decides to uproot himself and quits the college. His next effort, though short-lived, is to place the anchor in Swami Bodhananda's ashrama, but in vain. Forsaking his attachments to home, college and ashrama, Ravi is making another effort to anchor himself to Khasak. While walking towards Khasak along with a coolie porter, he thinks: "Maya, of course, the cosmic delusion; . . . *No, not on this journey of many lives, this journey of incredible burdens. Let me reach my inn, the village called Khasak"* (Vijayan 6). Ravi's attachment to Khasak is less social and more metaphysical, and he does not necessarily form conventional, lasting attachments. The village, with its rich myths, eccentric characters, and deep-seated belief in karma and rebirth, offers him an environment to explore his inner landscape and confront the existential questions that haunted him. It is within this context of uprooting that Khasak emerges not merely as a setting, but as Ravi's final and most seductive anchor.

Ravi is bewitched and entranced with the magical embrace of the remote village of Khasak—its children, their beliefs and explanations, teaching role, elders with strange stories, myths, gods and goddesses, festivals, mosques, priests, women, smallpox disease, and arrack—but only for a while. He tries his best to cling to Khasak but gradually identifies that his efforts are fruitless and has to pull out the anchor of belongingness. After Padma's visit, Ravi goes to Kashi, and he returns after ten days as a man of clarity and realisation. He gets a complete feeling of deliverance from his attachment with Khasak and thinks that he no longer belongs to the seedling house; instead, he understands that there are many rightful heirs for it:

> Ravi was not listening, his mind was on the cockroaches which had come meekly by their inheritance; he had returned again to violate their mildewed spaces. *I am sorry, my little brethren,* said Ravi. Children burdened themselves with reading and reckoning here, and I sought a *sarai,* a place of rest on a long, long journey. A black hairy spider which had returned to the seedling house during the absence of its human resident raced on the wall in circles, dismayed. I intruded on this *sarai*, said Ravi, for too long, desecrating its primeval nights with lamps and incense… Roach and spider lay in wait in these winds. (Vijayan 198)

This passage shows that Ravi has lost his final grip of attachment and wants to uproot from the village of Khasak. As Balakrishnan and Dennis opine, "All of O. V. Vijayan's protagonists are 'sick souls' who cannot but see the sorrows of the world, empathize with them, thus

coming out with profound insights. It is the existential angst of Ravi, in Khasak, for instance, that leads him in the journey of discovering truths" (268). The final truth Ravi finds out is that he was an intruder for a long time who desecrated this sacred place of pristine purity [Khasak] with his presence, which originally belonged to the roaches, spiders and other heirs of earth, and should quit it at the earliest and move on. Once spatial attachment is relinquished, what remains to be dismantled is not place, but selfhood itself.

Mada [ego/pride/arrogance] is the fifth fetter to be conquered. Though not very evident, Ravi had the feeling inside that he is a learnt man having a systematic and scientific temper. His living in Khasak and close mingling with the ordinary people over there gradually shatters his ego as a scholar. Because "the natives of Khasak dwell in a mindscape of myths and legends. All actions and events are attributed to the idea of karma . . . Existence is seen as a cycle of birth and death that goes unendingly with the defining image of man as a helpless being tossed about in the endless cycle of karma" (Anand 99). Ravi is ostensibly the teacher, but he finds he has as much to learn from the children and their organic connection to nature and myth as he has to teach from books. He admits the same to Padma in their prolonged conversation at the guesthouse:

> 'Okay, Buy me something in flaring red and green. Something really loud and obscene.'
> 'Why?'
> 'Because the women back there will gasp in wonder.'
> 'Ooh, Ravi.'
> They fell silent. Then Ravi spoke, 'Did I hurt you, Padma?'

> 'This world is full of hurts. The other world too, if there is one.'
> 'There is. This is what my pupils have taught me.' (Vijayan 190)

Ravi's admission here hints that he has started to believe and accept the natural and mythical lessons given by his students in Khasak. His rational, scientific ego is gradually dismantled by the village's pervasive atmosphere of folklore and magic realism. Anand makes it clear that "The extent of Ravi's struggle to surrender to the mythical cadences of the landscape is manifest here" (98). Ravi's rational ego seems to subdue itself to the magical world of Khasak, and thus *Mada* [ego/pride/arrogance] is shattered completely.

Matsarya [envy/jealousy], the sixth and final fetter, does not seem to disturb Ravi. Nowhere in the novel is Ravi found with envy. The novel never depicts Ravi as jealous of anyone, leaving this aspect unexplored.

Conclusion

Ravi is seasoned over the months' stay in Khasak, his last inn in this world. He remains an attached insider who becomes deeply involved in the village's mythical reality, eventually leaving as abruptly as he arrived, his journey complete in a spiritual sense. His surrender is complete when he is relieved from the clutches of the *Shad-ripu* [six enemies]. He receives deliverance from his predominant fetters, namely *Kama* [lust], *Moha* [attachment] and *Mada* [ego/pride], thoroughly going through and transcending them with a high level of understanding. Ravi had already been relieved from the other three fetters. What remains is a defining union, a dissolution

with the Absolute Being which he ardently aspires to while giving the final reply to Padma: "*I wish to escape nothing,* Ravi answered from within his silence, *I want to be the sand of the desert, each grain of sand; I want to be the lake, each minute droplet. I want to be the laya, the dissolution"* (Vijayan 193). This final dissolution, the ultimate deliverance can only be provided with death. His final encounter with the snake marks the end of this physical journey and the beginning of another, spiritual one, suggested to be in the dimension of the after-life." Then freed from those things by which he was filled and affected," says Maitri Upanisad, "this rider of the chariot attains [complete] union with the self [the Absolute Being]" (811).

By reading Ravi's journey through the lens of *Shad-ripu*, this study proposes a way of breaking dominant existential narratives out of their largely Western theoretical frameworks and reopening them to regional and indigenous philosophical traditions. Ravi's readiness to surrender his body is not merely an act of despair or nihilistic withdrawal. It is but the culmination of a sustained process of inward purification, marked by the gradual transcendence of desire, attachment and ego. Death, in this context, functions not as negation but as dissolution, a movement toward union rather than extinction.

More broadly, this approach gestures toward a critical possibility within literary studies: the recontextualisation of existentialism itself. Texts such as *Khasakkinte Ithihasam*, Anand's *Marubhoomikal Undakunnathu* (1993), and other modern Malayalam narratives of crisis and inwardness can be reread through Indian philosophical paradigms rather than being situated

exclusively within European existential traditions. Such alternative frameworks need not be limited to Indian thought alone; they open pathways for comparative, non-Western, and cross-cultural epistemologies that challenge the theoretical hegemony of Western existentialism. This study offers one such reading as an example, suggesting that regional literatures possess their own conceptual resources for articulating complexity, crisis and transcendence.

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Enchanted Villages: Myth and Magic Realism in O.V. Vijayan and Gabriel García Márquez

— Shinoj P V

Abstract: This article attempts to understand the concept of 'village' reconfigured as a mythic space in the narrative practices of O.V. Vijayan's *Legends of Khasak* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Although these villages are situated on opposite ends of the globe, both are remarkably imaginative in their constructions of myth, spirituality, politics, and history. This paper highlights the ways in which each writer engages in the strategies related to magic realism that contribute to the production of the knowledge systems that shape and give meaning to their cultural landscapes. By pulling the surreal in the sphere of ordinary life, they produce realities that hold weight in oral traditions and mythic consciousness. The paper analyses how memory, temporality, and cosmological imagination are present in each of their constructions while highlighting the local inflections that present each work within its respective cultural history.

Keywords: Magic realism, mythic temporality, cultural memory, comparative literature

Traditionally, literature as a genre has included the category of mythology and storytelling to engage and safeguard cultural memory. A type of narrative constructed from the premise of myth is particularly important in a postcolonial context because it challenges the epistemologies, or systems of knowledge, inherent in imported narrative forms and also provides a means to reclaim and reengage with indigenous narrative traditions. The two novels selected for this study, the first being the English translation of the Malayalam novel, *The Legends of Khasak*, by O. V. Vijayan and the other being the novel by Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years*

of Solitude, translated into English from Spanish, embody this narrative propensity. Both of these novels inherently offer mythic physicality to the margins of their villages as a cultural negotiation between history and modernity and ancestral imagination.

Though written on opposite sides of the world, both texts were produced within the same turbulent decades of political transformation during the twentieth century, yet they manage to resonate and reverberate across oceans to create what can be termed as 'mythopoeic villages'. O. V. Vijayan provides a nuanced existential restlessness to Ravi's wanderings in Khasak and renders the narrative of local serpent myths, Sufi folklore and subaltern memory into an oriental method of magic realism. In the same way, Márquez situates Macondo as a world haunted by history, in which the Buendía family enacts an allegory of Latin America caught between memory and oblivion.

This comparative article attempts to interpret the possible operations of myth, memory, and temporality in each of these works. While their texts employ strategies of magic realism, the expression is positioned culturally—O.V. Vijayan's emerges from a spiritual and syncretic ethos of Kerala, whereas Márquez's reflects the chronicle of violent oscillations in Colombian and Latin American histories. The paper is structured with sections theorising magic realism and examining the mythic structures specific to Khasak and Macondo, and synthesising these as a comparison revealing both convergence and divergence in these narrative visions.

Magic Realism and Mythic Temporality

In the influx of varied theories in literature, magic realism and its blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction have garnered both fascination and controversy. Blossomed in the terrain of Latin American literature, this term denotes the blending of ordinary and fantastic and wove the such realities that resist Cartesian rationalism and positivist historiography in its loom. Faris (1995) and Zamora & Faris (1995) partially trace the genealogy of magic realism to counter colonial portrayals of realism and present it instead as a means to recover mythic consciousness. Placed within the postcolonial context, magic realism becomes a preceptor to resist the imported modernity and engages to kindle the spiritual residue of the indigenous traditions.

In the writings of both Vijayan and Márquez, magic realism functions as a dialectic. On one hand, it draws sustenance from local mythologies and spiritual practices, refusing absolute boundaries between the sacred and the profane. On the other hand, magical realism implicates itself by interrogating the violence of history and modernity, exposing the fissures within the linear progress of the very nature of history itself. The thin membrane between lived life and fantasy blurs and confuses these two villages, erasing a stability of narration and creating temporalities that are at once both cyclical and linear. This constant shuttle between grounded realities of life and fantasy, the latter of which stands opposed to the former, is not a mere aesthetic device of the novel but can be considered a transformation of a lived experience into a symbolic narrative structure.

Village as Mythscape – Khasak

Khasak, as depicted in Vijayan's narrative, is not just a geographical entity but a mythic palimpsest that encompasses serpent legends, Sufi saints, and the inherited anxieties of the villagers. The mystical presence of Sayed Mian Sheikh is marked in the novel by his grave that anchors the spiritual topography of the village. This encapsulates the rhythm of the narrative: "He uttered the names of saints in distant lands, and the villagers heard in his voice the winds that guard the hidden rivers" (*Legends of Khasak* 47). Characters like these colour the genes of everyday life in Khasak, infusing ordinary gestures with an aura of fate and fatalism.

Ravi, the protagonist of the novel, exiles himself to Khasak and seeks spiritual catharses. This course mirrors the political scenario of the nation itself: the existential malaise of postcolonial India. From the very beginning of the novel, when the character Allah-Pitcha, the mullah of the madrassa, meets Nizam Ali, the serpent motif emerges. The latter is there to catch snakes. The narrative later presents Othappu's fables of hooded snakes and stories of ancestral curses, which reflect both anxieties and a longing for redemption that become visible in the psyche of the village. In this context, myth and magic do not disrupt the flow of reality; instead, they permeate the very essence of the villagers' lived experiences. The membrane that isolates memories, dreams, histories, and rumours is fractured. The villagers' stories, often told as whispers or confessions during monsoon storms, serve as collective rituals for expiating guilt and invoking hope.

Textual time in *The Legends of Khasak* is nonlinear. Vijayan's sentences ripple with echoes of the past and foreboding of the future, refusing the logic of clock time. The landscape of Khasak, lush but haunted, is transformed at dusk into a theatre for spectral encounters: the appearance of the sheikh by twilight, the village's collective shudder at omens, and the "almost-friends who carried the wind's memory in their bones" (79). Here, the cosmology is not external; it resides within every villager, manifesting in habits and languages that evoke India's syncretic traditions—Sufism, folk Hinduism, and precolonial myth. Magic realism emerges as the narrative's grammar, neither ornamental nor outlandish, but as an epistemic principle. The mythic inheritance of Khasak is what enables Vijayan to present its existence not as a progression but as a circle—open to both decline and renaissance.

Village as Mythscape – Macondo

The contours of Macondo, the fictional village, become a point of convergence where the past and present, history and myth coalesce into an intricate interweaving of time and memory, and the divide between these genres becomes less pronounced. While Khasak presents a layer of spirituality that is rooted in the Indian tradition, Macondo is a mythic site of the Latin American experience of colonial conquest, mythohistory, and political unrest. It is a site that is paradoxically both secluded and assaulted by modernity, where the abnormal is routinely accepted and the normal is prophetic.

Macondo is full of magical events—Remedios the Beauty becomes a heavenly being: "She went up in a flurry of

sheets that rose in the gentlest breeze ever to drift through Macondo" (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* 236); the insomnia plague wiping memory away: "They had to mark everything with its name… so that they could identify things… Milk. Cow. Table. Chair." Foreign agricultural companies take land concessions (46–47), which does not disrupt the novel's narrative but creates its fabric. Time in Macondo is presented as circular, which is reflected in the cyclical and unchanging fates of the Buendía family, whose lives repeat ancestral sins and mysteries in a mythical manner.

The village is a self-contained universe where cosmological and historical exigencies unfold differently than the modern Western experience. The rain of yellow flowers that follows Jose Arcadio Buendía's death, expressed in the novel as "It was raining yellow flowers all over Macondo" (153), evokes a stubborn tendency to ward off memory amidst the signs of oblivion and decay. This sort of rebirth can be termed 'vegetable rebirth' and expresses a kind of endurance through mythic cycles in the narrative. Just like Khasak, Macondo refuses to settle on clear distinctions between the supernatural and lived experience, and it implies a felt consciousness steeped in mythic knowledge to comprehend and settle into this experience.

Macondo, in this way, emerges as a mythic village out of oral traditions and historical memories to serve as a political allegory that could be considered a mechanism for Latin American villages in negotiating and resisting historical amnesia. The thin invisible lines blurring between history, myth and autobiography open a space where Macondo presents as an enchanted isolated space for the local and the universal to coexist and interact

reciprocally with one another. The intertextuality present invites readers to engage with an expansive and rich super-linear cyclical temporality that challenges linear historiography and, as a result, also legitimises a postcolonial struggle for cultural identity.

Myth as Cultural Memory

In *The Legends of Khasak*, myth is treated as the very fabric of communal life in the village. As the narrator notes, "There were no lies in Khasak; only different kinds of truths" (63). Even the wind that blows out in Khasak is posited as a myth: "His isolation was inhabited, not by ghosts, nor hallucinations, but by the wind, and the legends it carried" (149). These "different kinds of truths" serve as mnemonic devices of the narrative, sustaining a collective experience and spiritual inheritance, without which memories would be lost to the oppression of rationality and forgetting.

In Khasak, the oral tradition of legacies of serpents, tales of Sufi saints, and whispers of ancestral guilt take place in a liminal space where competing and proliferating versions of history exist and serve as a collective repository of stories that provide psychic and existential relief. The very nature of myth is presented in the novel as something not static but evolving organically each time a myth is recounted, thereby becoming a communal ritual for expiating guilt and invoking hope. This is in line with Faris's theoretical argument: "Magical realism reclaims myth as a vital epistemology, resisting the cultural marginalization of the irrational" (Faris 1).

Macondo is treated as a landscape where every breath is effused with myth: "The world was so recent that many

things did not have names, and to indicate them, it was necessary to point" (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* 1). This moment of absence of language provides the opening for myth to carve meaning into the fabric of daily existence. This memory remains tenuous, staged in the most dramatic form of the insomnia plague: "They went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but which would escape irremediably when they forgot the values of the written letters" (47). Through ritual and relic, Macondo wages an urgent war against oblivion.

Both novels represent myth as a living ritual, as a barrier against amnesia and erasure. Zamora and Faris suggest that magic realism is an opportunity for "a meeting ground of diversity" (Zamora and Faris 3), and in fact both Khasak and Macondo mark myth and memory as their ground of resistance.

Time's Cyclical and Linear Patterns

In Khasak, time is not conceived like it is in clocks: "Time is counted in festivals, births and deaths" (202). This mythic temporality, which revolves around rituals and seasons and through generations, is indicative of the cyclical nature of time as propounded by Indian philosophy. Ravi's narrative movement through the novel is not an incarnation of the progressive aspect of time but can be called 'spiral loops', as time is presented moving back and forth into the two aspects of remembering and existential searching: "His most cherished memory was of the sky-watch, a pastime in which the movements of eagles and clouds and the imagined trajectories of vanished gods were observed." (172).

Macondo's time, similarly, disavows a straightforward Western understanding of its linearity. This non-adherence to linearity is revealed when Márquez points out generational repetition to the reader—recurring names, destinies, or mistakes: "There was always something left to be discovered. By then Macondo was in its last days, but nobody realized it" (*One Hundred Years of Solitude,* 395). The Buendía fate, or lies, is presented through prophecy, circularity, and forgetting: "Races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth" (412). Jose Arcadio Buendía created a "memory" to combat his insomnia, which also represented his struggle to find meaning in a way that challenges the concept of time: "Aureliano Babilonia was the only one... who managed to decipher the parchments and, at the end, discovered that everything that was written there was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more" (411). Faris and Zamora regard the interruption of chronology as a core element of magic realism: "Magical realism allows us to allow worlds, spaces, and systems that would have little chance of being reconciled in other modes of fiction." (Zamora and Faris, 4). Both novels embrace time as a site of contestation and incarnate a circular logic that resists historicist closure.

Village Cosmologies and Universal Reach

The cosmology of Khasak is grounded in the spiritual ecology of Kerala, which includes a blend of Hindu, Sufi, and folk imagery: "He was saying the names of the saints who lived in faraway lands. The villagers heard in his voice the sounds of the winds that protect the concealed rivers" (47). The goddess beneath the tamarind tree, the

figures seen at twilight, and the rites that mark the passage of seasons all describe a cosmos that embraces exile and atonement, agitation, and festivity.

Macondo, though lamentably tethered to Colombian reality, becomes universal in allegorising loss, memory, and recurrences. The magical "rain of yellow flowers" that skates over the surface of the earth, covering everything after Jose Arcadio Buendia dies: "It was raining yellow flowers all over Macondo" (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* 153); or Remedios rising into heaven: "...the beauty rose to the sky, wrapped in bed-sheets and all living wisdom" (236); or the premonitory end of Macondo: "...the destruction of his family had been foretold by the ancients" (412). All indicate a cosmology with myth illuminating the limits and fullness of humanity. Zamora and Faris write that magic realism's "eccentric program" provides literature "to reimagine the universal through the local" (3). Thus, the village cosmologies of Khasak and Macondo stand as genera of the human struggle with a meaningful temporality manageable and accountable to destiny.

Conclusion

A thorough exploration of the magic realism present in The Legends of Khasak and One Hundred Years of Solitude reveals the structures of interlaced realities in mythic consciousness, cyclical temporality, and village cosmologies. The analysis of these structures is open to interpretation of the same in isolation and also in tandem with collective memory. In this case, all the components of magic realism work to embody or indicate a mode of resistance, as well as indicating a kind of 'epistemic' disobedience. This resistance is then invoked in an

organic way, working for, as well as subverting, the indigenous, spiritual, and oral traditions of the land, providing a front to counter the socially constructed histories and alter the same.

In Khasak, O. V. Vijayan works with local phenomena—snake myths, village feasts, a mysterious saint—to demonstrate a living palimpsest, a space where the past and the present coexist and affect the substance of experience. Ravi's life, his sense of haunting desire and guilt, becomes a signifier in a metaphysical universal quest for meaning that exceeds historicist linearity. For example, "the wind, which had memory", or the villagers "heard in the voice the winds guard the hidden rivers" (*Legends of Khasak* 47), enfold the metaphysical in the quotidian, revelling in the promise of myth that exceeds trauma and asserts belief. As the villagers persevere through cycles of loss and restoration, the readers see their varied truths brought to the surface by magic realism and a habit of reading that situates what we know in complexity over closure and ambiguity over certainty.

Márquez's Macondo, on the other side of the world, serves as a meeting point where history and myth converge and engage in constant dialogue. The insistent presence of prophecy, the repetitive fate of the Buendía family, and the landscape of forgetfulness wrought by the insomnia plague—all underscore the fragility of memory and the necessity of mythic invention. The novel's closing image, in which Aureliano Babilonia deciphers the parchments only to see Macondo's obliteration inscribed, is as much an acceptance of universal loss as an affirmation of the generative potential of storytelling. Márquez's use of cyclic time,

"races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth" (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* 412), refuses the comforting finality of redemption, instead inviting reflection on the dark magic that animates history, remembrance, and desire.

Drawing together the above analyses, evidence emerges of a common literary ethos: the village as a mythscape is not an insulated one; it is a cosmopolitan construct in its ability to mediate universal human concerns. By foregrounding the porousness of boundaries between real and magical, and temporal and timeless, both authors attack the binaries that lie under colonial epistemology and literary tradition. Both authors reclaim the village as a site of cultural and existential negotiation. While mythic structures become anchors of collective memory and survive the conditions of a world increasingly cut off from mythology, in both Khasak and Macondo, the enchantment from which stories emerge is a manifestation of resilience—both subversive and healing, local and global.

This comparative perspective may inform the realisation that myth, memory, and cyclic temporality are active and legitimate structures of thought in postcolonial literature by reimagining the limits of narrative, community, and self. The engagements of oral tradition, family saga, and landscape provide not only a critical act of giving voice back to muted histories but also a conceptual space where past and present, real and imagined, are interconnected.

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The Fisherfolk's Voice: Folk Arts and Cultural Identity in T.S. Pillai's *Chemmeen*

— T Manickam and **K Nagarathinam**

Abstract: Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen* (1956), acclaimed as one of the most significant works in Malayalam literature, and transcends the boundaries of a regional love story to become a cultural document of Kerala's fisherfolk. Through its interweaving of folk arts, oral traditions, and mythic beliefs, the novel foregrounds the cultural identity of a marginalised community. The sea functions not only as a natural backdrop but also as a spiritual and cultural force governed by ritualistic codes. Folk songs, ritual chants, and oral stories embody the collective consciousness of the fisherfolk, transmitting values of fidelity, sacrifice, and ecological interdependence. This paper argues that *Chemmeen* elevates folk arts from peripheral cultural practices to central literary elements, thereby giving voice to a community historically silenced in dominant literary discourses. By situating *Chemmeen* within the broader context of folklore studies, cultural anthropology, and subaltern narratives, the study highlights the significance of folk arts in shaping communal identity and resisting cultural erasure.

Keywords: Culture, tradition, sea, folklore, mythic beliefs, subaltern

Literature often acts as a mirror reflecting the lived experiences of communities, and regional writing in particular has the power to preserve cultural memory. In India, with its multiplicity of languages and traditions, regional literatures have been instrumental in documenting the cultural and folk practices of marginalised groups. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen* holds a central place in this regard. First published in Malayalam in 1956, the novel is celebrated not only for its poignant narrative but also for its ethnographic representation of the lives of fisherfolk in

Kerala. It became the first Malayalam novel to win the Sahitya Academy Award (1957) and continues to occupy an important position in both literary and cultural studies. At its core, *Chemmeen* narrates the tragic romance of Karuthamma, the daughter of a fisherman, and Pareekutty, a Muslim trader. Their love, constrained by social taboos and communal boundaries, culminates in tragedy. Yet, beyond the personal narrative lies a deeper engagement with the community's cultural identity, sustained through folk arts and oral traditions. The sea, which governs the fate of the characters, is mythologised as a sentient force. According to local belief, a fisherman's safety at sea depends on his wife's fidelity on land. This belief, deeply rooted in folklore, becomes the moral framework of the novel and dictates the tragic trajectory of its characters. By weaving songs, chants, and myths into the text, Pillai elevates the novel into a cultural archive. These folk arts, transmitted orally across generations, serve not only as entertainment but also as instruments of moral instruction, social regulation, and ecological awareness. The songs of fishermen rowing their boats, the lullabies sung by women, and the stories of the sea goddess all construct a cultural identity that binds the community together. In this way, *Chemmeen* demonstrates how literature can embody ethnographic dimensions and preserve intangible cultural heritage. The present study explores *Chemmeen* through the lens of folklore and cultural identity. It asks: How does Pillai incorporate folk arts into the narrative? In what ways do these traditions act as identity markers for the fisherfolk? How do they intersect with ecological consciousness and subaltern resistance? Through a close reading of the novel, supported by critical perspectives from folklore studies and cultural anthropology, this paper argues that *Chemmeen* is not

simply a love story but a literary ethnography that enshrines the cultural identity of Kerala's fisherfolk.

Scholars have long recognised the significance of *Chemmeen* as more than a love story. K. M. George describes it as a "folk epic" of Kerala's fishing community, noting how it immortalises the cultural ethos of a marginalised group (122). His observation foregrounds the novel's ability to elevate folklore into an epic narrative form. Meena T. Pillai emphasises the centrality of folk songs, arguing that they act as cultural signifiers that preserve identity in the face of modernisation (82). She suggests that *Chemmeen* demonstrates how oral traditions act as a counter-narrative to elite literary traditions, thereby reclaiming cultural space for subaltern voices. Asha Susan Jacob approaches the novel from an ecological perspective, noting how the folklore encodes ecological consciousness. She argues that myths about the sea goddess reflect the community's awareness of ecological balance and sustainability (48). Critics such as R. E. Asher have highlighted the ethnographic value of the novel, situating it within the larger context of regional Indian literatures that document marginalised communities (19). Similarly, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, in their anthology of women's writings, note how the figure of Karuthamma embodies the burdens of gendered morality imposed by folklore while also symbolising resilience and sacrifice (314). Collectively, these studies affirm that *Chemmeen* is not reducible to its romantic plot. Its lasting value lies in the preservation of folklore, the articulation of ecological wisdom, and the legitimisation of subaltern identities.

Folk Arts and Oral Traditions in *Chemmeen*

One of the most distinctive features of *Chemmeen* is its reliance on folk arts and oral traditions to construct the cultural universe of the fishing community. Unlike novels that foreground elite culture, Pillai integrates the everyday songs, chants, and oral stories of ordinary fisherfolk, thereby allowing their cultural practices to resonate within literary space. Kerala's coastal regions are rich in oral traditions, ranging from lullabies to ritualistic chants, which are passed down through generations. In *Chemmeen*, these forms are not ornamental but functional. They frame the characters' worldview, shape their relationships, and provide moral instruction. The songs sung by fishermen while rowing their boats, for example, are rhythmic expressions that synchronise collective labour and reinforce solidarity. These boat songs are communal performances that embody the unity of men facing the unpredictable dangers of the sea. Women, too, play a central role in sustaining oral traditions. Their lullabies, wedding songs, and laments reveal a gendered dimension of folklore that highlights themes of longing, fidelity, and sacrifice. Karuthamma's character is deeply entwined with these songs, which foreshadow her destiny. For instance, her lullabies often echo the sea's presence, suggesting the inescapable bond between the fisherfolk and the ocean.

The significance of oral traditions in the novel can also be understood through the lens of folklore studies. Alan Dundes defines folklore as "the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture" (2). Pillai captures precisely this unofficial culture by weaving oral forms into his narrative, thereby validating the cultural memory of a marginalised community. The folk songs in

Chemmeen thus serve not only as markers of authenticity but also as instruments of cultural preservation. Furthermore, these oral traditions emphasise the cyclical nature of time and continuity. Each generation inherits the same chants and myths, ensuring that cultural identity is never severed. In this sense, *Chemmeen* functions as a cultural archive, preserving intangible heritage in written form. What might have otherwise remained confined to oral circulation finds permanence within the pages of the novel.

Sea Myths and Cultural Codes

The sea in *Chemmeen* is not a passive backdrop but an active cultural agent that governs the moral and spiritual life of the fisherfolk. Myths associated with the sea, especially those concerning the chastity of fishermen's wives, occupy a central role in the narrative. According to tradition, the sea goddess demands fidelity: if a fisherman's wife is unfaithful, the sea will claim her husband's life. This myth functions as a communal code of conduct, binding women to strict moral obligations while also ensuring men's dependence on women's virtue for survival. This belief is deeply symbolic. On one level, it reflects the community's attempt to impose order on the chaos of nature. The sea, with its unpredictable tempests and bountiful harvests, represents both danger and sustenance. By mythologising the sea, the fisherfolk give meaning to its unpredictable behaviour. A storm that takes a fisherman's life is not interpreted as random misfortune but as divine retribution for moral failure. In this way, myth provides psychological comfort and cultural coherence.

Pillai dramatises this belief through the fate of Karuthamma. Despite her love for Pareekutty, she is compelled to marry Palani, a fisherman. Her personal desires conflict with communal expectations, and ultimately, her inability to conform to the mythic code leads to tragedy. Palani, though portrayed as a brave fisherman, perishes at sea when Karuthamma's fidelity is questioned. The myth of chastity thus transcends individual will and becomes a collective destiny. The sea myths also serve as allegories for ecological consciousness. The fisherfolk recognise that their lives are at the mercy of natural forces, and through myth, they encode a form of ecological respect. While modern science interprets storms and shipwrecks as meteorological phenomena, the fisherfolk interpret them as divine warnings. This worldview, though rooted in superstition, reveals a profound acknowledgement of human vulnerability to nature.

Pillai's narrative demonstrates how folklore operates as a system of cultural codes. These myths are not irrational beliefs but functional tools that provide coherence to communal life. They regulate social conduct, reinforce communal solidarity, and articulate ecological wisdom. By embedding these myths in *Chemmeen*, Pillai ensures that the cultural codes of Kerala's fisherfolk are preserved for future generations.

Folk Arts as Identity Markers

The cultural identity of Kerala's fisherfolk, as portrayed in *Chemmeen*, is inseparable from their folk traditions. Unlike classical or institutionalised cultural forms, folk arts thrive through oral circulation and communal participation. They belong not to an individual but to the

community as a whole, making them essential expressions of collective identity. Pillai's representation of folk songs, chants, and myths allows readers to recognise how these oral forms create a sense of belonging among the fishermen. For the fishing community, folk songs are more than recreational activities—they are repositories of communal memory. Songs sung during rowing, for instance, are not composed for aesthetic pleasure alone. They function as rhythmic tools that synchronise labour, instil courage, and reinforce camaraderie in the face of the sea's uncertainties. These songs, often structured in call-and-response formats, reflect the communal nature of fishing expeditions. Women's songs also serve as crucial identity markers. Their lullabies often personify the sea as both nurturer and destroyer, embedding the ocean into the emotional and spiritual lives of children from birth. Wedding songs, laments, and chants articulate the gendered expectations placed on women, particularly the burden of chastity that underpins the community's moral framework. Through these songs, women contribute significantly to preserving and transmitting cultural identity.

The myth of the sea goddess, too, becomes an identity marker that differentiates the fishing community from others. It binds individuals into a shared cultural narrative, ensuring that identity is defined not solely by occupation but by adherence to a common moral code. Karuthamma's personal tragedy underscores the extent to which cultural identity is determined by collective myths rather than individual desires. Her love for Pareekutty cannot survive because it threatens the integrity of the community's identity, which is anchored in folk traditions. Thus, Pillai demonstrates that folk arts

are not peripheral cultural artefacts but the very foundation of communal identity. Without their songs and myths, the fisherfolk would lose the symbolic framework that unites them and distinguishes them from other communities.

Ecological Consciousness in Folklore

One of the most striking aspects of the folklore in *Chemmeen* is its ecological dimension. The fisherfolk live in intimate proximity with the sea, whose unpredictability demands both respect and caution. Their songs and myths reflect an awareness of ecological balance, even if expressed through symbolic or religious terms rather than scientific language. The myth that links a fisherman's safety at sea to his wife's chastity, while primarily moral in nature, also encodes an ecological truth: human survival depends on harmony with natural forces. By demanding fidelity and moral discipline, the myth encourages individuals to humble themselves before the sea. The community recognises that the ocean cannot be mastered but only respected. This ecological consciousness, though articulated through folklore, reflects an understanding of sustainability and vulnerability.

Folk songs often portray the sea as a living entity with moods, intentions, and powers. This personification reflects a worldview in which nature is not inert but animated and responsive. Such a perspective fosters ecological responsibility, since harming nature is equivalent to offending a living being. For example, fishermen's chants often request the sea's blessing before setting out, highlighting their recognition of dependence on natural forces. The ecological

consciousness embedded in folklore also regulates the community's practices. Overfishing, for instance, is discouraged not through modern conservation policies but through cultural taboos and ritual observances. Certain days are deemed inauspicious for fishing, ensuring that the sea is periodically given rest. Ritual offerings to the sea goddess symbolically acknowledge the need to replenish and respect natural resources. By preserving these traditions in literary form, Pillai ensures that the ecological consciousness of the fisherfolk is not lost in the face of modernisation. As Kerala's coastal communities increasingly confront ecological crises such as overfishing and climate change, *Chemmeen* remains a reminder of how traditional folklore embodies sustainable practices and ecological respect.

Inter-Community Relations and Cultural Fluidity

While much of the critical attention on *Chemmeen* has centred on the fisherfolk's myths and folk traditions, another important aspect of the novel is its depiction of inter-community relations, particularly between the Hindu fishing community and the Muslim trader, Pareekutty. This relationship complicates the narrative of cultural identity, demonstrating how folklore can function both as a source of solidarity and as a boundary that restricts cultural interaction. Karuthamma's love for Pareekutty is not only a personal relationship but also a transgressive act that challenges both religious and cultural norms. Their romance dramatises the tension between individual desire and communal identity, underscoring the fragility of cultural boundaries in multi-ethnic, multi-religious Kerala. The economic role of Pareekutty further highlights this complexity. As a Muslim trader, he is deeply integrated into the economic

life of the fishing community, buying their catch and sustaining their livelihood. Yet, despite this interdependence, he remains culturally "other", excluded from the intimate folklore that defines the community's identity. This paradox reflects the dual nature of folklore: it creates cohesion within a community while simultaneously excluding outsiders. In this sense, Pareekutty symbolises cultural fluidity—his love and his trade bind him to the fisherfolk, but folklore and social codes continually remind him of his marginal position.

Pillai also demonstrates how folklore enforces communal discipline in the context of inter-community relationships. The myth that a fisherman's safety depends on his wife's chastity takes on greater symbolic significance when Karuthamma loves a man outside her community. Her attraction to Pareekutty is not only perceived as infidelity but also as a violation of communal honour, amplifying the stakes of her choices. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita observe, folklore often places disproportionate moral burdens on women, making them the custodians of communal honour (318). Karuthamma's tragedy exemplifies this dynamic, as her relationship with Pareekutty is judged not just as a personal failing but as a cultural threat.

At the same time, Chemmeen does not portray this relationship in simplistic terms of prohibition. The very fact that Karuthamma and Pareekutty's love is central to the narrative suggests that inter-community connections are integral to the cultural fabric of Kerala. The sea, which both communities depend on, acts as a shared ecological and cultural space, transcending human divisions. By situating a Muslim character at the heart of the novel,

Pillai acknowledges the pluralism of Kerala's coastal society. However, the tragic end of their relationship reinforces the novel's central thesis: folklore, while preserving cultural identity, can also enforce boundaries that inhibit cross-cultural harmony. Thus, the novel demonstrates that folklore is a double-edged force. It unites individuals within a community while simultaneously distinguishing them from others. Through Karuthamma and Pareekutty's ill-fated romance, Pillai highlights both the possibilities of cultural fluidity and the restrictive power of communal folklore.

Subaltern Identity and Cultural Resistance

T.S. Pillai's *Chemmeen* also invites analysis within the framework of subaltern studies. For centuries, India's coastal fishing communities remained marginalised in literary and cultural representations, often excluded from mainstream histories that privileged agrarian or upper-caste narratives. By centring the voices of fisherfolk, Pillai resists dominant narratives and foregrounds subaltern identity. The use of folk songs and myths in the novel functions as an act of cultural resistance. These oral traditions preserve the voices of a community that has historically lacked written records. By recording them within a novelistic framework, Pillai legitimises these practices as valuable cultural expressions, challenging the notion that literature must privilege elite or classical traditions.

The communal code linking women's chastity to men's survival at sea also reflects the negotiation of subaltern identity. While the code appears oppressive—particularly for women—it simultaneously affirms the community's distinct worldview, which differentiates

them from other social groups. Identity here is not imposed by dominant culture but constructed through indigenous traditions. Karuthamma's tragedy symbolises the double bind of subaltern women. On one hand, she embodies resistance by daring to love Pareekutty, thus rejecting the constraints of caste and community. On the other, she becomes a victim of the very cultural code that defines her existence. This tension reflects Gayatri Spivak's argument that subaltern women are often doubly marginalised, caught between patriarchal oppression and communal identity (Spivak 287). Yet, even within this tragic framework, *Chemmeen* resists cultural erasure. By giving voice to fisherfolk, Pillai preserves their songs, myths, and rituals in literary form, ensuring that subaltern identities are not silenced but remembered. This act of cultural preservation becomes especially important in modernity, where rapid industrialisation and globalisation threaten to erode traditional ways of life.

Conclusion

T.S. Pillai's *Chemmeen* stands as a monumental work in Indian literature precisely because it integrates folklore into its narrative structure. The novel demonstrates that folk arts—songs, chants, myths, and rituals—are not peripheral to culture but central to the identity of Kerala's fisherfolk. These traditions function as identity markers, cultural codes, and ecological wisdom, shaping the worldview of a marginalised community. The sea myths reveal how folklore provides coherence to human life in the face of nature's unpredictability, while the folk songs embody solidarity, moral instruction, and cultural memory. By preserving these oral traditions in literary form, Pillai resists the erasure of subaltern voices and

ensures that the cultural identity of fishermen is recognised in India's literary canon. Moreover, *Chemmeen* offers an early articulation of ecological consciousness, encoded within folklore long before modern discourses of sustainability gained prominence. It reminds contemporary readers that marginalised communities often possess sophisticated ecological knowledge, expressed through myths and oral traditions. Ultimately, *Chemmeen* is not just a regional love story but a cultural document. Its integration of folklore situates it at the intersection of literature, anthropology, and ecology. By giving voice to fisherfolk, Pillai ensures that their songs, myths, and rituals are not lost to history but preserved as enduring markers of cultural identity.

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Negotiating the Boundary of Caste: Interpreting the Issues of Dalit Articulation and Oppression in Paul Chirakkarode's *Pulayathara* and T.S. Pillai's *Two Measures of Rice*

— Mahima Gupta

Abstract: Boundaries exist in both intangible and tangible forms, contributing to a cohesive society. On one hand, symbolic borders promote group memberships but on the other hand social boundaries created by mankind gives room to unequal access and distribution of resources and social opportunities creating social differences. Boundaries of religion, caste, class, race and ethnicity act as social limits for the human beings leading to discrimination, subjugation and brutality. In Kerala Christianity is believed to arrive in the 6th century CE through Syrian Christians who emigrated to Kerala in AD 345. In the West Coast, both Portuguese colonials and the Jesuit Missionaries began imparting education through missionary societies like London Missionary Society, Christian Missionary Society to promote Christian values and morals for proselytisation of the lowest castes including Shanars, Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas etc with the hope of breaking them free from the humiliating lives. But when the Scheduled Castes started joining Christian faith they were segregated through endogamy. This segregation resulted in three broad divisions- Syrian Christians, Latin Christians and New Christians. In Malayalam, new Christians are called *Putiya Kristyani* or *Avasa Kraistava* meaning Backward Christians. This paper aims to examine the social outlook of the oppressed Pulaya and Paraya castes which led to the Dalit Christian Movement of Kerala in the 19th century. The issues of proselytisation, oppression and Dalit articulation will be analysed through Paul Chirakkarode's *Pulayathara* and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Two Measures of Rice.*

Keywords: Caste, Discrimination, Endogamy, Pulaya, Paraiah, Untouchability

With the formation of the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM), the struggle of Dalit Christians for equality, justice and non-discrimination became a reality. Though DCLM was limited to Tamil Nadu, it had a ripple effect in other southern states. In some northern states, attempts to unify Dalit Christians have also been ongoing, and agrarian unrest is reported to be more widespread in the rice-growing regions. Dumont states in *Homo Hierarchicus*, "Caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups… connected together by three characteristics: separation in matters of marriage and contact; division of labour and finally hierarchy" (35). In a similar manner, the society of Kerala is segregated into three broad divisions—Syrian Christians, Latin Christians and New Christians. In Malayalam, new Christians are called '*Putiya Kristyani*' or 'Avasa Kraistava', which means 'Backward Christians'. These words clearly suggest marginalising the converted.

Two Measures of Rice (1967), the English translation of *Rantitangazhi,* was written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. It was translated into English by M. A. Shakoor. The novel is based on the Punnapra-Vayalar uprising. It is about the induced class consciousness of the agricultural workers of Kuttanad and their fight against the injustice. This was an armed uprising in 1946 led by freedom fighters against the regime of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the then Diwan of Travancore. The participants in this struggle were the working class, drawn from the industrial, agricultural, and agroindustrial sectors. The major causes of the uprising were the social practice of untouchability and the unfair economic treatment and abolition of the feudal system. It is a kind of mass awakening of the peasants and workers toiling and performing extreme backbreaking tasks of bunding, transplantation, weeding,

etc. against the tyrannical regime of landlords. The novel is an account of the *Pulaya* and *Paraya* bonded labourers called 'onapanikkaran' through a system called *'velakkadam',* meaning 'labour debt'. Pillai exposes the surge of agricultural laborers' movements in Kuttanad against class exploitation and capitalist injustice meted out to them.

Koren, the protagonist of the novel, is indeed a proud "*onapanikkaran",* as he is the in charge of a hundred-acre paddy field belonging to a big farmer, Pushpavelil Ausepp, because of his skill at growing crops, which turn out to be the best. But tables turn when his master throws him out on a fault, which shocks Koren. At that moment, he decides to devote his life to fighting for the injustices of the working class. He brings a revolution among the Parayas and Pulayas. The Pulaya and Paraya castes are considered Scheduled Castes. In the novel, the caste mechanism is present in subtle forms like the demand of a bride price by Chirutha's father in lieu of Chirutha, the ostracisation of Koren from his community, and the disallowing of a burial site to Koren's father. Caste works as an underpinning in the novel's plot, and it is their low caste as 'Dalits' which gives justification to oppression of their class. Caste provides them with a framework through which the ideologies of capitalists and wealthy landowners operate, thereby defining the relationship between workers and landlords.

Pillai describes the inhumanity and barbarity of the landlords through one of the incidents in the novel:

> the brutal beating which broke his leg… All his belongings were destroyed. His children were thrashed and driven away… Mootha Pennu, with her baby in her arms, jumped into neck-deep

> water, but still she could not escape being beaten up… Chennan continued to be thrashed even after he had fallen down crippled! (28)

Koren was disturbed to the core. His mind was puzzled on thinking about what happened with Chennan. The novelist brings forward reasonable questions in the form of Koren's moments of self-actualisation. Koren ponders, "Perhaps the spirits of those Parayas who had taken birth, lived and died for their Thambrans had all gone in vain. In a sense whatever it is we are doing has no meaning" (Pillai 29). Kunjappi is a foil to Koren. He is a person who has internalised this life. A serf is born to live for the landlord, and he dies too. Moreover, he feels it is fortunate that God chose him to lead such a life. He tells Koren, "The Thambran has thrashed a Paraya; that doesn't call for such an outburst… In the past Thambrans had on many occasions beaten their serfs to death and disposed of their bodies by sinking them in the river. They have every right to do so" (Pillai 29).

The religious conversion of the Pulayas is written at length in the novel. The parish priests used to lure the poor Pulayas by offering them money and clothes when visiting their houses and by brainwashing them through their preaching. Pillai has indicated that the communal clash between Hindus and Christians is influenced by the actions of the Thambrans. The whole politicisation is done in the disguise of seeking the welfare of the deprived Pulayas and Parayas. The conversion to any religion is a method of capturing the majority, thus paving the way towards power. All these tactics are used upon an illiterate and orthodox crowd who think that through this upward social mobility they will earn a living of respect. Likewise was thought by Kunjappi, "If we

joined the Christian faith, we and the Thambran would be of the same caste" (Pillai 46).

Pillai has highlighted the issue of religious conversion. He writes, "On the following Sunday Kunjappi and the members of his family were baptized. Kunjappi was christened Patrose and Maani became Mariya" (Pillai 46). On the other hand, reconversions to Hinduism from Christianity were performed. It is mentioned, "Yohannan became Ananthan." Ruthless exploitation of the farm servants by the landlords impels them into hunger and starvation despite acres of harvest being reaped out of their blood, sweat and tears. In this way, Pillai lays bare the detrimental situation in society.

Pillai describes several incidents which gradually converted Koren, an ideal *Adiyan,* into a rebel. Koren asked Ausepp, "Thambran, how much did those three piles from your serf's hundred-acre field amount to?" (Pillai 59). Unfortunately, in answer to this question, he got beaten. Another incident which gave Koren a reality check was the injustice done by Ausepp over the years. He observed that while settling the annual accounts of workers, Thambran used to easily decrease the settlement, as the workers knew nothing about the debit and credit. As a result, the workers had to reluctantly respond with a "Yes" when Ausepp asked, "Is your account alright?" (64). Koren was shocked to witness the fraud occurring in front of him, while the workers silently agreed to it. When Koren's accounts were settled, Thambran did the likewise to Koren's account too, and in rage he uttered, "That is false, Thambran!" (64). Pillai marked this incident as an indication of Koren's action in the future, which will turn the tables. Koren's impending thoughts were nonetheless the burning torch which will

soon radiate into the darkness of unwariness in the lives of the workers. The novelist has remarkably presented his state of mind through the narration by an omniscient narrator:

> During each of these moments, new thoughts, new passions, shook his very soul…Why should one trust this so-called Thambran? What was he going to do with this hoarded grain and money? ...How much did he labour to produce this grain? For the first time Koren had felt that all the fruits of his toil had been misappropriated by this devil who was crouching over his accounts! ...He, too, had to live. He, too, had rights. He had been toiling. That grain and money belonged to him also… (Pillai 65)

The atrocities of the Pulayas and Parayas are increasing day by day, as they were not given their wages in grain, for which their bellies burn. The standard practice was that on completion of the harvest, the workers were given a final sheaf of grain, but all that was left for them to feed upon themselves was paddy. Koren's father had visited him after so long in his last days, and he wants to feed his father at least one full meal. When all the workers, including Koren, collectively went and asked Ausepp for grain, they got nothing in return. The solidarity of the labourers is evident, as the novelist mentions, "All the Parayas and Pulayas of the village decided to assemble at Koren's hut one Sunday. "Well, we all must stand together if we want to survive… Everyone, right up to the oldest Pulayi, repeated this sentiment without having been tutored by anyone" (Pillai 81). They understood the strength of resistance, and it is necessary to fight for oneself and raise one's voice against exploitation.

When the struggle began, workers resisted in the form of strikes at many places and refused to disperse without their wages as per their demand. They shouted slogans overnight too. The inner voice and thoughts that occurred in Koren's heart and mind manifested in reality, and he eventually became the leader of this struggle. Koren was asked to convert to Christianity if he wants land for the burial of his father, and to his dismay, with no option left, he tied the body to a large granite boundary stone and lifted that heavy load from the boat in the middle of the river. Pillai has encapsulated the ill fate of the Pulaya workers in a sentence which says, "And that was the epilogue of the drama of a life of service, denied even six feet of sodden earth!" (Pillai 84). It depicts the dehumanisation of the Pulayas and Parayas at the hands of the upper castes.

The struggle reached its climax with the massacre of Padachal, in which hundreds of people were killed. Pillai writes about this violent repression of the labourers' protest: "Thence, from Padachal, came the deafening noise of continuous firing and the people shouting slogans. (Pillai 115). Pillai ends the novel at a very optimistic tone anticipating betterment and welfare of the Union. He writes, "Long Live Revolution!" "Long Live the Union!" Velutha clenched his tiny fist and raised it, shouting, "Land to the Tillers!" (Pillai 117).

The second selected novel on caste and religious conversion in Kerala is Paul Chirakkarode's *Pulayathara* (1962). It was translated from Malayalam into English by Catherine Thankamma. The novel is considered the first Dalit novel in Malayalam. In the introduction of the novel, the translator states, "The Malayalam word *thara* can

variously mean floor, platform, foundation and home…" The title of the novel also suggests the fight for possession of the land in the right hands of Pulayas who toil on it rather than upper-caste so-called landowners. The social division of nineteenth-century Kerala had the upper-caste Hindus or wealthy Syrian Christians on the upper ladder of the hierarchy, and the working class of Parayar and Purayar were placed below them. Furthermore, their status as Dalits pushed them to the periphery of society. They live away from the upper-caste Hindu and Christian landlords in a specified place, a kind of ghetto. The novel renders the hollowness of religious conversion in Kerala's caste-ridden society, which is focused on the marginalisation and exploitation of Dalit Christians.

Ambedkar states in *The Annihilation of Caste*, "Religion, social status and property are all sources of power and authority which one man has, to control the liberty of another" (25). The landlords exhibit similar behaviours in the text. Chirakarrode describes Thevan Pulayan in the first chapter: "Very soon, Thevan Pulayan made a name for himself as a labourer. *Pulayan* denotes his caste status. However, chilly it was, he did not hesitate to go out to work. That dark-skinned body brimmed with health. A large frame that seemed to say, "Let me work" (Chirakkarode 4). Thevan had so many dreams for his house: "Whatever the loss, he would be gaining a home that he could claim as his own. That was not a small thing, was it? Indeed, it was a great achievement!" (Chirakkarode 5). Thevan is the epitome of a man's submission towards his owner. When the bund collapsed due to heavy rain, he broke down very badly and uttered, "How will I go to my Thamra's house now? ...What will my Tham'ra say?" (Chirakkarode 17). He was dumbstruck

when Narayanan Nair accused him of ruining the crops. The novelist describes the soreness Thevan experienced on hearing those harsh words: "The service of many years was being wiped out in a minute. It was due to Thevan Pulayan's unstinted labour that that family had prospered. Without recalling any of that, Thampuran's words were like a slap across Thevan's face" (Chirakkarode 18).

This is the reason Narayan Nair gives Thevan's hut to somebody else immediately in his rage towards Thevan. The people of lower caste do not own anything. Chirakkarode emphasises Thevan and his son's deplorable state: "Acha, some others have come to stay in our *thara*, Kandankoran somehow managed to get that out. His voice broke. Thevan could not believe his ears. Another family in Anjilthara! ... It was his hands that had given shape to Anjilthara" (Chirakkarode 20).

The novel depicts the oppression faced by the Pulaya community in the Kuttanad region and the tyrannical control exerted by the upper caste through religious conversion. Pallithara Pathros, a new Christian who was once a Hindu Pulayan named Kiliyan, serves as a key character in the novel. He converted to Christianity when he was treated as an outcast in his clan because the benefit of joining the church was that they could build homes around it. Thevan Pulayan and Kandankoran's stay at Pathros' house became a buzz around Kuttanad. It depicts the marginalisation of the new Christians, as they were not allowed to live there due to the strict exercise of the Church's authority and interventions in their lives.

Chirakkarode critically engages the issue of discrimination within the Church faced by Dalit Christians against Syrian Christians. Several glimpses mentioned in the novel reflect that the Dalit identity remains constant for the Pulayas even after getting baptised with holy water. One of the incidents took place when another preacher was invited to the special sermon in place of Pathros because he was a Pulaya. The novelist writes, "Stephen was a good man. He belonged to the upper caste… Custodian Thomas and his friends need not hear a 'Pelayan preacher' speak, after all! The lord had saved them" (Chirakkarode 41). "At the back of the Church there were benches with backrests. The upper-caste Christians heard the true Gospel leaning back against these comfortably… However, right in front, woven mats were laid for the low-caste Christians. Their fate was to sit on the floor" (Chirakkarode 55). Inequality pervaded the burial grounds, too.

The concept of conversion is linked with the church's rejection of the Dalit "new Christians," leaving them to grapple with their newly attained identity. They have been lured to give up their existing community but are not accepted by the Syrian Christians. Chirakarode describes the inner turmoil of Pathros and the converted Thoma regarding their identity in chapter sixteen; Thoma was mocked by a tea shop owner, saying:

> Yes, *eda*, you are a *poocha Kristyani*, a fraud.' *Poocha kristyani*! Thoma was stunned…So what if the Pulayan receives Christian faith, if the holy of holies baptism water falls on his forehead, if a cross is drawn on his forehead, if he gets a new name? All that does not change his *pula*, his untouchable status. Indeed, what a cursed creature he was! (Chirakkarode 115)

The novelist explores the miserable state of Dalit Christians through the characters of Pathros and Thoma, highlighting how the Church favours the interests of Syrian Christians. Dalit articulation ruptures the dictatorship of upper castes and promotes understanding of class consciousness. It helps assert Dalit identity in order to achieve freedom from inequality, injustice, and socio-economic oppression caused by the feudalistic social arrangement. Thankamma states in the novel's introduction, "The novel powerfully illustrates the link between language and empowerment and as a means of hegemonic assertion…The novel ends with the Dalits' step towards self-articulation and affirmation of identity." The novel shows the whirlpool of thoughts inside the major characters. When Narayan Nair called Kandankoran a wastrel before Thevan, the thoughts that came to his mind were, "Thampuran's son was a drunkard and a womanizer–no, he could not say all that. If it was anyone else he could have said something" (Chirakkarode 7).

In chapter eleven of the novel, for the first time but not the last, Pathros dared to speak. Moreover, he asked Thomas, "Whose land? Not on *your* land!" (76) Chirakkarode brilliantly put the transition of the Pulayas from voiceless to voicing their opinions. Not only the major characters but also the minor ones in the novel exchanged their thoughts. Pillaichan says after the hearing of the priest, "That lot of preachers! They preach and get the poor Parayan and Pulayan to join the church. What for? To exploit and exclude them" (Chirakkarode 44). The novelist raised rational questions about the existence of casteist structures both inside and outside the Church. Ambedkar commented in *The Annihilation of*

Caste, "Caste is another name for control." He emphasises the ubiquitous nature of caste and how it has been affecting those who joined the Christian faith and those who did not. All the Pulayas decided to organize a meeting on the ground owned by the mission, and they were ready for rebellion and displayed zeal and vigour, as reflected by, "It had happened when he (Paulos) realized for the first time that he was marginalized. There sprouted within him the confidence to resist anything and anybody… The new generation will resist" (Chirakkarode 166).

Chirakkarode presented glimpses of Dalit anticipation, and it also symbolises a positive future for Pulayas as Kandankoran decides not to baptise his son as an act of subverting the hegemonic order. Moreover, he declared vehemently, "I will send my son to school, educate him. I will not let him become some landlord's slave" (Chirakkarode 197). He concludes the novel by pointing towards a new dawn of Dalit articulation, liberation, and possibilities.

In conclusion, Paul Chirakkarode and T.S. Pillai present distinct yet complementary visions of Paraya and Pulaya oppression in Kerala and the events that led to the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, exposing the discrimination of the Dalit Christians and its impact. Both novels address the themes of exploitation, Dalit articulation, and the quest for a better future. Both the protagonists, Koren and Thevan, stood for their rights in the course of the novel. There are various similarities between the two, as both are agricultural labourers who bring revolution through resistance and articulation. The caste consciousness stirs them from within against the religious conversion of the lower classes. The future

generations of both Thevan and Koren were determined to educate themselves and denied joining Christianity. The novels are relevant pieces of literature in the portrayal of the Kuttanad uprising and liberation movement. It depicts the cause of their inception. Together, the two texts offer a comprehensive view of the revolutions in Kerala.

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Death, Disorder, and Dark Humour: Funerals as Liminal, Carnivalesque Spaces in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

— Archana V

Abstract: This paper examines how contemporary Malayalam cinema reconfigures death and funerary rituals through dark humour, treating them as liminal and carnivalesque social spaces rather than as sacred, private moments of mourning. Focusing on *Jan.E.Man* (2021) and *Vyasanasametham Bandhumithradhikal* (2025), the study draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque and Victor Turner's theory of liminality to analyse how funeral spaces become sites of disorder, performance, and power negotiation. The films portray death as a social inconvenience marked by ritual fatigue, commercialisation, and performative grief, where hierarchies are inverted, authority is mocked, and emotions are strategically enacted. Through grotesque humour, excess, and parody, the solemnity traditionally associated with death collapses into laughter and chaos. The paper argues that these disruptions expose the artificiality of ritualised mourning while enabling moments of anti-structure that challenge gender norms, social hierarchies, and cultural assumptions surrounding mortality, ultimately allowing for social critique and renewal.

Keywords: Death, dark humour, Malayalam cinema, liminality, carnivalesque

Death in mainstream cinema had long been treated as a peripheral phenomenon: intensely private, solemn, and removed from the politics of everyday life. However, some recent Malayalam movies like Lijo Jose Pallissery's *Ee.Ma.Yau.* (2018) reimagine death and the funeral rites that ensue as overtly political, social, and performative spaces where authority, gender, and social capital are actively negotiated rather than as private sites of

mourning. Movies like Jayaraj's *Hasyam* (2020) initiated a trend of employing subtle dark humour to critique social attitudes toward mortality. This paper deals with two such movies, *Jan.E.Man* (2021) and *Vyasanasametham Bandhumithradhikal* (2025), that further this trend and attempt to undermine the sacrosanct space conventionally assigned to death through the use of dark humour. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque and Turner's concept of liminality, the paper argues that death and the funerals depicted in these movies operate as liminal and carnivalesque sites where the gravity of death collapses through grotesque performance, excess, and social satire. This paper also examines how these two movies employ dark comedy to foreground the ritualised, communal, gendered, manipulative, and strategic dimensions of grief, thereby stripping death of its cultural dominance and exposing the artificiality of ritualised mourning.

In *Jan.E.Man*, the gravity traditionally assigned to death and funeral rites coincides with the elaborate and exaggerated birthday celebrations of a young man, Joymon. Joymon, who is in an isolated snowy landscape in Canada devoid of meaningful social connections, comes home to celebrate his birthday in a desperate attempt to forge companionship. The house where his birthday is being celebrated suddenly becomes the site of a neighbour's death from a heart attack. Despite the death, the youngsters refuse to tone down their festivities. The simultaneous unfolding of death rituals and birthday celebrations collapses the boundary between mourning and festivity, upsetting socially sanctioned codes of solemnity. Here, death becomes an inconvenience, reduced to a logistical problem to be

managed rather than a moment demanding collective reverence.

In *Vyasanasametham Bandhumithradhikal*, the death of an elderly woman, Savithriamma, transforms the domestic space into a theatre of performative grief. Relatives compete in exaggerated displays of mourning while simultaneously engaging in gossip, speculation, and character assassination. The deceased woman quickly becomes secondary as attention shifts to authority, power negotiations, and ritual obligations dictated by elders. The funeral thus becomes a stage where social hierarchies are contested, revealing grief as a strategic and communal performance rather than a private emotional experience.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, developed in *Rabelais and His World* (1968), is based on the idea that carnival is not merely a festival but an inversion of the social order. Bakhtin says, "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time, life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (7). During carnival time, official culture enforced by the church, the state, and the law loses its power. The movies taken for the study exhibit this carnivalesque spirit where authority is mocked, hierarchies are inverted, and laughter and excess replace seriousness and restraint. Thus, the movies challenge dominant ideologies and fixed meanings through humour, parody, and disorder. In the movies, death is stripped of its sacred and tragic aura and portrayed as an event of social inconvenience, revealing contemporary urban society's apathy for the

dead and ritual fatigue caused by boredom. Quite like a carnival that dissolves boundaries between sacred and profane, life and death, order and chaos, and mourning and laughter, the two movies create humour not out of death but out of society's response to death and the dead.

In *Jan.E.Man*, death is treated as a nuisance that disrupts the routines of everyday life. It is desacralised as it turns into a logistics problem rather than an emotional one. The logistics of handling the funeral become an additional burden for the grieving family. The event manager, Akshay Kumar, initially assigned to organise the birthday celebration next door, quickly transforms himself into a mourner-cum-logistics handler for the family of the deceased, revealing the manipulative politics and opportunism that surround death rituals. Akshay Kumar takes on a dual role, arranging things both for the birthday and the funeral. He alters the way he had tucked in his shirt, adjusting it to suit his look for the bereaved household (0:36:08). He switches his cheerful expression with a solemn mourning face and enters the household of the dead without invitation or introduction. He immediately assumes the position of an insider, performing the role of a family member who knows exactly what is required at each moment for the smooth conduct of the funeral, evoking laughter in the viewer as he navigates into the deeply private ceremony, providing necessary solutions to logistic and ritualistic problems. He removes the Hindu element from the traditional lamp, the Nilavilakku, and swaps it with a Christian cross to align it with a Christian domestic space (0:51:59). When he realises that there is no one available in the family to chant the Opees [the prayers and chants performed for the dead in Kerala Syrian Christian

traditions], the event manager deftly plays a recorded Opees chanting and places it near the dead body (1:30:36), thus offering a solution that parodies and desacralises the original chanting ritual that is meant to be recited at the liminal phase of death when the soul is in the in-between state.

Bakhtin says, "As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (10). In *Jan.E.Man,* death, conventionally treated as a sacred and solemn event demanding silence, reverence, and suspension of everyday life, is stripped of its authority. It fails to assert its assumed superiority by halting or overpowering the festive atmosphere, as social norms would ordinarily dictate. Instead, the expected hush surrounding death is displaced by noise, humour, and disorder. Death is forced to negotiate space with celebration, inverting cultural expectations and producing laughter from ritual disruption.

Death is also treated as a liminal space in the movies, not a final closure, but an in-between space where the rite of passage of the soul to the other world has been halted for a while. Victor Turner, in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (1969), describes liminality thus:

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and

> indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death… (95)

Turner also states that liminality brings in an 'anti-structure' where formal hierarchy, rank and authority are temporarily weakened and ordinary time and routine are interrupted. He also warns that if liminality is unnecessarily prolonged, disorder increases, authority weakens and chaos ensues. This phenomenon is vividly dramatised in *Vyasanasametham Bandhumithradhikal,* where ritual control weakens through conflicting ideas presented by different authorities, leading to delay in the funeral and disruption in performances. Thus, liminality slips into Bakhtinian carnivalesque moments—jokes, drinking, arguments, gossip and boredom that disrupt sacred rituals and evoke laughter. Bakhtin describes carnival laughter thus:

> It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope: it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (11-12)

The two movies evoke a strong sense of carnivalesque laughter, in which humour emerges from the inversion of social order. Joymon, deeply disillusioned by his friends, who are interested only in eating, drinking, and revelry and offer no genuine companionship, visits the dead

neighbour's household with his birthday cake and finds solace there. He stays with the drunk mourners there, and when a friend arrives to persuade him to return to the birthday celebration, he refuses, remarking, "njan varunnillennu paranjille… avide muzhuvan dark aan… this is the most happening place right now" ("Didn't I tell you I am not coming? It is tragic there", 1:56:35, my trans.). The dead household offers far more entertainment than the birthday party does, underscoring a striking inversion of social order.

Another such scene in the movie *Jan.E.Man* depicts the younger brother of the deceased, Plathottathil Kochukunju, visiting the neighbour's house to ask the youngsters to lower the noise at the birthday celebrations after Joymon opens fireworks at midnight (1:44:43). He speaks with deep sentiment about his dead brother, whom he describes as a father figure who adopts a mournful and restrained demeanour. However, this seriousness collapses the moment he notices a famous television serial actor among the guests. His behaviour shifts instantly to that of an excited fan; he drinks with the actor, expresses unrestrained joy, and even invites him to accompany him to view the corpse (1:48:15). Upon reaching the corpse, their demeanour snaps back to solemnity (1:49.45). This rapid and repeated switching between grief and celebration produces comic effect, exposing the instability of ritual emotions and evoking carnivalesque laughter in the audience.

Vyasanasametham Bandhumithradhikal opens with the grandmother, Savithriamma, asking her granddaughter, Anjali, to post a WhatsApp status on the grandmother's phone, featuring a screenshot of her friend's obituary

from the newspaper, accompanied by two love smileys. When Anjali asks her why she wants to put the status, Savithriamma explains that it is no different from the way Anjali shares photos with her friends as statuses (0:2:20-0:2:48). The opening itself feels carnivalesque, where death is taken out of its solemn status and the grief of mourning is replaced by the casual practice of everyday status-sharing.

Savithriamma collapses from a heart attack, is rushed to the hospital, and is declared dead. Even before the family members at home are informed of her death, event managers arrive with lights and ceremonial arrangements (0:24:32), competing with each other to get the job, marking the beginning of the commercial rivalry surrounding the ritual. While relatives arrive to mourn Savithriamma's death, a nearby house hosts a band rehearsal for an upcoming event. Even after repeated requests from Savithriamma's family, the youngsters continue playing, unwilling to pause for a death in the neighbourhood, echoing the sentiments of the youngsters in *Jan.E.Man*. The ambulance arrives with the corpse, accompanied not by silence but by the fast music played by the band, another carnivalesque inversion of order, producing dark humour. The ward member appears, eager to draw attention to himself in the hope of securing votes for the next election. The ensuing conflict between the Karayogam president and the ward member becomes the focal point, displacing the dead woman herself. Through dark humour, especially the clashing opinions of political and caste leaders over the location of the funeral pyre, the timing of the ceremony, and who should perform the final rites, the movie exposes how death is transformed into a

competitive spectacle rather than a moment of mourning.

The confusion surrounding post-death rituals, with each elder and caste and political leader insisting on different customs, further adds to the disorder. The delay of the funeral creates a carnivalesque space in which women begin gossiping, and men start drinking. Suhail, who has been stalking Anjali, inappropriately chooses this charged moment to impress Anjali and her family, revealing how death is reduced to an occasion where vulnerability is exploited and manipulated.

Both movies also showcase how death rituals operate as deeply gendered spaces, where grief is not merely expressed but assigned, regulated, and evaluated according to gender norms. While women are expected to cry loudly, faint, and refuse food, men take up ritual authority and gather together to drink. Men, largely relieved of the burden of performing grief, quickly grow bored; even those closest to the deceased can grieve only in the company of alcohol. Women's grief is policed by society, and so, many times, it becomes exaggerated to the point of parody, turning theatrical and even comical. This is unmasked in *Vyasanasametham Bandhumithradhikal*, when a relative enters the house wailing loudly, only to abruptly stop and scold the family for not crying enough: "oru marippu veedu kedakkana kedaya ithu? … ninakkonnum vilikkanonnum vayyedi." ("Is this a house where death has occurred? Can't you even wail aloud?", 1:06:09, my trans.). Suhail's friend Shakthi, who accompanies him to Anjali's house, refuses to enter the dead household, calling attention to this excess. He remarks, "Ee marippuveettile ee aalkkaar karayana kaanumbo enikku sahikkaanpattilla. Njan

chirichu pokum" ("I can't handle it when people in the dead household cry; I feel like laughing", 0:34:57, my trans.). Through such moments, the movie demonstrates how the carnivalesque excess of performed grief transforms mourning into laughter and comedy.

Anjali's fiancé, Akhil, when he learns about the death from Anjali's father, rather than consoling her, questions her over why she herself didn't inform him or his parents regarding the death. While she is crying over the death of her grandmother, Akhil insists that she herself should call his parents and tell them about the death, exposing the gendered expectation that women must manage. Here death is reduced to a matter of notification and propriety rather than mourning. The movie also depicts how Anjali's prospective in-laws perceive Savithriamma's death as a bad omen, particularly given that the marriage has already been finalised. Her prospective mother-in-law says, "Sathyam paranjal avar ee samayath marichathu thane sheriyaayilla" (honestly it was inconsiderate of her to die at this time" (0:31:43), asserting that death should have aligned with familial schedules, thus stripping death of its authority. It also shows the superstition and moral insensitivity of a society that is worried over ritual disruption and inconvenience rather than human loss. The future in-laws even consult an astrologer to determine an auspicious time to leave for Anjali's house and start late, which in turn causes inordinate delay in the funeral proceedings, which subsequently descend to chaos.

Arpad Szakolczai, in his essay "Liminality and Experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events", talks of how liminal experience "means that once previous certainties are removed and one enters a

delicate, uncertain, malleable state; something might happen to one that alters the very core of one's being" (148). In the terminology used emphatically by van Gennep and Turner, "death" is followed by a "birth" (148). The suspension of normative structures in the liminal phase opens up a flexible social space from which new practices arise. Both the movies also echo this life-altering shift in perspective after the liminal experience. In *Jan.E.Man*, the feuding neighbours come to recognise the meaning of genuine affection and eventually reconcile with one another, while in *Vyasanasametham Bandhumithradhikal*, the family shows the door to the Karayogam president Venu, who repeatedly and unnecessarily intimidates the family by warning that if they disagree with his version of the rituals, he will ensure that Anjali's marriage is called off. With her future in-laws still not reaching her house for the funeral and her fiancé behaving insensitively, Anjali herself calls off her marriage. With no male heirs present, the women of the family carry out Savithriamma's final rites, effectively challenging the authority traditionally held by caste leaders.

Through their irreverent treatment of death and funerary rituals, *Jan.E.Man* and *Vyasanasametham Bandhumithradhikal* reposition mourning as a social performance rather than as a sacrosanct emotional response. By using dark humour and carnivalesque excess, the movies expose how death rituals often function as sites of negotiation, where social hierarchies, gender roles, and power politics are reinforced. Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque and Turner's concept of liminality, this paper has exposed how the disruption and delay of ritual order generate moments of anti-structure in which the solemnity of death collapses

into laughter, parody, and disorder, which may ultimately create shifts in perspective and renew social order. Ultimately, these two movies foreground laughter, excess, and parody as critical tools for rethinking how contemporary society engages with mortality, mourning, and ritual meaning.

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Portrayal of Kerala as an Ideological State in Indian Cinema: Hegemonic Representation, Stereotype, and Cultural Misrecognition

— Alisha Jojo

Abstract: Stereotypical representation of Malayalis in Indian cinema has become a recurring feature that seems to form an unrealistic image of Kerala to the wider national and international audience. Cinema and music, with their power to function as ideological tools, lead to derogatory and inaccurate representations of Kerala and Malayalam, resulting in unwanted misconceptions and animosity among the people. The growing number of stereotypical and poorly researched accounts of Kerala's culture and society raises the question of whether this is an illustration of how state apparatuses legitimise such representations. This study attempts to show, while these depictions are often dismissed as harmless entertainment, they pose an underlying danger, reflecting its hegemonical undertones. By applying Marxist frameworks and Fredric Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping, this study analyses how these cinematic narratives operate in forming a dominant false consciousness. It then demonstrates how repetition transforms falsehood into truth as identified by Hitler as the "big lie". Through the study of selected Indian movies and songs, this paper argues that cinema is an ideological tool operating especially in reference to Kerala and its culture and society.

Keywords: Malayali representation, Indian cinema, cultural stereotypes, ideology and film, false consciousness

Perceptions of culture, identity, and social reality are shaped through many media; one such powerful medium is cinema. Indian films and the associated songs have a rich history in constructing and disseminating information, encompassing both political and cultural aspects. One such state at the crux of repeated reductive

representation in Indian popular media is Kerala. Kerala is renowned for its rich historical and cultural complexity. Bollywood, Tamil, and Telugu industries frequently rely on exaggerated tropes to represent Kerala and its people. Starting from coconut trees, backwaters, jasmine flowers, mohiniyattam, and kalaripayattu to stereotypical occupations such as nurses, cooks, or Gulf migrants. All these are signs to signal the "Malayali identity". Even though these symbols are culturally real, their overuse and distortions tend to reduce a multifaceted society into a series of easily recognisable clichés.

This study focuses on how non-Malayalam film industries perpetuate stereotypes and examines the ideological mechanisms working behind these representations. Sujith Kumar Parayil's framework sheds light on how Malayalam cinema encodes caste and subaltern identities through indirect cultural markers such as names, habits, occupations, bodily gestures, and spatial cues. This study juxtaposes this framework alongside the Marxist lens to prove how Bollywood and other pan-Indian industries employ analogous strategies, translating ethnic and regional differences into humorous, exoticised, or threatening portrayals that reinforce hierarchical cultural imaginaries. This paper contends that cinema serves as an ideological apparatus that actively reconstructs and commodifies cultural identities for mass consumption. Repetition of exaggerated tropes in visual and narrative forms creates a dominant false consciousness. This can lead to the incorrect shaping of national and international perceptions of Kerala and the erasing of the state's internal diversity. Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatuses and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony

elucidate how cinema, even when presented as mere entertainment, compels audiences to accept stereotypical identities as 'natural'.

Recently, people have drawn their attention to how Bollywood reduces Kerala to a set of repetitive cliches. Akshaya observes how cinema and popular culture routinely appropriate the region by isolating a few recognisable images, such as coconut trees, elephants, Kathakali, houseboats, and backwaters, while erasing the depth of Kerala's cultural reality. Although these symbols are authentic to an extent, their constant overuse transforms them into reductive markers that flatten a diverse and complex society into consumable stereotypes. For audiences outside Kerala, such tropes often become the only available points of cultural reference, thereby misrepresenting and diminishing Kerala's lived identity (Akshaya).

Akshaya further notes that cultural inappropriation is most visible when representation devolves into caricature. Exaggerated accents, mockery in the form of forced humour, and absurd stereotypes demonstrate how misrepresentation shifts from mere simplification to ridicule. For instance, the trope of Malayalis worshipping Mohanlal is an example substantiating this. Mainstream Hindi films repeatedly use such portrayals as devices to evoke cheap laughter. A striking example appears in the movie *Param Sundari*, where the line 'Thekkpetta Sundari Damodaran Pillai' deploys a caricatured Kerala accent as a comic afterthought with no cultural context. Similarly, *The Kerala Story* attempts to authenticate its protagonist with the line 'Shalini Unnikrishnan from Thiruvananthapuram,' yet the delivery is so clumsy that it sounds alien even to Malayalis themselves. Even

dialogues like the much-recycled “nattil evideya?” (Where in Kerala are you from?) have become overused shorthand for a so-called “typical Malayali thing”. It solidifies Kerala’s representation as a stereotype rather than a nuanced cultural reality (Akshaya).

Sujith Kumar Parayil offers a crucial framework for understanding how cinema encodes difference through his analysis of typecasting in Malayalam films. He argues that popular Indian cinema often employs two narrative strategies to redeploy static images of marginalised groups: the direct representation of physiognomy and the indirect use of cultural signifiers. The first mode relies on visible physical traits such as skin tone, attire, or body language to mark characters as subaltern. In the Malayali context, these are often embodied in darker skin, oiled hair, and the checked *mundu* or *lungi*, alongside exaggerated gestures that frame the character as awkward or comical. Such physiognomic cues immediately set Malayali characters apart as “different” within the cinematic frame (Parayil 65).

The second strategy, which Parayil identifies as the more pervasive, works through subtler cultural markers such as language, names, occupations, and habits. Malayalis are routinely represented with heavily accented Hindi, Tamil, or English, or given overtly “Kerala-sounding” names like Gopalan, Unnikrishnan, or Pillai. Occupations such as nurses, cooks, barbers, or Gulf migrants are often repeated, and habits like consuming fish curry or toddy and an attachment to coconut oil serve as recurring shorthand for identity. Through these indirect cues, cinematic narratives establish difference without explicitly invoking caste or ethnicity, instead embedding

subalternity or regional marginality into the cultural memory of spectatorship (Parayil 67–68).

Parayil extends this argument by noting that Malayalam cinema engages in a "politics of inclusion" rather than exclusion. Subaltern and marginalised identities are not erased from cinematic narratives but are incorporated in subordinate roles that reaffirm their difference. This politics of inclusion preserves and reproduces collective historical consciousness by linking stereotypes to social memory, thereby teaching audiences how to recognise and interpret identity through recurring signs. While Parayil situates this mechanism within Malayalam cinema's handling of caste, his framework can be extended to examine how Bollywood and other Indian film industries treat Malayalis. Much like caste identities in Malayalam cinema, Malayalis in national industries are "included" but only in marked roles: the accented comic, the servile worker, or the exoticised outsider. In this way, cultural stereotypes about Malayalis become integrated into the collective imagination of Indian cinema, where repetition naturalises caricatures into truth (Parayil 70–72).

Ananth Krishnan extends this discussion by tracing how Bollywood and related industries have "mallu-fied" Malayali identity through a reliance on exaggerated cultural markers. Drawing on examples from *The Kerala Story* and *Param Sundari*, he demonstrates how ethnic identity is staged through an inventory of visible signifiers, which includes dress codes such as half-sarees and jasmine flowers, props like coconut trees and backwaters, and cultural performances including Mohiniyattam and Kalaripayattu. In *The Kerala Story*, the protagonist Shalini Unnikrishnan is made recognisably Malayali not through narrative depth but through

superficial cues: jasmine flowers in her hair and a half-saree worn even in incongruous settings such as a pub, and mispronounced Malayalam words sprinkled into otherwise fluent Hindi. Similarly, in *Param Sundari*, Sundari Damodaran Pillai is presented through comical mispronunciations of her name, repeated references to Mohanlal, coconut trees, and the casual use of words such as *"thenga" ("coconut")* or *"manunni" ("idiot")* in dialogue. Even Malayali goons are stereotypically endowed with expertise in Kalaripayattu. This further cements the image of Kerala as an exotic and caricatured cultural zone (Krishnan).

Krishnan's observations directly connect with Sujith Kumar Parayil's framework of indirect representation. Just as Malayalam cinema encodes caste identities through names, habits, occupations, and spaces, Bollywood and Tamil cinema redeploy ethnic stereotyping through a parallel set of cultural markers. The effect is not exclusion but inclusion in subordinate, flattened roles: the comic outsider, the servile worker, the exoticised dancer, or the newly emerging stereotype of the "dangerous Malayali woman in a red sari." This politics of inclusion ensures that Malayalis remain visible in Indian popular cinema but only as carriers of reductive cultural memory. Repetition of such imagery across films from *The Kerala Story* to *Param Sundari* ensures that these caricatures acquire the weight of authenticity, shaping national spectatorship to perceive Malayalis as defined by coconut oil, jasmine flowers, mispronounced words, and comic excess (Krishnan).

Reading the representation of Malayalis in non-Malayalam cinema through a Marxist framework reveals cinema's role as an ideological state apparatus. Rather

than passively reflecting cultural identities, cinema actively restructures and commodifies them for mass consumption. In this process, identity is reduced to a set of marketable signs that reproduce dominant cultural hierarchies while appearing to provide "authentic" representation. Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping sharpens this analysis. For Jameson, cultural texts help individuals orient themselves within the complexities of late capitalism by providing symbolic "maps" of social reality. However, these maps are not neutral; they privilege particular perspectives while distorting others. Within Malayalam cinema, as Sujith Kumar Parayil argues, caste identities are not erased but "strategically included" through indirect markers such as names, occupations, bodily habits, and spatial associations, which simultaneously make subaltern identities legible and subordinate (Parayil 68). A similar mechanism operates in Bollywood and other Indian industries, where Malayali identity is "mapped" through a selective bundle of exaggerated signifiers: coconut trees, jasmine flowers, mispronounced Malayalam, references to Mohanlal, or martial-arts-trained "goons" (Krishnan). These reductive symbols function as a shorthand for Malayali identity, flattening its complexity for national consumption.

From a Marxist perspective, this mechanism illustrates how ideology works to naturalise stereotypes. Through repetition, cinematic caricatures become accepted as cultural truth, a process that resonates with what Hitler famously termed the "big lie". It is the idea that repeated distortions acquire the force of reality. The cinematic Malayali thus becomes intelligible to a pan-Indian audience only through tropes that erase difference while preserving hierarchical structures of power. In

Malayalam cinema, caste-coded subalterns are "included" but subordinated; in Bollywood, Malayalis are "included" but caricatured. In both cases, cinema generates what Marxist theory identifies as a false consciousness: a dominant worldview that conceals exploitation and complexity beneath the veneer of familiar signs. By combining Parayil's insights with Jameson's theory of cognitive mapping, the misrepresentation of Malayalis can be understood not as incidental but as structurally embedded in the ideological work of cinema. The politics of inclusion ensures that marginalised or minority identities are visible, but only in ways that commodify and constrain them, preserving the dominance of established cultural hierarchies.

The persistence of stereotypical depictions of Malayalis in Indian cinema has profound implications for how Kerala, its culture, and its people are understood at both national and international levels. What emerges from the analysis is that cinematic shorthand, such as coconut trees, jasmine flowers, mispronounced Malayalam, comic caricatures, or exoticised women, functions as more than just popular entertainment. It becomes an ideological mechanism that naturalises and circulates a particular version of Malayali identity. At the national level, these cinematic practices flatten Kerala's complexity into consumable images. Viewers across India are encouraged to recognise Malayalis only through such tropes, thereby erasing the region's linguistic diversity, socio-political history, and cultural dynamism. This resonates with Fredric Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping, where cultural texts provide audiences with "maps" of reality that often distort rather than clarify social relations (Jameson 54). By repeating clichés, Bollywood and other industries condition audiences into

equating Malayali identity with narrow signifiers, producing what Marxist theorists would call a false consciousness. On the international stage, these depictions travel globally through Bollywood's reach, establishing themselves as the dominant frame through which Kerala is imagined. For audiences outside India who have had no lived contact with Kerala, these images often stand in for cultural truth. Thus, Kerala is consumed abroad primarily as a land of coconuts, Kathakali, and comic "Mallu" accents, overshadowing the state's modernity, cosmopolitanism, and socio-political innovations.

When read through a Marxist framework, these representational practices reveal their ideological function. The repetition of stereotypes produces a cinematic "truth" that displaces lived reality. Here, Hitler's formulation of the "big lie" becomes strikingly relevant: a distortion, when repeated often enough, is eventually accepted as fact. Cinema, in this sense, operates not only as entertainment but also as propaganda in miniature, embedding cultural falsehoods into collective memory. The Malayali on screen, whether caste-coded as a subaltern within Malayalam cinema or caricatured in Bollywood, is thus caught in a hegemonic process of inclusion that erases complexity while naturalising hierarchy. These representational practices can also be understood through Louis Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Cinema, as one of the most powerful cultural industries, operates not only as entertainment but also as a mechanism that legitimises and reproduces dominant ideologies. By consistently portraying Malayalis through a narrow set of signifiers. Cinema functions as an apparatus that

interpellates both Malayali and non-Malayali audiences into fixed subject positions.

An important dimension of these representations is the way they are dismissed as "mere entertainment" while, in fact, carrying deep hegemonic undertones. Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony is particularly relevant here: hegemony operates not through overt coercion but through the subtle normalisation of dominant ideologies in everyday life. Cinema and popular music serve as key vehicles for this process. When a film like *Param Sundari* casually inserts phrases such as "bloody *thenga*" or depicts Malayalis through mispronounced Malayalam, it may be framed as harmless humour or creative exaggeration. Similarly, musical narratives that introduce tropes of the "dangerous Malayali woman in a red sari" may be defended as playful stylisation. Yet such "harmless" entertainment conceals the fact that these cultural texts reproduce and reinforce hierarchies of identity. The very dismissal of these portrayals as comic relief or light-hearted fun is itself a hegemonic strategy: it prevents critique by trivialising the act of stereotyping. Moreover, by embedding stereotypes within the rhythms of music, the spectacle of dance, or the pleasures of cinema, these narratives reach a mass audience in ways that rational argument or explicit propaganda cannot. They become part of what Gramsci would call the "common sense" of a society, which is understood as a naturalised way of seeing the world. Once this "common sense" takes hold, Malayali identity is continuously recognised through clichés rather than lived realities, ensuring the dominance of homogenising cultural narratives at both the national and global levels.

Ultimately, these portrayals demonstrate how cultural production participates in ideology: by reducing a diverse region to predictable markers, cinema and music cultivate a false consciousness that preserves hierarchical distinctions, flattens cultural complexity, and reinforces the dominance of the producers' interpretive framework over the authentic identities of Malayalis. By privileging certain traits and exaggerating them for comedic or dramatic effect, cinema naturalises hierarchical and homogenised representations of Malayali identity. These portrayals are not neutral; they discipline how viewers perceive and engage with Kerala, shaping collective assumptions about its people, culture, and social norms. As Gramsci would argue, this occurs under the guise of entertainment, making hegemonic ideas appear "common sense" and preventing audiences from critically questioning the reductionist images they consume (Gramsci 57).

This study demonstrates that the representation of Kerala and Malayalis in Indian cinema and popular songs is far from neutral or innocuous. Through the selective repetition of visual, linguistic, and performative markers such as coconut trees, backwaters, jasmine flowers, mispronounced Malayalam, stereotypical occupations, and exoticised femininity, films create a flattened and reductive image of Kerala. Drawing on Sujith Kumar Parayil's framework, it is evident that both Malayalam and pan-Indian cinema employ strategies of direct and indirect representation, strategically including subaltern or regional identities while simultaneously subordinating them. Bollywood and other industries extend this pattern, coding Malayali identity through a bundle of exaggerated tropes that naturalise hierarchy and reinforce stereotypes. Applying a Marxist lens alongside

Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses, and Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, the study indicates that cinema functions as an ideological tool. It shapes audience perceptions, cultivates a dominant false consciousness, and produces a collective mental map in which Malayalis are recognised primarily through caricatured markers rather than authentic, lived realities. Repetition across visual, narrative, and musical texts transforms distortion into perceived truth, normalising stereotypes and rendering critique difficult, particularly when these portrayals are framed as entertainment. Ultimately, cinema and music operate as powerful cultural technologies that construct, circulate, and reinforce hierarchical narratives. While providing entertainment and mass appeal, they simultaneously discipline how audiences imagine Kerala and its people, erasing complexity while preserving dominant cultural hierarchies. This study underscores the importance of critically interrogating popular media, revealing how seemingly playful or humorous representations participate in shaping collective consciousness and sustaining ideologically laden perceptions of regional and ethnic identity.

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The Curious Case of the Missing Woman: A Dalit Feminist Inquiry into the Absence of Dalit Women in Malayalam Cinema

— **Neha Agarwala** and **Nikhitha Rachel**

Abstract: Brahmanical patriarchy, an Indian-specific form of patriarchy, upholds caste hierarchy through the control of women's sexuality and the practice of endogamy. While Malayalam cinema has, in recent years, experimented with narratives that revolve around women-centric and caste-centric narratives, it is still blind to the exceptional experiences of Dalit women due to caste-gender intersectionality. While Brahminical patriarchy continues to be an invisible yet determining force in Kerala society, Dalit women remain conspicuously absent as protagonists or in substantive roles in Malayalam cinema. When represented at all they are often subjected to reductive stereotypes or relegated to the margins of dominant narratives, stripped of voice and agency. This absence is not merely a cinematic oversight but a reflection of the hypermasculine, deeply rooted in caste pride, cultural landscape of Kerala. By interrogating this silence, the study critically analyses Dalit women's stereotypical representation and absence from Malayalam cinema influenced by the ideology of Brahminical patriarchy, using it as a framework to critique the deep-rooted prejudices and caste-blindness of the Kerala society in general. This study aims to foreground that the lack of Dalit female subjectivity on screen reflects larger societal discomfort with acknowledging caste-gender intersections. In tracing this "missing woman," the research highlights how cinema becomes both a symptom and a perpetuator of caste and gender oppression.

Keywords: Dalit women, Malayalam cinema, Brahmanical patriarchy, caste and gender, cultural erasure, Kerala Society

Is P. K. Rosy a symptom of the caste hegemony in casting or just a casualty of regressive times? This is the question that haunts this research at its onset. Kerala is often

associated with the moniker “progressive”, given its high literacy index, lower gender parity in employment between men and women, and its championing of human rights. The long history of active left movements in the state, which demanded the abolition of the feudal system, a ban on caste discrimination, and access to literacy for the Dalit communities in the 19th and early twentieth centuries, appears to have radicalised Kerala society. The historic Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 is touted as a win for liberal politics in the state and further proof of the modernisation of Kerala’s society, which had been rescued from its dark ages of caste-based discrimination and patriarchal degeneracy. But where does P. K. Rosy fit in this narrative?

From the legend of Nangeli to P. K. Rosy, the relationship between caste and gender appears to have made little progress. Nangeli is hailed as a Dalit hero who bravely fought against the inhuman tax imposed by the dominant castes on the breasts of Ezhava women in Travancore in the early 19th century and who, with her undeterred resolve and courage, managed to secure for the Ezhava women dignity and a right to their own bodies, ending a caste-based discriminatory practice rooted in Brahminical patriarchy. P. K. Rosy, another Dalit woman, was hounded, attacked, and driven from the film industry and the state into hiding by the powerful Nairs, from where she never resurfaced. The crime P. K. Rosy dared to commit was to play a Savarna woman on-screen. In 1938, the Nair feudal lords physically tore the screen; “the mirror that mirrored the wrong image was broken and the Dalit body of Rosy was banished from the Malayalam film history itself” (Rowena), which could not tolerate seeing the Dalit female body with agency, who was only fit to be exploited physically and sexually by

them. While Nangeli's mythical death challenged the caste prejudice of the then Kerala society, P.K. Rosy's metaphoric death from the cinematic space of the Malayalam film industry signalled the death of the representation of Dalit women on the screen.

This research is aimed at critically analysing the evolution of the Malayalam film industry in its representation or misrepresentation of Dalit women in stories rooted in social justice and in popular cinema across the decades. Through this research, we intend to foreground Brahmanical patriarchy as the foundational stone of the Malayalam film industry, whereby the absence of a Dalit female subject from the screen is not a consequence of the material deficiencies they have owing to their oppressive existence, but rather a carefully crafted Savarna hegemony that continues to perpetuate casteist violence upon Dalit women in real life. This study aims to foreground that the lack of Dalit female subjectivity on screen reflects larger societal discomfort with acknowledging caste-gender intersections. Cinema plays a dual role in any society—a mirror of the changes that a society undergoes through the ages and a facilitator in shaping those changes. It holds the power to shape the ideology and views of the movie-going public in influential ways and is, in turn, influenced by the beliefs of the creators. Regional cinema, acting as an ideological state apparatus, has offered the Kerala society "a mirror in which to find a visual form for the material and cultural shifts dispersed and transformed earlier social life in the process of transition into modernity" (Pillai 102). At another instance, Pillai terms Kerala as a "peculiar native brand" of "a 'liberal patriarchal pseudo-feminism'" (ch. 2) that operates under a carefully constructed image of a bastion of female empowerment publicly, while in the

private sphere it glamorises the patriarchal gender roles of an idealised femininity. Cinema, then, becomes a medium through which women are typecast into specific stereotypical roles. It casts women characters in tune with the prevalent socio-cultural and patriarchal gendered constructions and, through repetition, adds to the hegemonic discourse. Consequently, in Malayalam cinema, women are represented as "object[s], as a set of functions and roles, as a body, as the passive object of desire of the other" through which it shapes the "sex-role expectations of society" (Pillai, ch. 2).

Kerala society was matrilineal, based on caste stratifications, where the foundation of the family was still deeply patriarchal. However, women enjoyed relative sexual freedom, which underwent a drastic shift during colonial times and the parallelly running nationalist movement, which aimed at sanitising the image of Kerala society. By controlling women's sexuality and forcing patriarchal reconfiguration based on Victorian morals and codes, this new Kerala society was founded, where the upper-caste woman became the epitome of virtue and sacrifice. Cinema began to adjust to this shift, depicting women on screen as emblems of the strength and dignity of masculinity. The art cinema tried to converse with the crisis in masculinity; however, mainstream Malayalam cinema vilified the "progressive" woman, and the reformation of Kerala society into a modernist state was carried out on women's bodies. Despite high literacy rates among women, Kerala witnessed a steep rise in domestic violence and dowry-related crime, indicating that in the socio-political sphere, a hegemonic masculinity was being played out. According to Meena T. Pillai, "Though Kerala society has undergone rapid advancement in terms of

socioeconomic indices, gender inequality has been restructured and reproduced in contemporary Malayalam cinema in tune with the new socioeconomic realities" (113). She also notes, while tracing the shift from a matrilineal society to a deeply entrenched masculinity, that caste norms of untouchability were re-coded on the gendered body. A mutual untouchability between the sexes existed in the spatial arrangement, only broken by conjugality, and violation of this distance meant different things for the man and the woman. "A male violation of this 'distance' could be a form of punishing or a reverse notion of polluting the female. Female disruptions of this distance would be tantamount to an 'invitation' to pollute her, marking her sexual availability" (107).

However, this reading remains incomplete as long as one does not interrogate the caste and gender politics active in the state. According to Rowena, the Malayalam film industry has been influential in solidifying the hegemony of the Nair men at the centre of Kerala modernity. In this cinematic sphere, the Nair man could imagine himself as both modern and Malayalee against the loosening of the religious and caste sanctions and regulations. Cinema offered the Nair man the tools to exercise his authority and legitimise his rise to power. This directly resulted in attaching positive values to the personas of the Nair men and women, where "to be secular, to be good, to be a citizen, to be creative, to be intelligent, to be meritorious, to be modern and to even be a human being is to be a Nair man or woman" (9). In contrast, Dalit men and women, particularly women, were either used as a foil to highlight the virtues of Nair women or were made to mimic them. This further reinforces the idea that the

ideal of womanhood is defined by upper-caste standards.

While the universal "woman" is the "other" on-screen, devoid of any subjectivity in comparison with the White male, the Black woman has no subjectivity in comparison with both the Whites and the Black male. bell hooks in "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" traces the evolution of an exclusive Black female spectatorship that is formed from the critical standpoint of being both Black and a woman. Marginalised for their race as much as for their gender, representation of Black women in early Hollywood films was only "to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze" (310). Black women were present on screen as a foil to the clear, white skin of the white female, on whom the male gaze of the white man, as well as the Black man, was directed. Similarly, a correlation can be observed between Indian feminist film theory and Dalit women's spectatorship. While she finds very limited representation or no representation at all on-screen, most of the time when she is present, she is used to enhance the beauty and virtues of the Savarna woman or mimic her exalted virtues. She is never her own being.

In *Neelakuyil* (1954), Neeli's bond with the schoolteacher is shown as consensual, yet framed within caste morality. Neeli transitions from being an autonomous figure to a symbol of "shame" associated with her caste and sexuality. Neeli must die, while the Nair woman who navigates the narrative's moral landscape safely is rewarded with marriage and the ability to adopt the child of her husband's union with a Dalit woman out of wedlock, an act framed as progressive. This juxtaposition reinforces the cinematic hierarchy of womanhood within

the film: the upper-caste woman embodies virtue, moral clarity, and social legitimacy, while the Dalit woman remains a marker of transgression, her subjectivity subordinated to caste and morality.

In *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (1961), the film reinforces caste-based hierarchies through the experiences of women. Upper-caste women are depicted as having access to education and opportunities, such as attending college, which symbolises autonomy and social legitimacy. In contrast, lower-caste women are often confined to labour in the fields or other forms of survival work; their lives are constrained by caste and economic necessity. However, in a bid to uphold reformist zeal, the movie ends up romanticising the labouring Dalit female body as the ideal of freedom. She is contrasted with the Savarna woman Radha, who "feel[s] after becoming an ideal wife that she is a spiritless person, imprisoned like a caged bird" (P.V. 37). Chellamma, on the contrary, is posited as a symbol of the "idyllic image of freedom of the labourer" who is "burdened with the duties of the witness of human misery and the potential liberator of humanity" (P.V. 37), by replacing Rajan in his feudalistic family setting. By inverting the binary opposition of the 'us' and 'other', the film disguises itself as a Marxist utopia; however, it in turn solidifies the caste-gender role of the Dalit female body as a labouring body and a romantic interlude in the hero's journey to self-actualisation.

In *Collector Malathy* (1967), Malathi, a Pulaya woman, although in the lead, is made to embody the Savarna womanhood of sacrifice by ending her relationship with the upper-caste man on the insistence of his family. In *Ningalenne Communistakki* (1970), Mala, the Dalit heroine, declares her love for the communist leader

Gopalan, but her desire is erased, recast as "universal worker's love" and denied legitimacy. In contrast, when Sumam, the upper-caste woman, expresses her love, it is reciprocated and celebrated as revolutionary. The film thus silences the Dalit woman's subjectivity while elevating the upper-caste woman's desire as progressive, reinforcing caste hierarchies even within the rhetoric of radical politics.

Malayalam films reinforce the concept of endogamy in their portrayal of inter-caste relationships, where the "affair" between an upper-caste man and a Dalit woman never culminates in marriage or her entry into the so-called "civilised" normative world of privileges. She remains on the fringe, serving only as a means for the man to realise his socialist or reformist convictions or as a source of titillation for the male audience, which the upper-caste heroine cannot embody. The Dalit woman on-screen appears in two roles: "heterosexual love in search of a fulfilment in the family mode and the ethics of work" (P.V. 26).

The enforcement of caste endogamy is starkly visible in *Neelakuyil* (1954), *Collector Malathy* (1967) and *Ningalenne Communistakki* (1970). In *Neelakuyil*, the schoolteacher, a Nair man, seduces and impregnates Neeli, a Dalit woman. When Neeli asks him to marry her, he responds, "Neeli, how will I respect myself? How will I live in this society?" (0:54:47), revealing that his concern lies not with her well-being but with his own social standing. Neeli is subsequently abandoned, her pregnancy marked as a site of shame, while the teacher continues to enjoy his socially sanctioned position. In *Collector Malathy* (1967), Malathy and Ravi cannot marry because they cannot transgress the sacred boundaries of

caste, and the only resolution comes from, if not the death of the Dalit woman as in *Neelakuyil* (1954), then the death of the hero. In *Ningalenne Kammunistakki* (1970), Mala falls in love with Gopalan, but despite his seemingly revolutionary attitude towards the Dalit community, Gopalan's inherent casteism seeps into his actions, like addressing Mala's father by his name. For him, love with a Pulaya woman is not even a consideration; rather, "his love toward the worker is liberal humanistic...affirms the difference in stations. By associating her as his sister, Gopalan inverts the logic of upholding endogamy—she is not fit for matrimony because of her "proximity to the male Nair subjectivity", and he can ensure that he "does not have to cross the barrier of caste in any way and that he can deal with untouchability in a very superficial way" (P.V. 33). Another scheme through which casteism is embedded in the Malayalam film industry is in its choice of the female protagonists and the Dalit women characters. Indian society is obsessed with colour and finds its adequate representation in movies, whether regional or national. Colourism in the Indian social sphere is deeply rooted in the social hierarchisation of our society. According to Jidugu Kavya Harshitha, while a light complexion is intrinsically linked to savarnas and the glow observed on their faces, which is perceived as "pure and appealing," a dark skin tone on a savarna is also endowed with qualities of royalty and divinity, making it acceptable. In contrast, dark skin is intrinsically associated with the Dalit identity, resulting in their dehumanisation and perceptions of being "dirty, stinky, and polluted" (233). But a light-skinned Dalit does not enjoy the same privileges as the Savarnas, because that becomes a marker of arrogance and deceit. It is through such significations attached to the colour of the skin that casteism and discrimination

are carried out in the everyday lives of the Dalits, whether in their representation on-screen or in the language used to address them.

For women, the axis of caste and gender that forms Brahminical patriarchy "marginalises Dalit women for their lack of beauty; a characteristic expected of all women under Brahminic patriarchal norms" (Geetha). According to Varsha Ayyar and Lalit Khandare, the contempt for dark skin colour is deeply rooted in "Brahmanical tradition and culture built on the praxis of caste purity" (92), which associates "femininity, beauty and superiority in lighter skin color" (92), making it the ideal against which the dark-skinned woman is "hardly attractive, dark, stunted, and immoral" (88). This issue is deeply rooted in the caste system that plagues Indian society. Given the negative connotations associated with the Dalit body based on its skin colour stereotyping, it is only obvious that cinematic representations of beauty are almost always upper caste, whereas the Dalit woman, almost always a dark-skinned maiden, is not the preferred choice of either the hero or his society.

The inherent stereotype that Dalits have darker skin tones than upper-caste people has led to directors using makeup to darken the skin tone of their fairer upper-caste actors. Malayalam cinema follows a similar tendency. With an almost unparalleled Nair hegemony in casting, extremely fair women are cast in upper-caste leads, whereas, in stark contrast to them, stands the Dalit woman with her darker skin. Deeply encoded in the cultural modes and norms of caste-derived colourism that Indian society operates on, this casting choice is almost always left unchallenged and unquestioned. From the very onset, the viewer can recognise that the "other"

on screen is the Dalit woman, based on whose lack the heroine would emulate. The Dalit woman is often visually and narratively marginalised—her interiority suppressed, her body framed as impure or deglamourised, and sometimes even physically darkened to signal caste stigma. Romeo in "The Decathected Dalit Body in Malayalam Cinema" shows that depictions of Dalit women often include stereotyped markers, such as dark skin, unattractiveness, or a body subjected to pity or disgust, rather than the complexity of character.

In *Collector Malathy* (1967), despite being a black and white film, the darkening of the skin of the actor Sheela is quite visible. In *Kuttyedathi* (1971), the lower-caste protagonist is made visibly ugly and disgusting with warts on her face and a coarse, provocative demeanour, and she is ultimately ostracised for her lack of Brahmanical feminine beauty and attitude. A similar logic operates in *Ee Parakkum Thalika* (2001), where Nithya Das first appears in heavy dark makeup as a 'woman of the street', only to later reveal her "true" fair skin and wealthy background, suggesting that darkness is incompatible with affluence or respectability. In *Nammal* (2002), Bhavana, a fair-skinned actress, was darkened with makeup to mark her as lower caste, reinforcing the association of darkness with marginality. *Celluloid* (2013), another movie dedicated to the erasure of P. K. Rosy, a Dalit woman, resorts to using dark makeup for the actress "playing" Rosy. In *Kammatipaadam* (2016), for instance, a brown-skinned actress was deliberately chosen to play a Dalit woman, visually anchoring her caste identity in her complexion. The same colouristic coding is evident in *Pathonpatham Noottandu* (2022), where Dalit characters are represented as having dark skin, reinforcing the equation of Dalitness with dirtiness,

criminality, and social inferiority. These examples show how Malayalam cinema actively sustains caste hierarchies through colourist representation, consistently attaching fairness to legitimacy and virtue while relegating darkness to shame, poverty, and pollution.

Dalit-centric movies

Recently, Malayalam cinema has progressed from using Dalit characters as stereotypes to giving them their full-length on-screen presence. But how progressive or caste-sensitive has this representation been? Ajith Kumar A S questions this recent visibility and audibility of caste in the backdrop of many political movements undertaken by the marginalised themselves. He critiques *Celluloid* (2013) and *Papilio Buddha* (2013) as a Nair liberal approach to the history of caste in cinema. While *Celluloid* (2013) sentimentalises the tragedy of the Dalit heroine, providing a sense of achievement to the modern Malayalees who can claim to have transcended caste, Papilio Buddha marks violence on the Dalit body, eroticising violence meant for the entertainment of the upper-caste progressives.

Papilio Buddha (2013), directed by Jayan K. Cherian, reintroduced Dalit struggles into Malayalam cinematic discourse. The film is radical in its treatment of land struggles, Ambedkarite politics, and queer identities, yet its portrayal of Dalit women reveals a striking continuity with *Neelakuyil* (1954). The primary female character exists largely as a victim, subjected to gang rape by upper-caste men. Rather than centring her story or subjectivity, the film uses her suffering as a narrative device to heighten the political urgency for male

characters. While rape scenes are a common trope in most cinematic representations where the woman is almost always a victim and the perpetrator a man, it takes on added dimensions when attributed to a Dalit female body. Brahmanical patriarchy provides legitimacy to the upper-caste man "to enjoy the right to consider Dalit women as property that could be violated—a form of sexual access that provides ongoing testimony to touchable mastery and sexual morality" (Paik 135-136). Thus, the Dalit woman's body becomes a visual and physical metaphor for Savarna honour and caste masculinity. As Sadaf Ahmed argues in the context of rape scenes in Pakistani films, they serve multiple functions: "as a vehicle to titillate an audience that is believed to seek such gratification; as a device to further the film's plot; as a means of highlighting various social anxieties and fears, especially those surrounding women's behaviour" (388). In *Papilio Buddha* (2013), the violence on the Dalit female body operates from a Savarna gaze, which is a "conscious attempt to please the male/upper caste gaze" (Karthika 5), and not a representation of "caste-based gender violence on silver screen" (5).

In *Kammatipaadam* (2016), she can only be a victim without agency. We never see her outside the male gaze or in her encounters with Krishnan. She is a dusky, docile girl who is tossed between the two men—one declares his right to marry her openly; the other loves her in secret but fails to act on it. Despite her reciprocating Krishnan's love, the Dalit woman has the only choice to marry her chosen suitor from within her caste. Even in a movie that claims to centre Dalit struggles, it perpetuates the same stereotypes that earlier movies did. Endogamy is upheld, the Dalit woman's social location is visibly marked on her

body, and rather than being assertive and an agentic being, as Dalit women have proven themselves repeatedly in their participation in social movements, she espouses the Savarna womanhood of docility, servility, and upholding caste boundaries.

'Representation' is a term often debated in feminist and postcolonial circles. Representation in the media perpetuates certain stereotypes that are more effective than those presented on paper or in any other form. While Dalits in general do not find much representation in the visual cinematic medium, the negotiated representation that Dalit women receive is mostly "co-opted within the categories 'women' and 'dalit' to promote anti-patriarchal and anti-caste fronts respectively" (Pan 135). The upper-caste Nair woman is conceived to be more adept at representing the Dalit woman on-screen than the Dalit woman herself because she lacks the making of a heroine fit for Malayali sensibilities. She must have a photogenic face and be trained in classical dance and an exaggerated form of acting derived from it (P.V. 25), which automatically translates to "talent." The existing stereotypes that portray Dalit women as uncouth, crass, uncivilised, and ugly contradict the idea that beauty is linked to good genetics, which is influenced by caste. The liberal Nair woman, who sheds her caste surname and is aware of the politics of marginalisation and disempowerment, is thus assumed to be more suitable to portray a Dalit self on screen than the Dalits themselves. Hence, cinematic erasure of Dalit women or their misrepresentation is not just due to the lack of opportunities for Dalit women, given the systemic oppression of casteism, classism, and patriarchy they bear, but also the caste ideology that operates on stereotypes and vilification. Films such as

Ozhivudivasathe Kali (2015) erase Dalit women altogether, reducing them to implied presences in the background; *Kala* (2021) centres Dalit male resistance but silences Dalit women completely; *Ponthan Mada* (1994) narrows caste critiques to eccentric male bonding while excluding female subjectivities; and *Odiyan* (2018) mythologises marginalised men while rendering Dalit women faceless. Together, these absences reveal how the Malayalam cinema systemically denies Dalit women space as agents of desire, resistance, or even existence.

Conclusion

In 2020-21, the Kerala government has taken conscious steps through initiatives like those of the Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC) to create a more inclusive cultural space. By reserving production opportunities specifically for women and filmmakers from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the state is attempting to counter the longstanding exclusion of marginalised voices from mainstream cinema. Despite the Kerala government's efforts to provide opportunities for Dalit and tribal filmmakers through initiatives such as the KSFDC, the influence of entrenched caste hierarchies persists in Malayalam cinema. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, one of Kerala's most celebrated filmmakers and recipient of the Dadasaheb Phalke Award, criticised the initiative by claiming that offering ₹1.5 crore to SC/ST filmmakers would encourage corruption, suggesting the amount be reduced to ₹50 lakh so that these filmmakers "learn the difficulty of filmmaking." The irony is clear: marginalised communities now perceive access and resources, once unremarkable for privileged filmmakers, as excessive. His anecdote about raising delegate fees to keep out "those who can't appreciate cinema", rooted in caste and class

biases, echoes historical exclusion, such as the erasure of P. K. Rosy, a Dalit woman, for portraying a Nair character. Both cases, separated by decades, highlight the persistent logic of exclusion in deciding who may represent, whose stories are valued, and who defines what counts as "good cinema." Caste has always shaped Malayalam cinema, not only in terms of who directs or acts, but also in terms of whose narratives are told, whose voices are marginalised, and whose authority is recognised.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Vidheyan* (1994), which critiques feudal and caste oppression, now finds himself accused of embodying the very hierarchies his work once exposed. *Vidheyan* (1994) meticulously depicted the exploitation of the weak by the powerful, using cinematic language to make caste and feudal domination visible. Nevertheless, when it comes to real-world initiatives to empower marginalised filmmakers, Adoor has repeatedly positioned himself as the arbiter of who is "ready" or "deserving" to make films. The hypocrisy is striking—he uses cinema to critique oppression but simultaneously upholds gatekeeping, echoing the same caste-class prejudices that marginalised figures like P. K. Rosy endured. This clash of art and authority exposes a tension between the ideals of Malayalam cinema and the entrenched hierarchies within its institutions. It is not an anomaly or a departure from the industry's legacy; it is a continuation. The Malayalam film establishment has long dictated whose stories are told, whose voices are heard, and who qualifies as a legitimate filmmaker. Adoor's stance illustrates how even those who produce politically conscious art can perpetuate systemic exclusion when it impacts their authority, access, or influence in the real world. And we, in the 21st century, reiterate the question

Geetha G. raised: “Why the Dalit characters in cinema be killed, murdered, or commit suicide and are ostracised, insulted, and dehumanised?” (183).

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Ancient Algorithms: Decoding the Computational Logic of the Kaṭapayādi System

— **Jiju A Mathew** and **Rameela Ravindran K**

Abstract: The Kaṭapayādi system—a sophisticated intersection of poetry and mathematics, is an ancient Indian encoding scheme that maps Sanskrit consonants to decimal numerals, allowing complex numerical data to be woven seamlessly into meaningful verse. This article investigates the system's versatility by analysing three of its most enduring applications documented in classical literature: the precise encoding of the mathematical constant Pi (π) to 17 decimal places, the astronomical cataloging of lunar longitudes (Candra-vakyāni), and the structural classification of Carnatic music's Melakarta rāgas. Bridging ancient theory with modern practice, we present an algorithmic implementation of the Kaṭapayādi rules to formalise its computational logic. We specifically deconstruct the verse girinaḥ śreyaḥ as a case study, decoding it to reveal the lunar position 12˚ 02' 03", which is then mapped using a polar coordinate visualisation. Finally, the study frames the system as a masterwork of 'constraint-based design', arguing that while it originated from the necessities of an oral tradition, its legacy serves as a testament to scientific ingenuity rather than a substitute for modern technological advancement.

Keywords: Kaṭapayādi System, Subliminal Communication, Indian Astronomy, Melakarta Ragas, Data Encoding, Mnemonics

Throughout history, humans have been driven by a fundamental impulse to conceal meaningful data within seemingly innocuous structures. This practice, known as steganography, involves embedding a secret message within an innocuous wrapper to facilitate private communication over an open channel (Mathew and Singh 847). The Greeks, for instance, mastered the art of concealing messages beneath layers of normalcy.

Historian Herodotus recounts two methods: one involved carving a message into a writing tablet beneath a layer of wax, while the other involved tattooing a message onto a slave's shaved head, and waiting for the hair to grow back before dispatching the courier. Similarly, the Chinese were masters of micro-encoding, concealing messages by inscribing tiny characters onto fine silk, which was then rolled into a miniature ball and sealed in wax before being swallowed by the carrier during transit. (Kahn, ch. 2)

This race reached its terrifying peak during World War II. Both coalitions relied heavily on complex steganographic and cryptographic systems to maintain the element of surprise, transmitting critical operational details through seemingly innocuous means. The methods employed were astonishingly creative, yet the countermeasures were equally drastic. To thwart these hidden channels, censors on both sides routinely intervened—paraphrasing sentences to strip away potential code and even resetting the hands of clocks in transit to scramble subliminal signals. The ultimate twist in this global contest was the eventual success of the British codebreakers at Bletchley Park, who cracked the Enigma code, turning the secret into a known quantity (Kahn, chs. 9, 26).

The Indian Parallel: A Code for Wisdom

In contrast to the deceptive nature of the global race for subliminal communication, the Indian approach aimed to efficiently transmit and memorise complex ideas across generations of scholars. This was often achieved by mapping phonetic elements [letters] to numerical values

for purposes such as mnemonic aid and chronological record. One notable example is Kaṭapayādi, the Code of Kerala Astronomy. The Kaṭapayādi system is a clever mnemonic technique that assigns a numerical value to every Sanskrit consonant. This system creates metrically perfect and often poetic sentences to store vast amounts of data. To genuinely appreciate this mastery, three examples that highlight its enduring impact across various fields like mathematics, astronomy, and music are examined.

1. Encoding the Value of Pi (π):

K.V. Sarma provides extensive documentation on how Kerala astronomers achieved unprecedented precision in mathematical constants using the Kaṭapayādi system. A prime example is found in Śaṅkara Varman's Sadratnamala (c. 1819), which encodes π to 17 decimal places. The verse reads:

भद्राम्बुधिसिद्धजन्मगणितश्रद्धा स्म यद्भूपगीः

When decoded, the consonants yield the following values:

i. भद्र (Bhadra) - 4, 2
ii. अम्बुधि (Ambudhi) - 3, 9
iii. सिद्ध (Siddha) - 7, 9
iv. जन्म (Janma) - 8, 5
v. गणित (Gaṇita) - 3, 5, 6
vi. श्रद्धा (Śraddhā) - 2, 9
vii. स्म (Sma) - 5
viii. यद् (Yad) - 1
ix. भूपगीः (Bhūpagīḥ) - 4, 1, 3

Following the rule अङ्कानां वामतो गतिः (Ankānāṃ Vāmato Gatiḥ - meaning reversing the digits), this sequence translates to 3.14159265358979324, a level of accuracy unmatched in the world for centuries. Sarma emphasises that this was not just a computational achievement but a linguistic one, ensuring that such complex irrational numbers could be easily chanted and remembered by students without the aid of written tables (Sarma).

2. Memorising Lunar Movements

Its most significant and earliest application is credited to the scholar Vararuci (traditionally c. 4th Century CE). Vararuci utilised the Kaṭapayādi system in his Candra-vakyāni (Moon Sentences) to concisely encode the complex, daily movements and longitudes of the Moon. A classic example is the very first vakyā (sentence) of the Candra-vakyāni:

गिरिनः श्रेयः

Decoding this phrase reveals its astronomical data:

i. gi (गि): ga - 3
ii. ri (रि): ra - 2
iii. naḥ (नः): na - 0
iv. śre (श्रे): śra (takes the last consonant ra) - 2
v. yaḥ (यः): ya - 1

The resulting sequence is 3-2-0-2-1. Applying the rule Ankānāṃ Vāmato Gatiḥ, we get 12023. In the context of angular measurement, this represents 12˚ 02’ 03” [12 degrees, 2 minutes, and 3 seconds], which shows the

Moon's precise longitudinal position at the end of the first day of the cycle (Sarma).

Fig. 1. Polar coordinate visualisation of the lunar longitude.

3. Classification of Carnatic Melakarta Rāgas

Beyond its astronomical origins, the system endures as a living mnemonic tool in the aesthetic domain, specifically within the classification of the 72 Melakarta Rāgas (parent scales) of Carnatic music. In this context, the Kaṭapayādi scheme functions as a metadata tagging system: musicians decode the first two syllables of a rāga's canonical name to instantly retrieve its serial index and associated interval structure. A paradigm example is the 28th Melakarta, Harikāmbōji. The initial syllables Ha (consonant ha = 8) and ri (ra = 2) generate the sequence 8-2. Reversing these digits yields 28, thereby embedding

the scale's mathematical identity directly into its artistic title (Sambamoorthy).

Working of Kaṭapayādi

The Kaṭapayādi system functions as a hash algorithm, mapping the phonetic structure of Sanskrit—specifically its consonants—to the decimal number system. Its name, *Ka-ṭa-pa-yā-di*, is itself a mnemonic indicating the four groups of consonants that begin the sequence: " *Ka*, *Ṭa*, *Pa*, and *Ya*."

Mapping of Sanskrit Consonants:
The system assigns numerical values [1 to 9 and 0] to Sanskrit consonants based on their position in the alphabet. Vowels are functionally null; they serve only to make the consonants pronounceable and do not carry numerical value themselves. The mapping is as follows:

Value	**Ka-adi** (Guttural/ Palatal)	**Ṭa-adi** (Retroflex/ Dental)	**Pa-adi** (Labial)	**Ya-adi** (Semivowels)
1	Ka (क)	Ṭa (ट)	Pa (प)	Ya (य)
2	Kha (ख)	Ṭha (ठ)	Pha (फ)	Ra (र)
3	Ga (ग)	Ḍa (ड)	Ba (ब)	La (ल)
4	Gha (घ)	Ḍha (ढ)	Bha (भ)	Va (व)
5	Ṅa (ङ)	Ṇa (ण)	Ma (म)	Śa (श)
6	Ca (च)	Ta (त)		Ṣa (ष)
7	Cha (छ)	Tha (थ)		Sa (स)
8	Ja (ज)	Da (द)		Ha (ह)
9	Jha (झ)	Dha (ध)		
0	Ña (ञ)	Na (न)		

Table 1. Kaṭapayādi Lookup Table

The Syntactical Rules:

To decode a verse correctly, three operational rules must be applied:

i. Consonant Priority: Only consonants carry value. A syllable like *Ka*, *Ki*, *Ku*, or *Ke* all equal 1. The vowel does not change the number.

ii. The Conjunct Rule (*Samyuktākṣara*): In a conjunct consonant (a cluster of two or more consonants, e.g., *Stra* or *Kya*), only the final consonant—the one immediately preceding the vowel—is counted. The preceding consonants are ignored. *Example:* In the syllable Śre (sh-ra-e), the *Ś* is ignored. Only the R (2) is counted.

iii. The Reversal Rule (*Ankānāṃ Vāmato Gatiḥ*): The digits extracted from the text are written left-to-right, but the final mathematical value is read right-to-left (or the sequence is simply reversed). *Example:* If the text yields 3-1-4, the number is 413.

Encoding:

The encoding process is fundamentally generative and non-deterministic, functioning as a one-to-many mapping. Unlike decoding, where a specific phrase yields a single number, encoding allows the mathematician to choose from multiple available consonants for each digit. This flexibility enables the construction of meaningful words or metrical verses from abstract data, effectively embedding the 'ciphertext' [the number] into a 'cover text' [the poem] (Pfitzmann 348).

Algorithm 1: Kaṭapayādi *Encoding Process*
Input: A decimal integer N (e.g., the value to be stored).
Output: A Sanskrit string S (meaningful verse or phrase).
Steps:

Convert integer N into a list of digits L.
Apply Rule: Ankānāṃ Vāmato Gatiḥ (Reverse the order).
Reverse list L so that the "units" place is processed first.
Define Reverse Map R where keys are digits 0 .. 9 and values are Sets of Consonants
Initialize empty string S.
For each digit d in list L:
Retrieve the set of valid consonants Options ← R[d].
Select a consonant c from Options.
Constraint: Choice is determined by the desired semantic meaning or poetic meter of the final word.
Select a vowel v (or null).
Note: Vowels do not affect the numerical value.
Form Syllable syll ← c + v.
Append syll to S.
End For
Return S.

Decoding:

The computational logic of the Kaṭapayādi system can be formalised as a string-processing algorithm. The procedure iterates through the input text character by character. It utilises a constraint-checking mechanism to handle Sanskrit conjuncts (samyuktakshara): if a consonant is followed immediately by a virama (halant), it is identified as a prefix to a conjunct and ignored, in

adherence to the rule that only the final consonant of a syllable carries value. Valid consonants are mapped to their numerical equivalents using the standard lookup table. Finally, the resulting sequence of digits is reversed—applying the principle of Ankānāṃ Vāmato Gatiḥ—to produce the final decimal output.

Algorithm 2: Katapayadi Decoding Process
Input: A text string S containing Sanskrit characters (Devanagari).
Output: A numerical value N derived from the Katapayadi system.
Steps:

Initialize an empty list D (to store digits).
Define map M where keys are Consonants and values are integers 0 .. 9.
Define constant Virama as the Unicode Halant marker (◌्).
For each character c at index i in string S:
If c exists in keys of M:
Check Lookahead:
If (i + 1 < length(S)) AND (S[i+1] == Virama):
Continue (Skip this character; it is part of a conjunct).
Else:
Retrieve value v ← M[c].
Append v to list D.
End If
End If
End For
Apply Rule: Ankānāṃ Vāmato Gatiḥ (The movement of numbers is leftward).
Reverse the order of list D.

Concatenate elements of D to form integer N.
Return N.

Step-by-Step Decoding Example

To illustrate, we can decode the term Dhīraśaṅkarābharaṇam [the 29th Melakarta Raga]. This example demonstrates the handling of simple consonants, nasals, and the reversal rule.

Step I: Phonetic Segmentation
Break the word into its component syllables:
Dhī — ra — śaṅ — ka — rā — bha — ra — ṇam
Step II: Numerical Extraction
We apply the Kaṭapayādi lookup table to the first two syllables [as per the standard practice for Raga indexing]:

1. Dhī (धी): The root consonant is *Dha* (dental).
2. *Lookup:* Dha is the 9th letter in the *Ta*-group.
   Value: 9
3. ra (र): The root consonant is *Ra*.
4. *Lookup:* Ra is the 2nd letter in the *Ya*-group.
   Value: 2
   (Note: The remaining syllables identify the scale's name but are not part of the numerical index).

Step III: Application of *Ankānāṃ Vāmato Gatiḥ*

1. Extracted Sequence: 9 — 2
2. Reversal: The digits are read in reverse order.
3. Final Value: 29

This confirms that *Dhīraśaṅkarābharaṇam* corresponds to the 29th position in the Melakarta grid.

Discussion

Ingenuity within Constraints

The analysis of the Kaṭapayādi system reveals a paradox often met in the history of science: a methodology can be both brilliantly innovative and inherently limited by the technology of its era. To evaluate the legacy of this system, we must avoid the contemporary tendency to romantically conflate ancient mnemonics with modern computational power. Instead, we should view the system through the lens of *constraint-based design*—a marvellous solution to the specific challenges of an oral culture lacking written archives.

The Challenge of Approximation: The Lunar Anomaly

The necessity—and the limit—of the Kaṭapayādi system is best illustrated by the problem of the Moon's variable velocity. As noted in the analysis of the *Candra-vakyāni*, the Moon does not orbit at a constant speed; it accelerates at perigee and decelerates at apogee (Bennett et al. 65).

For an ancient astronomer without calculus or gravity models, this presented a significant hurdle. A simple arithmetic mean (average speed) would result in gross errors in predicting eclipses. The Kerala astronomers devised a clever workaround: they identified that the Moon's speed pattern repeats almost exactly every 248 days (roughly 9 anomalistic months). By encoding the daily positions for this specific 248-day cycle into Kaṭapayādi verses like *girinaḥ śreyaḥ*, they created a mechanism that bypassed the need for complex physics. However, this highlights the distinction between predictive patterns and physical laws. While the 248-day cycle was a remarkably accurate approximation for its

time, it remains an approximation. It accounts for the *what* (the position) but not the *why* (gravitational dynamics).

Inspiration vs. Regression

There is a growing trend in modern discourse to equate these ancient methods with, or even position them as superior to, contemporary scientific advancements. Such comparisons are often anachronistic and scientifically unsound. The Kaṭapayādi system was the "supercomputer" of the 4th century—a necessary tool for a time when data storage was biological (memory) rather than silicon. Today, however, we possess the calculus of Newton and the relativistic physics of Einstein, which offer precision far beyond the discrete data points of the 248-day cycle. To revert to, or force-fit, ancient calculation methods into modern aerospace or engineering contexts would be a regression, not progress. The true value of studying the Kaṭapayādi system lies not in adopting its formulas for modern use, but in drawing inspiration from the scientific temper of our ancestors. They observed the universe with rigour, identified patterns with precision, and optimised their limited tools to the absolute maximum. Therefore, the appropriate homage to this heritage is not to travel back in time, but to apply that same relentless spirit of inquiry and optimisation to the technological frontiers of our own age.

Conclusion

The Kaṭapayādi system stands as a testament to the sophisticated intellectual infrastructure of ancient India,

bridging the often-separated worlds of rigorous science and aesthetic beauty. As demonstrated, it successfully transformed the dry data of astronomical longitude [12° 02' 03"] and mathematical constants [π approximating to 3.141] into fluid, devotional poetry, solving the critical data-storage problems of an oral culture. However, as the transition from astronomical tables to the Melakarta rāgas illustrates, the system's true longevity lies in its adaptability. It evolved from a computational necessity into an artistic metadata tool, proving that precision and culture need not be mutually exclusive. Ultimately, the study of the Kaṭapayādi system offers a profound historical lesson. It is not a call to revert to ancient methods in an age of supercomputing, but rather a reminder of the human capacity for innovation under constraint. The ancient astronomers and musicologists did not wait for better tools; they optimised the ones they had to their absolute limit. To truly honour their legacy today, we must emulate not their specific formulas, but their scientific temper—applying that same relentless creativity and optimisation to the technological frontiers of our own time.

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